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Ferdinand Domela Nieuwenhuis

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Is atheism immoral?

Ferdinand Domela Nieuwenhuis

A frequent accusation that is brought against atheism is that it is immoral. The reasoning underlying this accusation is this: Without religion there can be no morality and therefore where atheism has broken with all religion, morality has been undermined to collapse completely.

But where is the proof?

People simply assume what needs to be proven and thus they get away with the matter rather too easily.

Are all atheists immoral? Are all religious people moral?

We would like to know who dares to answer both of these questions in the affirmative.

With an eye to reality we find it impertinent to dare to assert such a thing.

Or show us a religion, any religion, that does not have a register of immoral deeds on its account. Where is it? And yet by its fruits one knows the tree. If morality is the fruit of religion, then religious people must provide proof of this, so that their actions are better than those of others, then the history of religions must also be the history of morality. Is that so?

Turn to the history book of the Jewish religion with its avenging God, who advises lying, cheating, stealing and murdering. Almost every page of the Old Testament serves as proof that the God created by the Jews is an advisor on the path of immorality. He violates his own commandments one after the other. And do not think that the Jewish religion is behind others, so that it provides the explanation for the wickedness of the Jews, because then you are sorely mistaken. On the contrary, the legislation of the Jews is supported by a spirit of humanity and mercy, such as they rarely occur elsewhere, such as our laws do not show after so many centuries.

Yet there is no sin that cannot appeal to a Bible text to prove that it is a virtue? And Christianity, is that better?

But how many pages in its history books are not written in blood!

Besides, so many sects, so many gods, and in the name of their God, people kill each other, harm each other and, in a very brotherly way, make their fellow men breadless, without any qualms of conscience

Were it not always the priests who made religion an external formal service, so that more attention was paid to the observance of all kinds of commandments and regulations than to the way of life of man?

It was for this reason that Isaiah the prophet, already reproving and warning the priests of his day, said (Isa. 1:11-18):

“What profit is there to me in the multitude of your sacrifices? declares the Lord. I am filled with the burnt offerings of rams, and with the fat of fatlings; I delight not in the blood of bullocks, of lambs, and of goats.

If ye come to appear before me, who shall require this at your hands, to enter into my court? Bring no more meat offerings in vain; incense is an abomination to me; the new moons and the sabbaths, in which ye come together, in labor and distress, are not to be endured by me.

My soul hates your new moons and your solemnities; they are a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them. And though you spread out your hands, yet I hide my eyes from you; and though you pray much, yet I will not listen to you; for your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; put away your evil ways from before my eyes.

Cease from evil; learn to do good; seek justice; relieve the oppressed; do justice to the fatherless; help the cause of the widow.

Come now, and let us reason together, declares the Lord: though your sins be as red as blood, yet they shall be as white as snow; and though they be red like crimson, yet they shall be as wool.”

So the strict fulfillment of the prescribed religious customs does not give the slightest guarantee for the fulfillment of one’s moral obligations. But how can morality then be regarded as a fruit, a consequence of religion?

That assertion can hardly be contradicted more sharply.

And was it not Jesus, who in his classic punitive speech to Pharisees, priests and scribes said exactly the same thing? Priests can never be scourged more sharply, more sharply than in the words of Matthew XXIII. Hear only:

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, who indeed pay your tithes of mint, anise and cummin, but neglect the most important thing in the law, namely justice, mercy and sincerity. These should be done and not neglected.

You, blind guides, you who suck out the gnat and the camel swallows up.

Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! ye which cleanse the outside of the cups and platters, but within they are full of extortion and gluttony.

Thou blind Pharisee, cleanse first the inside of the cup and platter, that the outside may be clean also. Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! ye which are like unto whited sepulchres, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within they are full of dead men’s bones, and of all uncleanness.

So likewise ye also: outwardly ye appear perfect unto men, but within ye are full of hypocrisy and wickedness.“

One sees how religious scrupulousness, according to an Isaiah, a Jesus, and so many others, did not at all provide proof of morality in conduct and behavior.

