Moral Decision Making - Social and Cultural Perspectives

Teacher Background

Usually it is not a problem for religious adherents in a society to abide by social codes that are usually less stringent than, or at least similar to, their religious codes. Most religions encourage their adherents to be good citizens of their society and to support governments and societal leaders. In Western European-based societies the past, this has not been a problem, because social law had Christian law as its basis. Society is built upon the premise that people will conform. To achieve its objectives, it sets definite goals and values for its members, things that it regards as worth striving for. It also defines the means by which these goals are to be achieved. These regulations and procedures must be adhered to if the social structure and the status system are to remain intact. Society spells out in regulations and procedures with negative and positive norms. Positive norms say what individuals must do; they define the kinds of behaviour society esteems and honours. Negative norms tell them what they may not do; they warn them of activities that are forbidden.

However, in a changing world where national boundaries no longer contain single cultures or religions, socialisation may be inappropriate: the norms that individuals have learned may not apply in the situation in which they find themselves. This often occurs when conflicting cultures come together— that is, when adherents of religions come into conflict with the laws and codes of their societies. In Australia in recent years, we have seen religious groups harbouring illegal refugees in opposition to Australian law; pacifists have broken laws to protest against Australian involvement in controversial wars. (See the example of Ciaron O’Rielly in the Level 5-6 Module Social Action of the Church.)

Social sub-groups

More influential on the individual than societal norms, are the codes and rules of sub-groups to which we belong. For example, there exists an extensive body of literature which claims that schools have replaced other social institutions such as the church, the medical profession and government welfare agencies as the most important agencies of influence in the lives not only of children, but also their parents. Service clubs, community associations and organisations, volunteer groups and cultural groupings all have codes of behaviour and membership rules. Most mirror those of the wider society, but reform groups may well have codes which challenge the status quo. In an Australian society where the alienation of suburbia and the depersonalisation of welfare and government agencies have left people feeling isolated and powerless, local, community-based organisations have become the basic “glue” that holds society together.

Cultural Pressures

For most religious people in Australia and the Western world, the challenge is to continue to live and work and operate in a pluralist culture in which some practices and actions are legal or tolerated, but not moral according to their personal beliefs. Jewish people have lived in this way for millennia; Muslims and Buddhists and now Christians in a multicultural Australia face the same challenges. It is the experience of any minority religious or cultural group. The challenge is even greater when people try to pass these beliefs onto their young when they do not have the cultural supports to reinforce the religious beliefs. Cultural values and practices then, can have a strong influence on whether religious values are passed on to the next generation. In Australia, there are many examples of communities - Indigenous, South Sea Islander, Muslim, Buddhist, Vietnamese, Philippine, Lebanese, South American, Asian and African- who are seeking to preserve their cultural heritage in order to pass on religious and cultural values to a younger generation which has been exposed to the pluralistic, secular values of modern, secular Australia.
According to sociologists, the most pervasive and influential cultural factors in Australian society are (i) the Media- written, aural, visual and electronic; (ii) the entertainment industry; film, music, electronic “games” and cyberspace experiences and nightclubs; (iii) the business of “sport” and sports promotion; (iv) the fashion industry (v) the drug industry and (vi) the lifestyle industry: investment brokers, real estate brokers, wealth advisors and health/beauty brokers. Many of these are interconnected, using and relying on the media to spread their message and influence. The underpinning values are materialism, hedonism, pleasure, wealth, power, influence, appearance and individualism.

Any person hoping to live by religious values and moral norms in the modern world is literally bombarded by alternative messages via significant channels of communication in the home, market, educational institution, workplace and even transport - private and public. This occurs via free-to-air and pay television, internet, stereos, DVD player, VCR, newspaper, junk mail, games console, mail, billboards, blimps, sky writers, telephones - fixed and mobile. The individual must have a solid and coherent support base in order to constantly evaluate and analyse these contrary messages.

At times, cultural factors of minority groups can come into conflict with accepted practices or laws in a dominant or pluralist culture. This can be a cause of cultural conflict, especially if the practices of the culture are associated with religious beliefs. Some examples include the wearing of specific clothing, such as head covering or body adornments; physical mutilation or marking, such as piercing, cutting, tattooing, removal of skin, hair, teeth and body parts; practices such as prayer postures, begging, processions, ritual purity actions, food consumption and preparation, treatment of animals or natural features.

When such culturally associated practices of minorities are challenged in dominant cultures, adherents must decide whether these culturally-based practices and beliefs are essential to their values and beliefs and/or whether they can be preserved and expressed in forms more acceptable in their new cultural setting. The history of Christianity has many examples of how fundamental Christian doctrine found and continues to find, expression and legitimacy in different and alternative cultural practices. Other religious traditions, such as Judaism, Buddhism and more lately Islam, have also adopted and adapted culturally based beliefs and practices to distinguish between beliefs and culture.