



Hug- og Félagsvísindasvið

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The Immorality of Christianity

Does Christianity Contain the Best Moral Values Available?

Jón Birkir Bergþórsson

Lokaverkefni við Hug- og félagsvísindasvið



**Háskólinn
á Akureyri**
University
of Akureyri

Hug- og Félagsvísindasvið

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Leiðbeinandi: Sigurður Kristinsson

Lokaverkefni til 180 eininga B.A prófs við Hug- og félagsvísindasvið

Yfirlýsingar:

„Ég lýsi því hér með yfir að ég einn er höfundur þessa verkefnis og að það er afrakstur eigin
rannsókna

Jón Birkir Bergþórsson

„Það staðfestist hér með að lokaverkefni þetta fullnægir að mínum dómi kröfum til B.A.-prófs
við Hug- og félagsvísindasvið.“

Sigurður Kristinsson

Abstract

Iceland has been a Christian country for over a thousand years. The conventional assumption is that Christianity is the best set of morals available to us. Does Christianity contain the best moral values? Religion has in the past had a monopoly over ethical matters and as such it's important for it to be ready to face inquisitions over its justification. We humans are unique in the animal kingdom because of our intelligence, our ability to empathize and to make complicated ethical decisions. So should we settle for the Bible as our ethical guideline, written hundreds of years ago or is it time to rethink our heritage of Christian values? The issue of ethical behavior concerns all of society, whether it's inculcated through written laws or unwritten ones. Because of this I feel that these debates are of paramount importance for all of us. In this dissertation I'm going to argue that Christian ethics are in many ways immoral. Specifically I'm going to challenge the ethical doctrine presented in the New Testament, the supposed connection between faith and morality and give my insight into the debate on the role that Christianity should play in our school. Because this is a philosophical dissertation, I try to take responsibility in not misrepresenting Christianity which is why this dissertation includes an interview with Rev. Hildur Eir Bolladóttir and my response to what she has to say.

Útdráttur

Ísland hefur verið kristið land í meira en þúsund ár. Það er almennt ályktað að kristindómurinn feli í sér allra bestu siðgildin sem eru möguleg. Inniheldur kristinfræði besta siðfræðiboðskapinn? Trúarbrögð hafa í gegnum tíðina einokað siðfræðina og þess vegna er svo mikilvægt að gagnrýna þau, til þess að þau geti réttlætt stöðu sína. Við mennirnir erum einstakir í dýraríkinu vegna gáfna okkar, getu okkar til þess að hafa samúð með öðrum og til þess að taka flóknar siðfræðilegar ákvarðanir. Ættum við að setta okkur við Biblíuna sem okkar siðfræði leiðsögn, rit sem var skrifað fyrir hundruðum ára eða er kominn tími til þess að við endurhugsum arfinn okkar um kristin gildi? Siðfræðileg hegðun snertir allt samfélagið, hvort sem hún er innrætt í gegnum skrifuð eða óskrifuð lög. Þess vegna finnst mér að þessar umræður séu mjög mikilvægar fyrir okkur öll. Í þessari lokaritgerð mun ég færa rök fyrir því að kristin gildi séu að mörgu leyti siðlaus. Nánar tiltekið mun ég gagnrýna siðfræðireglurnar sem koma fyrir í Nýja Testamentinu, hina svokölluðu tengingu milli trúar og siðgæðis og ég mun gefa mína sýn á umræðuna um hlutverk kristinnar trúar í skólunum okkar. Vegna þess að þessi lokaritgerð er heimspekileg þá mun ég reyna eftir bestu getu að koma fram rökum kristindómsins á sanngjarnan hátt, sem er ástæðan fyrir því að þessi lokaritgerð inniheldur viðtal við séra Hildi Eir Bolladóttur og mín viðbrögð við því sem hún hefur að segja.

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Introduction

I was religious when I was younger, I believed in God and in His goodness. I distinctly remember the day I lost my faith; it was September eleventh, 2001, I was eleven years old. Of course history will forever remember that day, but I was still relatively young and I didn't even know what the World Trade Center was. It just so happened that my aunt and her husband were visiting Iceland from the U.S.A. My aunt's husband was a member of the U.S. Army at the time, I remember him crying. I had seen the news but the severity of the situation had eluded me until that moment when I saw him at my great-grandmother's 100th birthday which as it happened was also on that very same fateful day. I asked my mother who had done this horrible thing in America, and she replied that it was an act of terrorism. I had never heard of terrorism before so I asked her to explain to me what that meant. She said that it was something bad people do in order to hurt an entire country, not just a few people but that they wanted to strike fear into everyone. The answers continued to baffle me; I just could not understand how anyone could be so evil. My mother tried as best she could to explain this to me, and eventually she said that the people responsible only did what they did because they believed they were doing the right thing. That they did what they did for their God, and because America believes in a different god, they felt this was their duty. This brought up more questions than it answered, in my naivety I had thought that everyone believed in the same god, it was only logical since he was the only true god. Apparently some people believe in other gods simply because they happened to be born somewhere else. If our god is the one true god then they won't go to heaven simply because they were born in the wrong place. They then must also believe that we won't go to heaven because we were born here. What if they're right? How could God allow such horrible things to happen? If we need to believe in this specific god to go to heaven, and God is omniscient, omnipotent and loves us all then why does he allow people to go to Hell just because they were born in a place that believes in a different god? Why doesn't He show those people the error of their ways? Then I thought; what if He doesn't exist, He's just make-believe like Santa Claus. All of a sudden that made all the sense in the world, it explained all the unbelievable stories we had been told about God, Jesus and the Bible that defied reality. Surprisingly I found some comfort in the idea of there being no God; after all if He did exist then He wasn't very nice.

Which brings me to the present; Iceland remains a Christian nation as it has been for over a thousand years. It's generally accepted that Christian values are the best set of morals that are available to us. I believe that all ideas should be challenged in order for them to be

relevant. If an idea remains unchecked and unchallenged then it stagnates, and becomes meaningless blind faith. With that in mind I've decided that my dissertation will be about whether Christianity really does contain the best moral values.

In order for me to properly examine the moral merit of Christian ethics I will of course have to use the primary source of it, the Bible. However, I will only be relying on the New Testament not the Old Testament. I do this for the simple reason that I'm focusing my energy on Christianity. The New Testament is radically different from the Old Testament; the ethical doctrines differ in fundamental ways. Christianity usually focuses much more on the New Testament because it contains the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. Christian ethics is much more rooted in his life and teachings than the Old Testament.

Another reason for me to choose the New Testament and mostly ignore the Old Testament is that I believe the New Testament to be a much better set of morals than the Old Testament. In order for me to make my arguments as convincing as possible and not to fall into the logical fallacy known as the **straw man**, I will represent both sides of the argument as best I can. The straw man is a logical fallacy in which a person misrepresents an argument in order to make it easier to attack.

I seek inspiration from many great thinkers such as; Immanuel Kant, William K. Clifford, Howard J. Curzer, John Arthur, Bertrand Russell and John Stuart Mill as well as a couple of brilliant Icelandic philosophers, Salvör Nordal and Eyja Margrét Brynjarsdóttir. However, I feel as though there isn't enough representation from those who live and work within the church and the Icelandic community. This is why I'm going to interview Rev. Hildur Eir Bolladóttir, a priest at the church of Akureyri. She has been kind enough to grant me an interview and give her side on the importance of Christian ethics. Hildur is well known in the Icelandic community for her liberal and compassionate interpretation of Christian values.