How else is it that priest and hypocrite have become words of almost equal meaning? Why are priests always presented as people who “bind together heavy and unbearable burdens and lay them on people’s shoulders, but do not touch them themselves with a finger?” Why is it always thrown in their face that “they say it, but do not do it”, that “one should not do according to their works?” Look at the world around you, which is nevertheless called Christian, the work of priests during 18 centuries, and then ask whether they can sometimes be called a model of justice, truth, honesty and good faith! Begin with the rulers, who play with all oaths, in whatever form. to deceive others, who bring themselves a lot of prosperity, even if it is on the ruins of the happiness of so many small ones, doomed to be defeated and given over to the ranks of the great under the patronage of laws and police. Descend into all circles of society and answer the question whether the horses, who deserve the oats, also get them and if not, then all that benefits others, who do not deserve it. And what is this other than stealing the bread from the mouths of his fellow Christians?

Come on, do not hear our judgment, because we are only unbelievers and therefore immoral, no let a Christian communicate the judgment. that he is forced under the power of irrefutable facts to pass on this our society.

“General” Booth of the Salvation Army writes:

“When in one of the streets of London a hired coachman’s horse stumbles and falls, either through fatigue, or through carelessness, or through stubbornness, and lies stretched out in the midst of all the riding, no competition is announced, no debate is opened, how it hap-

I believe that everything that lies outside the treasures that man has only slowly acquired and that will never be lost, is a pipe dream and vanity.

I believe that all those truths that will still come, together will ultimately give man an incalculable power, complete clarity, perhaps even perfect happiness. Yes. I believe that life will ultimately triumph.”

pened that the beast stumbled, before we attempt to help it to its feet. The hired horse is a very fitting figure for the poor, exhausted portion of mankind. If it falls, it is usually due to too much work and too little food. If you help it to its feet, without changing its circumstances, it can only expose it to a repetition of its sufferings. But in any case, the first thing you must do is to help it to its feet. It may have fallen through too much work or too little food; or it may have been entirely its own fault that it fell, that it bruised its knees and broke its limbs; but that is a matter for later, helping it to its feet comes before everything else; if not for its own sake, then to prevent obstruction of traffic. See how everyone’s attention is focused on helping it to its feet again. Its harness is taken off, its harness is unbuckled, even if it is cut loose, everything is done to help it back. And then it is harnessed again and put to work again and again for its usual task. This is the first of the two rules that apply to the hired horse. The second is that every one of these horses in London has three things: A shelter for the night, food for its stomach, and so much work that it earns its food by labor. These are the three points that count as the “right of the hired horse.” If it falls, it is helped to its feet again and as long as it lives, it has food, shelter and work. Now, even though this is a low standard, there are millions—literally millions—of our fellow human beings in this country who cannot possibly attain this standard of living. Can what is rightfully due to hired horses also become the portion of human beings? I for one say: Yes. The standard that applies to the hired horse can also be a yardstick for human beings on the same terms as for animals.”

If a Christian judges Christian society in this way, then it would be advisable on the Christian side to tone it down a bit and especially not to presume to present it as if religion had such a beneficial, moralizing influence on humanity! The right of the London hired horse, the unachieved ideal of man, supposedly created “in God’s image”, is it not more than bad? Does it testify to high morality if one can come forward with 25 proofs for the truth of the Christian religion, all of which testify to the most refined, barbaric and inhumane tortures, applied by the church as such to so-called heretics, i.e. to dissenters? Torture pincers, torture collars, thumb and leg screws, Spanish collars, a kind of necklace with iron pins on the inside, gallows from which one was hung by one arm with a weight on the legs, Spanish boots, being red-hot iron boots, which were filled with molten lead when the “guilty” had put his foot in them, breaking wheel, the so-called “iron Virgin”, a doll of wood and iron, which opened at the front and was provided on the inside with iron points of seven to eight inches in length and sharp as bayonets, the stake, etc. etc. — Behold the moral proofs of the religion of love! And that dares to talk of immorality! Ask about the “sanctity of marriage” in Christian steel and behind the hypocritical appearance that is often maintained, a reality opens up that gives every reason for disapproval. How many family scandals do not come to light and how many others, probably many more, are played out in secret? People consider themselves superior to other peoples because of monogamy, the life of one man and one woman in marriage, but prostitution has been legally recognized and regulated as a supplement to that marriage, while marriage itself is not much different than legalized prostitution.

Ask about the rule in business and conduct, where people attack and undermine each other’s existence, to unleash the foulest passions and the war of all against all is considered natural. People do not murder each other as in those dark sufferings of old on the public road, they do it now in silence, safely sitting in their office, by means of bills of exchange, high percentages and usurious prof-

conscience? So everything that has the tendency to preserve and perfect man as well as the race, that is good and everything that has the tendency to harm and destroy man as well as the race, that is bad.

Atheism, far from being immoral, only provides a good foundation for morality by placing it in man himself.

And as long as religions are not able to cultivate a race that shows itself to be higher than others in society, we have no reason to assume that religion can produce a race of moral beings.

Every religion considers itself “the true one” and claims to proclaim the best morality, but looks down on another religion and sees the morality contained therein as something of lesser quality.

Whoever loves convenience must seek his salvation in the church, because it thinks for him, speaks for him, acts for him, after all it possesses the monopoly of the true in its dogma (doctrine), of the beautiful in its worship, of the good in its morality or discipline.

The atheist does not call out to his fellow men: Come to us. our burden is light, our yoke is easy, no narrow is the path of thinking, heavy is the burden of inquiry, but once we have gone along it, it will become easier and easier for us, because thinking also exercises by doing. And only then will he fulfill his calling as a human being, when he thinks. Or do we not boast of being beings lifted with reason? Well, then it must be shown that reason is our guideline in all our actions.

And against the creed (faith) of the believer with all its absurdities and incomprehensibility we place that of Doctor Pascal in the book of that name, written by the famous writer Emile Zola and which now reads: “Shall I tell you my creed?”

I believe that the future of humanity lies in the progress of reason through science. I believe that the search for truth through science is the divine ideal that man must set for himself.

moral as the level of morality rose among men, and conversely an immoral god led men to immoral acts. Therefore, when the content of religion has been softened in the course of centuries and the deity has become more and more moral in character, it is because the moral concepts of our time are superior to those of earlier centuries.

Atheism cannot be immoral, because it wants to be reasonable, and what is reasonable is also and therefore moral.

As long as one does or omits something because others, whether persons or laws, prescribe it, there can be no question of a moral principle.

The church threatened with hell and damnation for actions against her will or mirrored profit and pleasure for strict observance thereof. The result of this was that far from moralizing people, she demoralized them on the contrary.

Others threaten with gallows and rope, with chains and whip, with prison and imprisonment, again in order to moralize people in this way. And what is the result of this method? That people are demoralized again.

Both are guilty of the same evil and like causes necessarily have like effects.

The atheist says that all actions of people have the same origin, namely they all proceed from the desire to respond to a need of the nature of the individual, all have as their goal the seeking of pleasure and the avoidance of pain. Do not think that it is man alone who would know what is good or evil, oh no the animal world knows that too and hence the urge in all of nature to preserve the species and to obtain the greatest possible sum of happiness for each individual. Therefore good is for animals as well as for men. for atheists as well as for believers. that which is useful for the preservation of the race and evil that which is harmful to it. Not only for the individual, but for the whole race.

What in the world has the idea of good and evil - and that is the domain of moral life - to do with religion or with a mysterious

its if there is anyone who has the courage to say that our Christian society is supported by the principles of right and truth and love, let him act and point out wherever he can see traces of them. With Büchner in his first edition of "Power and Matter"¹ we say: "and finally one looks a little more closely at human society itself and asks oneself whether it acts on moral principles yes or no. Is it not really a bellum omnium contra omnes (a war of all against all)? A general competition in which one does not try to conquer the other, but to destroy it? Could one not say of it what Burmeister says of the Brazilians: everyone does what he thinks he can do with impunity, deceives, harms and exploits his neighbor as much as he can, in the conviction that he is not spared either."

And we are not referred to the past.

The heyday of religion was always the period in which the standard of morality among the people was at its lowest. The better time, to which we must reach out, is not behind us, no, ahead of us in the future and we must work in the present to help hasten it.

The Cain's mark, which is stamped on our Christian society with its: am I my brother's keeper? must be erased by the baptism of fire of love, whereby it will become: all for one and one for all, because we are one noble family of brothers and sisters, my country is your country, my right is your right, there is only one right, which is based on the equality of all.

Do you want a single proof of the hypocritical game that Christians play with their Christianity? Every year they celebrate their Christmas, the birth of Jesus, the "prince of peace" and then the beautiful tones of: Peace on earth! Goodwill to men! And Christians dare to raise that, who are armed to the teeth and who are literally devoured by militarism!

That is heard from the mouths of people who allow that in Europe alone more than 2150 batteries with 13,250 cannons are found, with the aim of killing each other, that armies are main-

¹ Strangely enough, these words are missing in later editions.

tained, which in wartime can be brought up to more than 18 million men, in the prime of life! Every year the peoples have to bleed through a yield of approximately 2900 million, pumped from their poverty and misery! And then there are the treasures that are spent on the fleet!