The main text of this dissertation is divided into six chapters. The first chapter is my exploration of the morality of faith and as such can be applicable to all religions, not just Christianity. The chapter draws upon Immanuel Kant's view on faith being a moral necessity, then as a response I present William K. Clifford's view that faith without sufficient evidence is not moral. The last part of that chapter is the timeless argument on whether morality can exist without invoking God. The second chapter is about the morality presented in the New Testament, mainly through Jesus' teachings or specifically, the gospels. In this chapter I look to the Bible, the book *Ethical Theory and Moral Problems* by Howard J. Curzer and Bertrand Russell's essay: *Why I am Not a Christian*. The third chapter presents Rev. Hildur Eir's defense of Christian values. The fourth chapter consists of my reaction to Hildur Eir's view,

where I among other things suggest an alternative to Christianity as our moral code. The fifth chapter is where I take on the issue of whether or not Christianity should be taught in schools in Iceland. This chapter draws upon Salvör Nordal' article called *Um trúaruppeldi og kennslu í kristnum fræðum* or *On religious upbringing and instruction in Christian studies* and Eyja Margrét Brynjarsdóttir' rebuttal *Á að veita börnum trúaruppeldi? Or Should children be brought up in religion?* The sixth chapter is dedicated to a discussion of the previous chapters and my overall conclusions.

The relevance of Christianity (and other religions) is a hugely important discussion. For many, Christianity affects their life a great deal and the Christian church remains a superpower in the Western world. Religion has in the past had a monopoly over ethical matters and as such it's important for it to be ready to face inquisitions over its justification. We humans are unique in the animal kingdom precisely because of our intelligence, our ability to empathize and to make complicated ethical decisions. Because of this I feel that these debates are of paramount importance for all of us.

Chapter 1

Morality and faith

The connection between morality and faith has been the subject of many great debates. Some are convinced that true morality cannot be achieved without faith or at least that morality is enhanced by faith. Others disagree and claim that faith in the divine has nothing to do with morality and the two are not connected. Some philosophers, such as William K. Clifford claim that belief without sufficient evidence is immoral. I think it's appropriate to start this discussion with one of the greatest philosophers of all time; Immanuel Kant.

1.1 Immanuel Kant's moral necessity

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) came forth with a new and radical way of thinking in terms of the connection between religion and morality. According to Rossi's (2009) comprehensive summary and interpretation of Kant's view concerning the connection between morality and religion, Kant held that it's fundamental to one's morality to believe in God. One cannot be truly moral without faith, because without a belief in the divine, a person will inevitably not put his own life or happiness on the line for the right action. For us to be truly moral we need to follow the "**highest good**" action. The highest good is an action that gives the highest proportion of happiness to all who are affected by said action. The way to do that he calls a "**categorical imperative**". Which means that in order for an action to be considered moral or the highest good; we need to use our will to take actions based solely on their moral rightness. We use the categorical imperative to assess which actions are morally right in any given situation.

Kant recognizes that this system is flawed, mainly because we tend to choose an action based on the happiness it brings us. We are all inherently a little selfish; we tend to think of our own happiness as more important than the happiness of others. As such, even if we try to take moral actions we almost never put our own life or our own happiness at risk. A true moral action is chosen on the basis of its moral rightness not on the basis of our happiness and is completely independent from it. In this arises a conflict, wherein a moral action should proportionately bring about happiness, but happiness (at least personal happiness) shouldn't be a factor in the decision making process. In an attempt to resolve this conflict Kant splits the perspective in which we view our actions into two; the **sensible** and the **intelligible**. When we view actions in a sensible perspective we look to use that action to

enhance our happiness or the happiness of others. This view is helpful for day-to-day interactions or the “**spatiotemporal causality**”, that is, interactions that take place within space and time. However, a moral action should not be viewed in such a way, it should be viewed in the intelligible way, when we put aside our own selfish desires and view an action solely based on its moral rightness. Both of these viewpoints come from reasoning but it’s also an **antinomy**. Both of these viewpoints seem to be true at any given moment yet the two are contradictory. They are contradictory because of the necessity to include happiness in the highest good which was something Kant firmly believed. The sensible perspective takes happiness into consideration; in fact it’s the only thing it takes into consideration. However, the intelligible perspective only takes moral rightness into consideration, which often leads to actions that cause unhappiness and thus is incompatible with the sensible point of view. This antinomy can have terrible consequences for moral behavior, because we are so uncertain of how our actions will affect happiness that it can discourage us from living fully moral lives. This problem can be viewed from both perspectives; intelligibly we know that we can never achieve moral perfection because we can never achieve the accurate proportion of happiness to virtue even through a sustained lifetime of moral effort. Sensibly we know that some actions, however moral, are incapable of bringing about happiness and some even cause the exact opposite, which means that no matter how you look at it; our moral efforts are futile. (Rossi, 2009)

Therefore there is a moral requirement that we have immortal souls since we cannot achieve moral perfection within the spatiotemporal causality in which we live our mortal lives. True morality can only exist outside of this spatiotemporal causality, and therefore we need to exist outside it as well in order to achieve it. Similarly, even though we don’t seem to be able to dish out proportionate happiness for all we are affirmed in our belief that there is a supreme cause of nature that can do so for all of us, i.e. God. Faith in God and the immortality of the soul is crucial to a life-long moral endeavor which we should all try to emulate. It’s imperative for us to put the highest good as the focal point of this massive endeavor and to do so we must believe that we can achieve it. As we have previously seen, we cannot achieve it without this faith, which Kant calls **moral faith**. To exercise this moral faith we must use our reason and logic which as we have seen forces us to act morally for morality’s sake or in an intelligible way. We have also seen that we are free, i.e. we can do what reason compels us to do and therefore have sufficient reason to believe that we can indeed achieve the highest good and moral perfection but only through the immortality of our souls. (Rossi, 2009)

Kant brings up an interesting point; that faith in the divine and the immortality of our souls are key components of a truly moral life. If Kant is right does that mean that without moral faith one can never be as moral as someone who has it? What is the connection between morality and faith? Can moral faith, which Kant describes as a faith in the immortality of the soul and God, be in itself immoral? William K. Clifford argues that faith without sufficient evidence is always immoral in itself. Since the evidence for the immortality of the soul and the existence of God is far from conclusive, that would mean Kant's moral faith is immoral. Therefore having "moral" faith doesn't make a person more moral but more immoral. Whether Kant brings up sufficient philosophical evidence to support moral faith, is up for debate. If one concludes that he does, then it seems that the two hypotheses can be compatible.

1.2 The virtue of faith

William K. Clifford (1845-1879) wrote an essay called *The Ethics of Belief* in which he claims that faith based on insufficient evidence is not morally justifiable (Clifford, 1877). His first argument is a series of allegories in which we see that beliefs need to be based on sufficient evidence to be justified. One of them regards a ship owner whose confidence in his ship is so great that he doesn't have it examined. Regardless of whether the ship sinks or not, he is equally guilty because he should not have allowed his ship to go out to sea unexamined. His faith in the sturdiness of his ship was not based on enough evidence to support his claim that it was seaworthy.

The question is not whether a belief is right or wrong; it's about gathering sufficient evidence to warrant that belief. It's not about the belief itself either; it's about the actions that we take based on those beliefs. When a man holds a strong belief he cannot fairly and unbiasedly examine its merit for he has already decided in his heart that it is true. When the man has a chance to act according to his beliefs he will do so. No belief is therefore insignificant; we store them up in our minds and each and every one of them influences our behavior in sometimes subtle ways (Clifford, 1877).

Because of this our beliefs are not only our concern; for all of our actions and words are common property of society. We are all bound together and united in our beliefs; so it's dangerous to uphold fatal superstitions. All beliefs should therefore be subject to fierce questioning and those who do not hold up should be discarded. We should not hold beliefs that aren't based on any real evidence just to add comfort and beautiful illusions to our lives.