People preach peace with their mouths and in between they seek their strength in general armament with the permission and blessing of the Christian spiritual lords!

A pleasure in people!

In which people?

In those starving people, who literally lack everything?

Visit our slums, where the workers are put in hovels and slums, too miserable for the rich to keep their horses there, and you will be filled with bitterness and resentment about so much baseness and hypocrisy, to dare to sing or speak of pleasure in people, while one lets one's fellow human beings, one's brothers and sisters live and dwell like that.

In our rich Netherlands, the official report on the Poor in 1888 amounted to 154,424 heads of families and 73,334 single persons.

This did not include the persons who received support from private individuals. not the nurses and the sick in so-called charitable institutions, not the women in childbirth who were nursed at general expense or received assistance from charitable societies.

So the figure is much too low.

But let's do some calculations.

154,424 heads of households, what does that cold, dry figure mean?

On average, we can say that a family consists of a man, a woman and three children, so five people.

Each head of a household therefore represents five people.

So multiply:

$154,424 \times 5 = 777,120$ people.

We also had 73,334 single people.

So add up:

than men like Moleschott, Feuerbach and Multatuli! And that is what a representative of science teaches at one of our universities!

We do not understand how anyone, with a view to the history of belief in God, dares to say that it is the basis of all moral principles. Do not those thousands and hundreds of thousands who were tortured and murdered for the sake of faith involuntarily arise before our imagination? Do not the many witch trials during the Middle Ages testify against the priests who dragged so many unfortunates to the slaughter to be put to death? Only a more general intellectual development contributed to undermining this sad superstition. Therefore we may safely say that all civilization, however small a part of it may be among us, has moved away from the belief in God and not truly towards that belief. And if there are believers who are moral - who will doubt that there are? - then they are not so because of but in spite of their belief.

Believers cannot do otherwise than cover their faces in shame because of the deeds of their fellow believers of all times or they are so hardened that they no longer have any human feeling for those victims of faith. On the other hand, the atheist can proudly and calmly raise his eyes from a moral standpoint and look everyone firmly in the eye.

To be accused of being immoral by people who have so much on their conscience from a moral standpoint is in our eyes more praise than blame. After all, who would like to be praised by criminals whose hands drip with the blood they have spilled? Where one associates, one is honored — that proverb also applies here.

Christianity cannot be moral, because it places the foundation of moral life not in but outside man. Hence it is not religion that cultivates and ennobles morality, but on the contrary morality that raises the level of religion. We may go further and assert that if men had not been better than their religions, the world would have been, if possible, an even greater hell. Instead of religion having a favorable effect on morality, hell was the moral concepts that had a favorable effect on religions. The character of the deity became more

But it got worse. The young Samoyed, after having lived for some time in an unblemished state, finally began to wash himself with eau-de-cologne.

— He acts against morals, now said the philosopher of the day, he is immoral. Come, we will continue to take away the seals he catches, and beat him in addition....

This happened. But because in Samoyedia there was no slander. No copyright, no suspicion, no stupid orthodoxy, nor false liberalism, nor corrupt politics. Nor corrupting ministers, nor rotten Second Chamber.... they beat the patient with the gnawed bones of the seals he himself had caught.” So says Multatuli. And isn’t that rightly said? Instead of ”besmear” write the word ”believe” and you know why the believer claims that the atheist is immoral, simply because he deviates from the morals of the believers.

From the noble Socrates, who was branded as a seducer of youth and as a bad person and was sentenced to death by drinking the poison cup by the defenders of the existing religion, to the immoral Jesus, who was accused of being a glutton and a wine-bibber and of having intercourse with suspicious women, to so many others who were denounced as the scum of society, it has been the constant drive of the believers to accuse all dissenters of everything that was base in the eyes of the great masses. After all, all means are permitted to defend the ”holy” faith!

The philosopher Kant called the ”death of dogmas the birth of morality!”

It is absolutely incomprehensible how a scholar like Prof. Oort, himself no dimwit but a modern man, denies atheists and unbelievers the equal right to exist in this world and goes so far as to call ”disbelief much more disastrous than immorality.”

So a man like the ”notorious” Baron van Heeckeren, who was sentenced to prison for raping children, and his ”notable” fellow countryman and fellow Baron du Tour van Bellinckhave — to cite a few striking examples from the multitude of believers — are higher

777,120 4 + 73,334 = 850,454 people.

Eight hundred and fifty thousand, four hundred and fifty-four people.

The population of our country consisted of 4,511,415 people in this year.

So divide the number of beneficiaries by that of residents. What do you get then? Five.

That is to say: one out of every five people is blessed!² The blessed are of course those who are prey to the utmost need and the worst deprivation!

And then the Christian teachers do not cover their faces in shame and still dare to preach the Christmas gospel every year and speak of: goodwill toward people!

Is there a single heathen country where the situation is as shameful as in our Christian states?

And that dares to speak of the reasonable working of Christianity!

Moreover, the entire Christian reasoning rests on a false foundation. Why should one be good? Why should one refrain from doing evil? ”Because God sees it” — that is the warp and the woof. So out of fear of punishment or out of hope of reward. But that is an immoral foundation, and a morality that proceeds from an immoral point of view condemns itself and is worthless. The poet’s saying is perfectly correct:

I do not see what a God serves us in separating the evil from the good. On the contrary! Whoever has a good goal so that a God would reward him, precisely thereby makes the good into something evil, into a trade. And whoever flees from evil out of fear of the disgrace of that God, is... cowardly!

² These figures correspond to what was claimed in the Chamber, to the great surprise of Minister Roëll, but without being refuted by him. If these figures have changed since then, this will certainly not be due to our Christian governments.

Atheism immoral! And so the Christian dares to say, while he himself dares not challenge the great men of the earth, while he unsparingly condemns the sins committed by the rich! Does not Theodore Parker testify in his addresses: "To discuss from the pulpit the sins of the people, and to combat public injustices, is most unbecoming. The sins of commerce must not be mentioned in commercial cities. In time of war, the ministers must not act as defenders of peace. Why not? Because they are sins of this world, and because the kingdom of Jesus is "not of this world." It is said that one should not touch upon the sins of our time in the pulpit, because it would shock the feelings of the hearers and disturb them in their sweet, sweet rest to which they have become accustomed. One should preach the gospel — they say. And by that they mean the usual propositions that would convince no one's conscience: the squeezing out of some sentimentality and then lapping it off in the old leather bags of the church." He saw that "the law books are the creeds of a people, that the newspapers sing the true songs of praise and deliver the worship of the day.

What does it profit if the priest calls us Christians, while the newspapers and the congresses find us unfaithful? The social sacrament of religion is justice towards all who live in society. honesty in trade and in field work, in friendship and in philanthropy, in the help that the strong as a religious person offers to the weak. To take care of the body and soul of one's neighbor, that is the true sacrament."

Truly, when one tells people: you behave like Christians, that is not praise, but a reproach. And if atheists are guilty of what believers always do, who will be able to prove that what they did wrong was not a remnant of the faith in which they were brought up? Give humanity 18 centuries of disbelief with the study of nature and then see if there is still robbing, burning, plundering and murdering! Yes, 18 centuries are not necessary for that, one will suffice, because then one has the opportunity to let three generations mature.

Faith is intolerant, because it tolerates no other opinion besides itself, because it possesses the truth and does not convince with arguments, but with violence and weapons.

Reason, on the other hand, encourages tolerance, because it recognizes the possibility of error and never appeals to the fists in case of a difference of opinion, but to common sense, which will certainly decide it one day. Faith is greedy and extends its gaze over everything, it wants to rule, rule and rule again, it does not rest until the earth is stretched out at its feet. "The stomach of the church is as strong as iron, she has eaten whole countries without ever overeating"³

Reason, on the other hand, teaches that not master and servant, not man and wife, not rich and poor should stand opposite each other as hostile powers, but all side by side with equal rights and duties.

The lottery is immoral, because it demands the rape of reason, the highest and noblest in man, by submitting to what priests, who do not know it either, want to pin on us.

Atheism is immoral — yes, insofar as it deviates from the morals of believers, which are often horrible. Immoral is unmoral, not according to the morals and customs followed. But who guarantees that these are good? What the morals here entail and require, is elsewhere considered as against morals and is rejected. "In Samoyedia it is customary to smear oneself from head to toe with rancid tears. A young Samoyed neglected this. He did not smear himself at all, neither with tears nor with anything else.

— He does not follow morals, said a Samoyed philosopher... he has no morals... he is immoral. This was very well said. It goes without saying that the young immoral Samoyed was mistreated. He caught more seals than any other, but it did him no good. They took his seals away from him, gave them to tearful Samoyeds and let him starve.

³ Goethe's Faust.