This sort of self-delusion will not only keep us down in the dark but also degrades the human race (Clifford, 1877).

It's understandable that men are afraid of discarding long-held beliefs to allow doubt into their lives. But we must, for there is no greater joy than for a belief to be vindicated by rigorous questioning because only then can we truly call it our common property and we have mastered a bit more of this world we live in. If a belief is based on insufficient evidence, then we have betrayed our duty to all men. Then we have deceived ourselves by claiming a power that we do not possess and not only that, we may well have brought with us a disease that threatens to infect us all. We all suffer immensely from the maintenance and support of unworthy beliefs and the great evils many of these beliefs have brought forth. Greater still is the suffering when we foster credulous characters for the belief may not be evil or bad in itself but the character which it fosters is evil and bad for mankind, when a society becomes credulous it loses the habit of inquiry and sinks back into savagery (Clifford, 1877).

It is therefore the duty of each man to take great care of his own truth and beliefs because it does not only belong to him but to all men. If a man lives his whole life believing things he was taught in childhood, ignoring all doubt which arises in his mind, avoiding the company of those who believe different, choosing not to be informed on things that counteract his belief then his life is a sin against humanity. For it is never lawful to stifle a doubt or to refuse to question one's belief with an open mind (Clifford, 1877).

Some might say, and rightfully so, that they simply don't have the time to inquire into many serious questions or understand the arguments. Then that person shouldn't have any time to believe (Clifford, 1877).

That doesn't mean that we should become universal sceptics, afraid to do anything because we haven't personally inquired into all aspects of any action. Certain beliefs have been proven right countless times, such as the basic moral principles by which we live. The difference between a right action and a wrong one are known to most men and do not suffer from inquiry. They are as true as the universal laws of the universe. One might believe that murder is justified but that belief does not hold up to scrutiny and in order to believe such a thing; one must stifle all doubts and ignore all evidence to the contrary. Even when we cannot be certain as to which act is justified it is still our duty to act upon probabilities and to follow the highest probability of a right action. So the habit of conscious inquiry shouldn't interfere with daily life and in fact it should enrich it (Clifford, 1877).

When we assume that Christianity is the truth are we not surrendering our critical thinking? Does that belief have enough evidence to warrant its truthfulness? We are not here

to discuss God's existence, but blind belief in Him and the Bible surely falls under the category of unwarranted beliefs and may therefore be called immoral.

Another way to look at the connection between morality and faith is through the **divine command theory**. This theory states that the moral obligation ultimately depends on God and His commands. The best way to recognize God's will is through the Bible, and so the Bible is therefore the highest moral doctrine available. This theory obviously also assumes that faith in God is paramount to moral behavior (Austin, n.d.). Let's examine the merit of this claim further.

1.3 Is God Moral?

It's generally accepted by Christians that God created the universe and everything in it including man; He even went so far as to create man in His image. It's also generally accepted by Christians that God is good and that He wants us to act in a specific way, to commit certain actions over others, for example; choose love over hate, forgiveness over vengeance and so forth, in other words to be moral. But did He create morality or does morality exist independently from Him? This problem was first described by Socrates in Plato's *Euthyphro*, a dialogue about what makes an action either right or wrong. The character Euthyphro suggests that a right action is what the gods command, but Socrates is skeptical and asks the fundamental philosophical question; is conduct right because the gods command it, or do the gods command it because it is right? Is an act right or wrong because God commanded it, or is it right or wrong because God recognizes which actions are good and which are wrong? If we take the first option and maintain that an action is right because God commanded it, it will inevitably make His commands arbitrary and makes the concept of a good God nonsense. If honesty is a virtue, for example, then it is only a virtue because God says it is; it would mean that he could have just as easily decided that lying is a virtue. Therefore the act of being virtuous appears meaningless. In order to avoid this seemingly undesirable outcome there is another way to go. It could be said that God simply recognizes right and wrong actions and gives out orders accordingly. If one chooses to believe this then he is faced with another problem, it implies that there exists a moral code that is outside of God, one that He did not create. It's an inescapable result, either there a moral code exists on what is right or wrong outside of God or the moral code is completely redundant. Either result is a problem for those who would argue that you cannot have morality without faith. If you believe that, then your morality isn't inherently right or wrong but simply arbitrary and redundant. Surely, even

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believers would have to agree that it's much more desirable for there to exist a moral code outside of God (Rachels, 2002).

This timeless argument is fascinating and gives the divine command theory great problems. If morality was created by God, then it is arbitrary. If every moral decision is arbitrary, then morality is meaningless.

Now that we've examined morality with regard to faith in a god, let's take a closer look at the main topic of discussion; Christian ethics.

Chapter 2

The New Testament and the ethics of Christianity

This chapter is devoted to the ethics we encounter in Christianity, unlike chapter one which can be attributed to any religion. This chapter is entirely devoted to the New Testament, which is the foundation of the Christian religion and contains the life and teachings of Jesus Christ.

2.1 Does Jesus frighten us?

Like most religions, Christianity has a special place for sinners and unbelievers. A place of eternal torment where the wicked are punished with burning fire and torture, this is most commonly referred to as Hell. As Russell (1927) pointed out Jesus made numerous references to Hell in the New Testament. “The Son of Man will send forth his angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all stumbling blocks and those who commit lawlessness, and will throw them into the furnace of fire; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” (Matt 13:41-42). “If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life crippled, than having your two hands, to go into hell, into the unquenchable fire where the worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.” (Mark 9:43-44). “And whosoever speaketh a word against the Son of man, it shall be forgiven him: but whosoever speaketh against the Holy Ghost, it shall not be forgiven him, neither in this world, neither in the world to come.” (Matt 12:32).

If what Jesus says in these quotes is true, then what does that tell us about God? He created the universe; he is omnipotent and the creator of all things. He created man in His image and gave man free will. The Lord gave man free will, but if man doesn't use his gift in a way that pleases Him, he sends man to eternal damnation. He gives mankind His only son to teach men proper morality and through Jesus gives them a series of rules that they must follow lest they be sent to Hell, which often contradicts with man's very nature, the nature He created. This seems rather cruel and capricious.

Jesus often spoke about the perils of sin and the inevitable conclusion it brings the sinner. The essence of his teachings, however, is forgiveness. Nevertheless, his forgiveness is only reserved for those who accept him as their savior; “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” (John 14:6). “Very truly I tell you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be judged

but has crossed over from death to life.” (John 5:24). The New Testament makes it clear that only by believing in Jesus can a person go to heaven and if that person doesn’t he will be judged and sent to Hell. It is therefore safe to assume that scripture can be used to install fear into the hearts of believers. It’s not unreasonable to imagine that this has proved to be a good recruiting tactic by the Christian church. That salvation is only possible through them.

The problem with establishing a Hell is that it can rob moral actions of their merit. A good action has the best moral value when it’s truly selfless, when no reward is expected. The action of a person who lies and cheats his way into fame and fortune has therefore the same moral merit as the person who only acts in accordance to Jesus’s teachings because he wants to go to Heaven as opposed to Hell. They are both acting purely out of self-interest. The problem with a Christian, who truly believes that his actions will affect his afterlife, is that he can never achieve the truly selfless act and thus can never achieve the highest good. Here it’s noted that the highest good is defined in a Kantian manner i.e. as an action chosen with no regard to oneself but solely for the benefit of others. However, according to Rossi (2009), Kant believed that faith in the immortality of the soul was of great importance in order to achieve moral perfection and the highest good. So there seems to be a fundamental contradiction in his conclusion, if he believed that good actions are rewarded and bad actions punished in the afterlife, but there is nothing that suggest that he did. He concluded that the soul is immortal because we need infinite time to achieve moral perfection. Moral faith is necessary, because only by believing that we can achieve moral perfection can we be as moral as possible. There is a key difference between striving to achieve moral perfection for morality’s sake and being moral in order to avoid punishment or earning a place in Heaven.

2.2 Is fear of punishment really a bad thing?

It could be argued that Hell is necessary, because if actions didn’t have real and terrifying consequences then people wouldn’t have any incentive to act morally. God created Hell because He loves mankind; He made it so people would behave morally toward each other and to Him. He needs men to fear Him because He loves them, because without His guidance they would surely be lost and immoral. The reason people need Hell is the same reason God gave people free will, if they are to be free, there must be consequences. Such is the nature of the world we live in; the good suffer and the wicked prosper, there is limited immediate justice for all this injustice. The existence of Hell is therefore necessary for people to believe, because without it they wouldn’t believe in justice at all. The idea of Hell is keeping us in check, stopping us from being selfish and cruel (Russell, 1927).

This argument is very common in Christianity and is very central to it. This argument however, implies a startling lack of faith in the human race. It also doesn't hold up to scrutiny, we need only to look to our history to see evidence of that. Generally throughout our history we see evidence that high religious dogma doesn't equal higher morality; in fact it's the opposite (Russell, 1927).

The Spanish inquisition, witch burnings, the crusades, purposeful denying of science, torture, religious wars and slavery were implemented by the church during times of high religious dogma like the medieval times (Cantor, 1994). Some of the countries that have the least amount of faith have the highest life satisfaction, best education, high life expectancy and other indicators of a better society (Zuckerman, 2007.).

But regardless of the morality of Hell, what about the ethics taught by Jesus in the New Testament? Maybe we can just follow Jesus and live a fulfilling moral life through him, which brings me to my next point.

2.3 Jesus is a poor moral authority

His ideas may have been revolutionary, and in many ways a vast improvement over the Old Testament, but the fact remains that many of Jesus Christ's central teachings are impractical, unreasonable, impossible and not very moral.

The most famous moral guideline attributed to Jesus is called **the golden rule** and it's often cited as the most important moral all-encompassing guideline in history. "All things whatsoever ye would do to you, do ye so for them; for this is the law and the prophets." (Matt 7:1). At first glance the moral relevance of the golden rule seems obvious but look closer and you will find that it isn't very sound at all. Aside from the fact that this was in no way a revolutionary idea at the time, because it can be seen in virtually all major religions; Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, Sikhism, Taoism, Zoroastrianism as well as from the teachings of philosophers and ancient proverbs. (Barton, 2002). If we were to take this idea into practice then the world would be far more chaotic and unjust. Should a police officer, not take a mass murderer to prison because he himself doesn't want to go to prison? People cannot afford to treat everyone as they would like to be treated; the basis of the justice system would crumble. Would punishments and fines be forgone because nobody wants to be punished? Another thing this rule possibly ignores is the fact that people want different things; what I would want done to myself is not necessarily what you would want done to you. It's easy to see where this would have horrible consequences, when for example, you think about all the different sexual persuasions people have.

But what if the golden rule doesn't mean that we should assume that everyone has the same desires as ourselves? Maybe we should help people fulfill their desires as we would like to fulfill ours. Although this is an improvement, in it arises a different conflict. Some people's desires are evil, destructive or self-destructive, surely we shouldn't assist those urges. But if we don't then we are taking for granted that we are morally superior to the people we are trying to stop. We start to assume that we know what's best for them. Worse still is that, in only assisting the beneficial desires of other people and denying the unbeneficial ones, we presuppose a prior standard of morality. That standard is not incorporated in the all-encompassing moral guideline which the golden rule supposedly is (Curzer, 1999).

Jesus also famously told people to turn the other cheek when attacked. "To one who strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also, and from one who takes away your cloak do not withhold your tunic either." (Luke 6:29). He seems to forgo self-defense; it seems obvious that you can't always turn the other cheek, especially when concerning your life or the lives of others. The lack of self-defense is also consistent with the golden rule, people generally don't want to be attacked and so they shouldn't attack anyone under any circumstances. Jesus also implied that you should not only allow people to steal from you but you should offer them more. For example, if someone breaks into your house and steals your TV, then you should hunt him down and give him your stereo as well. Jesus gives further examples of similar messages; "Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back" (Luke 6:30). According to this we shouldn't demand anything back that has been stolen from us, not only that but we should also give anyone whatever they wish from us no matter how important that item may be to us. Jesus also says that "if someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles" (Matthew 5:41). If you are forced to do something, then you must do that and more (Curzer, 1999).

These proverbs and teachings all have a similar component, the apparent abandonment of your sovereignty. You should not care for your own ambitions and self-interest but solely care about others, including and with special emphasis on your enemies and those who seek to hurt you. Humility is a good virtue, and everyone should be humble but this is taking it to the extreme, to teach people that their ambitions and their pursuit of money and riches are not only wrong but will also condemn them; "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh" (Luke 6:20-21). "Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry. Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep" (Luke 6:24-25). It's wrong to teach this

to our children that they shouldn't be happy and fulfilled with their life for it will earn them damnation in the afterlife. Jesus is literally telling people not to laugh (be happy), and he claims that it is more virtuous to suffer and starve than living a fulfilling life.

Jesus wanted his followers to love everyone equally and unconditionally. "I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." (Matthew 5:44). This is simply impossible to do, love is an emotion and emotions cannot be controlled. But that's a bit unfair; it's entirely plausible that he simply meant that you should treat everyone like how you treat your loved ones. Never mind the distinction, it's irrelevant. Regardless of whether you actually love everyone equally or treat everyone with equal affection as you show your closest friends and family, then the inevitable conclusion is that you cheapen the relationships with the people who are closest to you. If this rule were to be taken to its natural conclusion, then it would eventually lump all relationships into the same group. It is also known that the sweet doesn't taste so sweet without the sour. If you love everyone and everyone loves you, it will cheapen the feeling, making it the norm. We wouldn't be able to appreciate it thus rendering it meaningless (Curzer, 1999).

We've now seen how following Jesus's rules on ethical behavior to the letter is either impractical or impossible. Some of these rules aren't even particularly moral either, at least not in the modern world of individualism and freedom. What sort of defense can we use to protect the Christian values?

Chapter 3

An interview with Rev. Hildur Eir Bolladóttir

I sat down with Rev. Hildur Eir Bolladóttir, a priest who works for The Church of Akureyri. We discussed for about an hour about the morality of Christianity and she made some excellent points. The following chapter is a summarization of what she had to say.

3.1 Rev. Hildur Eir Bolladóttir

According to Hildur Eir, Christianity is a big part of Icelandic culture, it's a huge part of our history and it's important for our children to know why we have Christmas, Easter and why we do things a certain way. She realizes that we live in a multicultural society but it's important for a person who is living in a new society to adapt and to get to know native people and Christianity is a significant part of that adaptation process. She makes a distinction between missionary work and educating children in Christianity, and doesn't feel compelled to preach to children that Christianity is the only true religion or anything of that sort. She wants it taught by teachers, academically with more emphasis on the moral themes that Jesus taught: love, forgiveness, humility and kindness as opposed to teaching it as fact. She believes that the church must evolve with the times, for the times are changing. It should be the job of the church to monitor the changes and examine how Christian values such as respect, love, forgiveness, justice and fairness can influence society for the better. Of course, the church should also seek to teach Jesus's messages, and to hopefully allow people to embrace him as their savior. However, she realizes that the world isn't that simple; her primary mission in life is to use her faith for good, not to make everyone believe. She completely understands that some people don't have faith; she doesn't believe that said person is doomed.

It's a misunderstanding that the church wants to impose itself on all aspects of society; she would much rather that people choose for themselves to come to them. The church does however, have a big role to play in society; its services are available if there is need for grief counseling. The church can be relied upon to offer its services to anyone who requires them. Sometimes when an unexpected death or tragedy occurs there is much need for it, for example, in places of work or in schools. Because the church is a part of the state, their services are free and they can be called upon at a moment's notice. Of course there are grief counselors outside of the church too but they do not meet those criteria's because they cost

money and need to be scheduled ahead of time. Hildur feels as this is the biggest reason she is against the separation of church and state.

With regard to Christian morality, when people study theology they learn to look at the Bible from different perspectives. In order to study the Bible you need to know about the history and cultural environment in which the Bible was written. Hildur claims that the Bible should be the subject of interpretation and consequently not to be taken literally. Fundamentalism is the enemy of Christianity, it doesn't and shouldn't work that way. For example, Jesus spoke a lot about Hell, but according to Hildur Eir that doesn't mean that Hell literally exists as a geographical location. Instead it exists as a reality in which many live; whether they are struggling with addiction or violent tendencies. Hell is a personal place and a state of mind. So of course Jesus speaks about it, it is very real and all too real for many people. But what Jesus offered was a way out of Hell; if you follow his teachings then you can indeed escape Hell. You don't have to follow his rules to the letter; because of course they are extreme. He needed to use extreme examples in order to get people's attention at the time; he was a rebel through and through. His ideas needed to be revolutionary for people to pay attention and to get them to think about them. He needed to be provocative to challenge us to think.

This is why his resurrection is so important; it showed us that you can overcome any obstacle. The resurrection of Christ can be interpreted as a social resurrection; it showed us that we too can resurrect ourselves and that everyone has the power to change his or her state of mind. The resurrection is the essence of Christianity; it says to us that even though we can never be perfect, even though we stumble on the way, even though life is cruel and unfair there is always hope with faith. Without faith in hope, there is no hope.

As an example for an extreme message with good moral founding, Hildur Eir spoke about what Jesus said about greed. He spoke about the lilies of the field; how we should be more like them and not want for anything excessive. He spoke of how they neither toil nor spin and yet we who are far superior to them get anxious about material things and try to reach beyond our grasp. This doesn't mean that we shouldn't reach at all; instead we should only reach as far as our arms allow. Hildur explains that we have already witnessed it countless times throughout history when men become blinded by their greed. A recent example is the banking crisis which shook the Icelandic nation in 2008; certain men became too greedy and overreached which had catastrophic consequences for the Icelandic economy and the Icelandic nation (Hildur Eir Bolladóttir personal communication, March 19th 2014).

The Immorality of Christianity

Until now I've discussed the literal interpretations of the rules presented in the New Testament by Jesus and how they are extreme. Rev. Hildur Eir points out that the Bible should not to be taken literally, and that there was good reason for Jesus to use such extreme examples. When we look underneath the literal text we can see the brilliance of the messages.

Does this new interpretation of Christianity contain the best moral values available to us?

Chapter 4

A new perspective

In light of this perspective given by Rev. Hildur Eir, which downplays many of the problems I mentioned in the first half of my dissertation, there is sufficient reason to rethink the meaning of Christian values and shed light on this new interpretation of Christianity.

4.1. A reduced Jesus

Rev. Hildur Eir argues that the ethical rules, presented by Jesus in the New Testament are more guidelines than actual rules. Even though it may be impossible for us to actually love strangers and our enemies as we love our family and friends, it's the message that counts. Jesus preaches a message of forgiveness, tolerance and kindness; it's the essence of his preaching that counts, not for us to follow his teachings to the letter.

The problem of always trying to reduce Jesus's preaching down to a more easily digestible moral code is that it undermines his moral authority. In the Bible Jesus gives no hint that he is speaking in metaphors, and this interpretation of his words sounds suspiciously like trying to turn his message into whatever people want to hear, to make Christianity less demanding. That doesn't make him a moral revolutionary it just makes him a spokesperson for a more common sense morality which we may all agree is just (Curzer, 1999).

Another problem with basing morality in religion is that The Bible can be interpreted in so many ways; there is a very real risk of people reading into it whatever they wish to see. For example, some Christians condemn homosexuals because the Old Testament states that they are an abomination "if a man also lie with mankind, as he lieth with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination: they shall surely be put to death; their blood shall be upon them" (Leviticus 20:13). But while those same Christians uphold certain verses they choose to ignore others which they themselves may have violated countless times such as "neither shall a garment mingled of linen and woolen come upon thee" (Leviticus 19:19) which clearly bans the wearing of mixed fibers. Both verses are even in the same chapter (Leviticus). After all no man can live his life entirely according to the rules and laws of the Bible. In Rachels (2002) he touches on this subject. Since the Bible is somewhat ambiguous on many matters, it's far too common that people make up their minds beforehand and then interpret the Scriptures in a way that supports their moral conclusion. It's all well and good to

have moral opinions, but when people are under the influence that somehow their opinion is supported by God, they are much more likely to close their minds on other arguments.

Reducing Christianity to a few central themes doesn't justify the Christian morality. However, this is certainly an improvement over fundamentalism. In Arthur (1999) it's pointed out that most actions are taken with many considerations such as what others will think of you, if that action brings you satisfaction, if that action embarrasses you or your friends or family, if an action gets you into trouble, if an action leaves you feeling guilty, if you might get caught and so on. The religious angle is rarely a deciding factor, except amongst those who are particularly devout.

The themes of this interpretation of Christianity are widely accepted; be kind, be generous, forgive, love, have humility, don't be judgmental etc. But is that because it is very basic ethics that we have all agreed upon? Rev. Hildur spoke about the importance of the resurrection, how we can all aspire to achieve a social and mental resurrection when we are down. Is it necessary for Jesus to come back from the dead to teach us that we can better ourselves? Most of us know people or at least have heard of someone who has overcome serious challenges in their life. I would hope that it's self-evident that we should not just give up when we are faced with a serious challenge. Can we not figure out the basic moral principles on our own? Do we need Jesus to tell us the golden rule to know that we should be kind, generous and loving toward other people? Can we not learn that it's better to forgive than to avenge without looking to the Bible and Jesus? These moral messages do not suffer from inquiry and have been proven countless times to be for the benefit of all people.

4.2 Basing morality on religion

If we are to follow a moral code then I believe that Christianity is a poor choice for a variety of reasons, the most important of which is that it can be taken to fanaticism. In the new interpretation, the line between Christianity being a moral code and a religion is blurry to say the least. The greatest danger which any religion bestows upon the human race is fundamentalism, and Christianity is definitely no exception. When faith in Christianity becomes so great that followers abandon all critical thinking with regard to its content then it poses a very real threat to all of us, not only a physical threat of violence and the deprivation of certain human rights but also a spiritual threat. Fundamentalists are by definition close minded, they actively fight against any information that isn't in accordance with the Bible. When people close their minds to new possibilities, they are doing a great disservice to the human race. After all, progress thrives on innovation and the challenging of conventional

ideas. If we were to succumb to fundamentalism then we would stagnate and instead of moving forward we would move backward. Fundamentalism can only thrive where there is belief in the concept of a divine creator and when people believe that our mortal lives are merely a means to an end toward a far grander and everlasting afterlife. Thankfully, fundamentalism seems to have significantly decreased in most Western states and most Christians are moderate believers; that is, they don't take the Bible literally (Zuckerman, 2007). Most probably follow a moral code that is similar to the one Rev. Hildur Eir proposed, i.e. a moral code that is without specific rules in any given situation but offers instead a simple theme which is to be kind, fair and generous to others.

However, there will always be a danger of fanaticism with regards to Christianity or other religions. That's the primary problem with basing morality on religion, because religion is faith in a higher power and in that, it suggests that we are unable to make our own moral choices. There will always be those who take it too far, who read too much into the text, who firmly believe that their truth is greater than their neighbors. Their influence must not be understated, for they will preach and there will always be those who will listen, especially the young and impressionable.

4.3 Mill's utilitarianism and concept of freedom

That being said, Christianity without the supernatural still has many of the problems previously discussed including the following: people shouldn't follow their dreams of being wealthy and/or happy, you should always do as others command, and you should love everyone equally. There are far more complete and better ethical doctrines out there such as John Stuart Mill's *Utilitarianism* and *On Liberty*. Here we have doctrines which do not invoke the supernatural and have a greater and deeper ethical message than Christianity. Mill believed that we all have **freedom** and it is only limited when it steps on other people's freedom or their ability to be happy. In other words, you can do as you please as long as it doesn't hurt anyone. Mill also believed that an action is at its most moral when it promotes overall human happiness. For Mill, happiness and pleasure are the only things that are inherently desirable for all mankind and so bringing happiness and pleasure to others must be considered the greatest of moral feats. However, happiness can be categorized into lower and higher forms. The lower form of happiness is physical happiness, the quenching of physical desires such as; hunger, lust and greed. The higher form of happiness is intellectual happiness; the quenching of intellectual desires such as, our desire to learn, to contemplate, to use our

imagination and to contemplate moral sentiment. The higher form should always trump the lower form for it is our unique intellect which makes us human (Heydt, n.d.).

Similar to the new Christianity, this is a very simple code to live by. But it is superior in many ways; unlike in Christianity, happiness is the key term. Humility, forgiveness, love and duty are the key terms in Christian ethics. Note that happiness is definitely not one of the key terms in Christian ethics. It is in our nature to pursue happiness; I think it's fair to say that all any of us really want is to be happy and free. According to Christian ethics our purpose is to serve, we should be humble and refrain from material goods. There isn't much freedom in servitude and there isn't much happiness in denying our impulses and ambitions. Mill also places a huge amount of importance on intellect, the pursuit of knowledge and our unlimited imagination. Wherein Christianity teaches us that it is not our place to question God or to question Jesus, we must accept a single truth, that is; accept Jesus Christ as our lord and savior. We mustn't wander off His path and pursue truths that are any different or contradict Him. Mill's approach to ethical behavior is much more in touch with modern morality. Freedom and happiness are very modern concepts, and are the keys to understanding Western culture. Most Western societies are based on the ideals that citizens should have freedom and a right to pursue their ambition and happiness. It is the essence of a democratic and capitalistic society, by which most Western societies abide.

The issue of Christianity in schools has been hotly debated over the years in Iceland. One basis for the argument that Christianity should be inculcated in schools is because it contains the best set of morals available for us. In light of what we have seen regarding the connection between morality and faith and the ethical value of Christianity, it's important to discuss the issue of Christian inculcation in our public schools. Is it morally right to do that? If Christianity doesn't contain the best moral values available, what place should it have in our society and schools, if any? This discussion is very relevant to the overall dissertation, because it deals with the fundamental questions of it. Hoping to shed the light on this debate, I've recruited the aid of Salvör Nordal and Eyja Margrét Brynjarsdóttir.

Chapter 5

Christianity in schools

Salvör Nordal (2005) discusses the teaching of Christianity in schools and the value of Christian morality in a child's upbringing. She maintains that a Christian upbringing and a Christian society will benefit the Icelandic nation. For this she provides three arguments; a cultural argument, a religious argument and a moral argument. The cultural argument states that since Christianity is such a big part of Icelandic culture and history, it would be a shame to dismiss it so easily. It's important to remember our heritage and therefore it's important for our children to learn about Christianity in our schools. Eyja Margrét Brynjarsdóttir (n.d.) convincingly argues that the cultural argument is valid and can stand on its own, the other two are not.

5.1 The religious argument

The religious argument was first presented by the American philosopher William James (1842-1910). He claimed that in order for people to make an informed choice, both alternatives must be **alive** for them. An option is only alive for a person if that person has experienced it first-hand, for example Christianity is only alive for a person who grew up in Christianity and therefore knows how it feels to be a Christian. It is not something that can be taught. By preventing people from experiencing faith by not inculcating it in them when they are young is to take the choice away from them. Christianity becomes a dead option. Salvör claims that the decision for a person to decide whether or not to be religious should be a choice made with all the information available. Faith is not something that can be described; it can only be felt and so if a person has never felt faith then that person cannot choose to be religious. However, if a person who previously had faith decides to become an atheist or agnostic, he will have contemplated many of life's great questions on morality, the meaning of life and the position of man in the cosmos. It's disrespectful and immoral for us to take the choice of our children away from them. It implies that we don't trust them to deal with these fundamental questions on their own. The cornerstone of a free society is the principle of having as many choices as possible available. When a person has never known faith he doesn't have the tools to make an informed decision on whether or not to reject it. In today's world of increased involvement by schools in upbringing, it's important for the schools to offer this option for children. If we don't there is a very real danger of creating a generation of

people who are apathetic toward faith. They will never know the feeling of spiritual enlightenment and the treasure of faith. If we are to ban religious upbringing by schools, should we also ban various sport clubs to preach their message in our schools? We might have to reconsider various fields of school collaboration if we take a clear stand against religious upbringing. One of the most important jobs of the government is to give all children and young people equal opportunity for mental growth. The government does that by opening young people and children to the various values that lie in spiritual and ethical valuables. Finally Salvör asks if the religious element isn't just as valuable as arts and science. (Salvör Nordal, 2005).

5.2 The counterargument

In Eyja Margrét Brynjarsdóttir (n.d.) article, she starts by discussing Salvör's claim that in order for us to have a free choice between faith and non-faith, faith must be a live option. Surely if the choice is to be truly free, then non-faith must also be a live option. She reiterates the importance of keeping both options a live, but doesn't waste any space on explaining how non-faith can be kept alive by inculcating faith. Maybe she assumes that everyone who grows up in a religious environment will inevitably contemplate their faith.

The main problem with the religious argument is that it takes it for granted that faith is something desirable and worth pursuing. Salvör expresses concerns that if children don't experience religion as a live reality then they have no chance of ever attaining it and become apathetic towards faith. The contradiction in this is that most of the parents who have a problem with schools inculcating faith are those who are conscious atheists. The people who are apathetic toward faith are much more likely to agree with faith inculcation on the grounds that it's probably good for the children and it frees them up to not teach them about it. Her concerns that children won't have a chance to discuss deep religious questions by people who consciously decide to not raise their children in faith are based on feeble grounds (Eyja Margrét Brynjarsdóttir, n.d.).

Or maybe Salvör assumes that the parents who don't want their child raised in a religious upbringing are only those who are credulous and apathetic atheists. The only kind of atheists she seems to have tolerance for is a rare breed indeed. That person has to have had a religious upbringing, a great deal of faith, know Christianity from the inside and then reject it. Not only that, this person must have an extremely positive attitude toward Christianity and be willing to inculcate faith in his child even when that person doesn't possess this faith himself (Eyja Margrét Brynjarsdóttir, n.d.).

As parents we raise our children to believe in the same values as we do and we place emphasis on them so our children will learn what we believe to be important. In doing so, we inevitably limit their choices and the opportunities they might have in the future. Children who learn figure skating from an early age are much more likely to become professional figure skaters than those who don't. If we don't put our child in this program we are limiting this option, but instead we strengthen other options we perceive to be more important. Perfectly free choice in every aspect is simply impossible. For many atheists, a live option to have faith is no more important than having a live option to be a figure skater for someone who has no interest in figure skating (Eyja Margrét Brynjarsdóttir, n.d.).

Salvör's main goal seems to be that children grow up to be without prejudice toward religion, gain the ability to deal with deep questions regarding faith and that they are able to make an informed decision on whether or not to keep their faith. It remains unclear how religious upbringing and by extension religious inculcation is the only and best way to reach these goals. How does raising a child in one specific religion protect it against prejudice toward other religions and atheism? Aren't those goals just as worthy? (Eyja Margrét Brynjarsdóttir, n.d.).

How does raising children in one specific religion help them gain understanding on deep religious matters? Eyja Margrét Brynjarsdóttir (n.d.) believes that it's better to teach children that the world is full of smart and nice people who believe in different things and to encourage them to find for themselves what they want to believe and why rather than telling them what to believe. Religious inculcation has never been thought to be very stimulating for critical thinking.

5.3 The ethical argument

Those who have spoken against the teachings of Christianity have held up the idea that schools should be neutral on ethical values and instead of preaching Christian values they should instead focus on the teaching of ethics and critical thinking. Salvör Nordal (2005) suggests that increased ethics education should not be at the expense of teaching Christianity, in fact it can enhance it and Christianity can be a good basis for critical ethics. Philosophers have often argued about whether ethics should be taught or preached. The question is whether or not ethics should be a discussion on potential ethical rules and leave it up to others to preach how to behave. Salvör's stance on this discussion is that ethical rules are shaped by what people value in their life and often the distinction between the two are muddled. The relationship between people's values and which rules they obey are of importance to schools.

The main essence of ethics as a subject is critical thinking. However, this critical guidance doesn't stop schools in teaching children what is valuable in life, values such as honesty and integrity. Moreover, philosophical ethics also has basic values at its core such as; individual freedom and respect for other people.

Philosophical ethics assumes that these basic principles are true and only differ on how they want to approach these values. Salvör wants to explore how to lay this foundation for our children. Only when children have learned how to treat others and themselves can we have a critical discussion on why these rules are so important. Before we start to teach critical ethics, our children have to know these basic values. Children need a moral upbringing beforehand, where the basic rules and values are inculcated rather than discussed. Up until now this moral upbringing has had a Christian undertone. Even though Salvör admits that the Christian elements are not necessary, we should think long and hard before discarding them. Especially since some respected scholars have suggested that apathy toward religion is of the same nature as apathy towards ethics (Salvör Nordal, 2005).

There is a reason why the ethical behavior we universally agree upon resonates so highly with Christianity. It is because it's built on it, Christian values and Christian ideals such as loving your neighbor are very similar to the foundation of philosophical ethics; respect for others in all aspects, be it their freedom or their choices. Most ideals of a modern, democratic society are heavily influenced by Christianity. This would also go some way in explaining why some societies who share a different religious background have difficulties in achieving the same Western values such as respect and human and civil rights. This view should however not be mistaken in such a way that we should put all emphasize on Christianity. We should explore and teach other religions as a way to enrich our understanding of different cultures. However it's only natural that our emphasis should be on Christianity, given our history and values (Salvör Nordal, 2005).

The parents of our nation are concerned about the choices offered to young people. In a world where violence seems to be on the rise and spiritual values on the decline there is much to fear. In today's capitalistic world most of the faith is put on money, but religion opens our eyes to a higher power than ourselves and that there is a yardstick for good and evil outside of us. Salvör believes that a healthy religious upbringing can enhance our morality and offer a resistance toward fundamentalism in a way that indifference does not. Before, Salvör discussed the importance of keeping the possibility of Christianity alive. We should fight to keep this possibility alive, so our children don't miss out on a precious opportunity for

mental and moral growth. It is time for us to reconsider our faith, and given the history of Christianity in our country we should at least give it the respect it deserves by taking that reconsideration seriously (Salvör Nordal, 2005).

5.4 The counterargument

Eyja Margrét Brynjarsdóttir (n.d.) makes it clear that she is not against inculcating certain behaviors into very young children, such as being nice to others. These two philosophers agree on the end but not on the means. Salvör claims that up until now, the inculcation has had a Christian undertone and that has served us well. What does she have to support that statement? She's probably not talking about the upbringing of those who have fostered this capitalistic society, which she seems so concerned about, those who are responsible for a world where violence is increasing and morality declining. The statement lacks all argumentation. Eyja Margrét sees many reasons for doubting the value of Christian inculcation.

1. Many values have been introduced under the guise of "Christian values". Sometimes it's what a group of Christians believe to be important. Many of these values are desirable, but others aren't. Some of the "Christian values" include that women should be submissive towards men, that homosexuality is a sin, that slavery can be justified and that children should be beaten to obedience. Some of these values are even still in practice with certain Christian people. What measurement for Christian values does Salvör have in mind?
2. Those "Christian values" that she seeks to inculcate in Icelandic children are not only tied to Christianity. Those values, such as honesty, respect for people, tolerance, etc., are praised in most religions and by most atheists. To teach children that these values are exclusively Christian is simply giving them false information. Giving them this misinformation is dangerous for three reasons; it can foster prejudice, there is a risk of teaching them that morality is exclusively based on religion which gives them a very shallow morality that can be easily lost, and lastly because it's important for children to learn the truth of the world. Truth for truth's sake.
3. Freedom of religion. Even though Iceland has a state church it must be considered immoral that schools take on a job of inculcating a certain faith into children, considering our fundamental right of freedom of religion.

Salvör Nordal (2005) also talks about how Christianity and Jesus Christ are the basis for our values in the Western states. Eyja Margrét Brynjarsdóttir (n.d.) doesn't believe that values such as respect for other people and freedom are exclusively linked to Christianity. If Christian values are the foundation of a good and moral society then why is history chockfull of examples of slavery, oppression of women and feudalism amongst Christian nations? Did those nations not have the correct understanding of Christianity? History has proven that Christian morals can be inculcated in radically different ways. Even today does the biggest Christian congregation in the world, the Catholic Church, openly parade sexism; women are denied priesthood, for example. Christian Protestant fundamentalists in the U.S. have controversial beliefs regarding homosexuality and the death penalty which have long been a thorn in the eye of human rights activists.

Lastly Salvör Nordal (2005) writes that Christianity is a big part of our democratic society and goes a long way to explain why some countries which have different belief-systems have struggled to achieve the same high standard of morality which is taken for granted in Christian societies. Eyja Margrét Brynjarsdóttir (n.d.) recites numerous examples of atrocities committed by Christian nations in history including; slavery, the crusades, the Vietnam War and the wars in Afghanistan and Iran. Clearly western societies are at the front foot of morality and equality she says sarcastically. Also when looking to the history of human and civil rights, the Christian church has plenty to be ashamed for. Eyja Margrét doesn't feel the need to reiterate to people that human and civil rights movements have often clashed with the church. The rights of women and homosexuals are recent examples.

It is important to note that education in Christianity is very different from inculcating it. There is every reason to educate children in Christianity in schools because it's a huge part of Icelandic history. The indoctrination of Christianity however, is not something we should have in schools because of the reasons mentioned above (Eyja Margrét Brynjarsdóttir, n.d.).

Chapter 6

Discussion and conclusions

In this chapter I discuss what I've learned throughout this dissertation, chapter by chapter. I present my commentary on the chapters where I relied primarily on sources from different authors. This excludes chapters three and four which are primarily based on Rev. Hildur Eir's remarks and my response. Therefore I don't believe it necessary to discuss them, since I already have.

6.1 Chapter one

The first chapter consists of three arguments; Kant's moral necessity, Clifford's *The Ethics of Belief* and the timeless argument on whether or not morality can exist independently of God, if He exists. This chapter is my exploration on the connection between morality and faith.

I find myself agreeing with Clifford rather than Kant's version of moral necessity. We all have our beliefs but it should be everyman's duty to regularly question it. Since a belief in God is so comprehensive over all matters, it becomes dangerous not to question it. For if we don't, the danger is that scientific and sociological exploration will cease to matter as much because we perceive ourselves to know many of the answers which those fields try to answer. With regards to morality, I share the opinion of Kant in some way. I too believe that morality is closely related to reason and our higher functions. It's entirely logical for us to be as moral as possible. We are social creatures and we thrive in the company of others, we behave kindly and morally toward other people because that way we get along much better and subsequently we feel much better. But unlike Kant, I don't believe that a belief in a higher power is generally necessary to take moral actions which conflict with people's interests. I believe that a person without faith can be just as moral as a person with it. I don't believe that people of faith are only moral because of their faith. I believe that a myriad of reasons come into play whenever we choose an action and most of those factors come from using logic, reason and empathy toward others. Those are traits that most people share, regardless of their faith or lack thereof. The difference between those two types of people lies within actions that are taken solely based on faith in God or a higher deity. I would have to agree with Clifford that those actions are not moral, for they do not have sufficient backing from evidence.

The third installment in chapter one is the classic argument on whether morality can exist independently of God. This argumentation has been used to debunk **the divine command**

theory, whose main essence is that actions and rules from the Bible are right because God commands them. I find no problems with the conclusions drawn from this argumentation that either morality exists outside of God or morality is arbitrary.

6.2 Chapter two

Chapter two is about Christianity specifically, and not faith in general. In this chapter we reviewed many rules and themes taken directly from the New Testament, more specifically the gospels. The ethical implication of Hell and the apparent fear it installs into Christians is explored. This also plays into the popular notion that we owe our free will to God. I conclude that if God gave us free will and certain physical and psychological urges but punishes us from giving into those urges, then He isn't very moral at all but rather cruel and capricious. I also briefly discuss the role of fear in religion, which applies to the subject of Hell and the fear of punishment. It's suggested that fear is not a very moral motivator for ethical behavior and noted that fear for one's own self-interest always produces a selfish action.

I also devote some space to Jesus's actual ethical teachings. The golden rule is at the very center of Christian ethics. I examined it from different angles and concluded that it's somewhat flawed, because it would mean that everyone would project their self-interest on everyone else. Since we all have a different self-interest the result is that our self-interest would not be met. I also gave a rather misguided example of how nobody would be punished for crimes and other misdeeds because nobody wants to be punished. I feel as though I may have been guilty of the straw-man fallacy in many ways during this argumentation. I later realized that by enforcing punishments we are serving our community, and it's not unreasonable to think that most people want to live in a society where crimes are punished and there exists a fair justice system. So in a way, it could be argued that people want to be punished if they commit a crime because that's the kind of society they want to live in. This does not however, affect the second part of the argument. We presuppose a prior standard of morality by enforcing this rule.

This chapter was heavily influenced by Curzer (1999) and Russell (1927) as well as some of my own ideas. The primary theme of the critique is the extreme humility and abandonment of self-interests which are central to many of Jesus's ethical rules.

The critique of the moral lessons and rules in the New Testament is overall very sound. I believe this chapter highlights serious problems with Christianity; people don't seem to realize just what it entails. It's hard to understand how people can look at these rules and

decide that this is the absolute best we can hope to achieve in morality. Most Christians I know claim that Christian values are the best set of morals but I've never known any of them to actually read the Bible and know what they are claiming. I cannot speak for most people, but I suspect that it's not very common for people of faith to actually read the Bible. If this is the case then I fear the situation is very dire. As I've previously stated numerous times, it's dangerous for people to uphold a set of ideals that goes unexamined.

6.4 Chapter five

Chapter five centers around two articles, Salvör Nordal (2005), and Eyja Margrét Brynjarsdóttir (n.d.). The first article was written as an argument for the teaching and inculcation of Christianity in Icelandic schools. The second is a direct response to the first article, where Eyja Margrét provides counterarguments against Salvör. I wanted to incorporate this debate into my dissertation for two reasons; it's a very relevant subject in the discussion on Christian ethics and because I personally feel very strongly about this subject.

Salvör provides three arguments for teaching and inculcating Christianity in schools, a cultural, religious and ethical argument. I agree with Eyja Margrét that her cultural argument is valid but not the religious and ethical arguments.

The religious argument that faith must be a live option is poorly executed as Eyja Margrét rightfully points out. The concept of a totally free choice for everyone, while it's a beautiful idea is simply impossible to achieve. Parents will inevitably steer their children in a certain direction. The best they can do is to use their judgment on which direction they wish to steer their children by keeping the options they feel are important alive. Some people might find it important that their children receive a religious upbringing and it's totally within their power to do so. Others don't find this to be of any importance and would rather bring up their children in a non-religious environment. The schools have no business to inculcate a particular faith onto children, just as they have no business inculcating a particular political policy onto them. Religion, just like politics are matters of opinion and thankfully we live in a society which promotes the freedom of opinion. The idea of Christian inculcation seems to be in violation of this freedom, the freedom that Salvör promotes so rigorously in her article.

The ethical argument is also very suspect. As one might have guessed, I have serious reservations regarding the morality of Christianity. I find it slightly offensive to suggest that Christians are in some way more moral than everybody else, as someone who is not Christian. When I was reading Eyja Margrét's article it was like she was speaking from my heart. I don't

feel the need to repeat her argumentation, but know that I feel the same way. I can't understand the argumentation that atheism robs people of spirituality and breeds apathy toward ethics. I would argue that it doesn't, the scientific world-view is in my opinion far greater and more mysterious than the idea of a single divine creator and eternal life. Atheism is life-affirming; we know that we only have one life so it's important to live it to the fullest. We know that our consciousness is merely a brief spark in a vast universe, which only occurred through a series of staggering coincidences. So we know just how lucky we are to be alive, we also know that it will not last and that's what makes life so precious. We know that life is a privilege, so we should all be thankful and happy that we get to experience all the wonderful things the world has to offer. In religion there seems to be a yearning for death because only in death can your life be perfect. So I would argue that religion is death-oriented and atheism is life-oriented. No one can claim that atheism isn't spiritual or promotes unhappiness because it does the opposite. The highest praise should go to those who are not afraid to follow the evidence, to use their rationality and logic. It takes a great deal of courage to think outside the box, to challenge conventional ideas if you believe there is sufficient reason to do so. It's much easier to cower in fear; fear of death, fear of punishment, fear of your own thoughts and inclinations, fear of being different. Fear is the enemy of logic and reason, in fact it's almost the polar opposite. When we are frightened, we are not thinking rationally. Only when we learn to control our fear, can we be courageous and reasonable.

6.5 Conclusions

All beliefs should be questioned if they are to remain relevant. Morality is not rooted in faith, but rather in human traits such as; intelligence, empathy and the ability to feel happiness. If morality isn't arbitrary then it has nothing to do with God's commands.

Christian ethical rules are in many ways outdated, impossible to follow and simply not very reasonable compared to today's standard. Fear of Hell is an immoral motivator for moral behavior.

Christianity can be moral when reduced to a few central themes. Reduced Christianity does however; still have the exploitative powers of a religion. There are many superior moral codes out there such as John Stuart Mill's utilitarianism.

Christian inculcation does not belong in schools. Freedom of religion needs to be respected. Atheism is life-affirming.

Christianity therefore does not contain the best set of moral values. Every year more and more people decide to leave the church in Iceland, members have dropped from 90% in 1998 to 75% in 2014 (Hagstofa Íslands, 2014). It seems others are coming to the same conclusion, and I for one am pleased with that.

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