

Religious Perspectives in Social Ethics

1. **What** are the religious perspectives in social ethics?

There are numerous religious perspectives in social ethics. Among them, the Judeo-Christian perspective is of particular importance, because of its influence over the development of Western ethics. Christianity and Judaism share some common scriptures, most notably what Jews call "the Hebrew Bible" or "Tanakh" and Christians call "the Old Testament". These scriptures are open to different interpretations about how human beings should treat one another in society, and are heavily influenced by two key ideas: the idea of equality before God and the idea of the sanctity of life.



A newborn child: Christians believe all human life is sacred, including disabled life.

Equality before God: the Christian belief that all human beings are equal to one another in the eyes of God. Christians support this belief by referencing Bible verses like Galatians 3:28, which states "All of you are one in Christ Jesus." However, some passages (e.g. 1 Corinthians 12:33-35) suggest that human beings should be treated differently based on their gender in some cases.

Sanctity of life: the Christian belief that all human life is precious and holy, because it is God-given. Christians support this belief by referencing Bible verses like Exodus 4:11, which implies that God creates every human being with a purpose (including disabled people). Other verses, like Romans 5:3-5 and Galatians 6:2, state that Christians should help and respect people who are suffering.

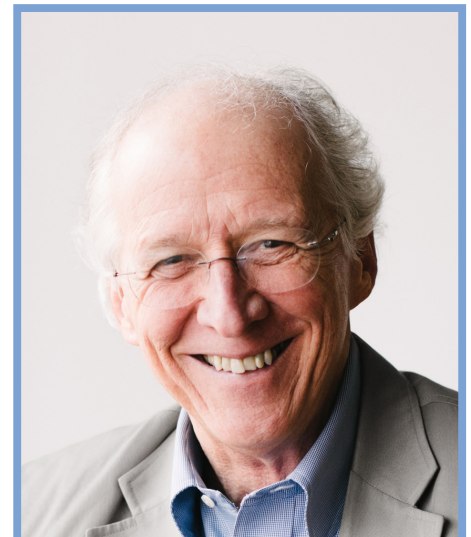
2. **How** do the religious perspectives in social ethics work?

The religious perspectives in social ethics are many and varied. Even among Christians, differing interpretations of the Bible lead to widely diverging approaches to social issues. Today, sexism, racism, and ableism are strongly opposed by most Christians; however, this opposition is not uniform for numerous reasons.

Sexism: the Religious Society of Friends (i.e. Quakers) and the United Methodist Churches support egalitarianism, which means that men and women are able to fulfil the same roles in religious practice. However, some denominations, including the Catholic Church and some Baptist churches support complementarianism, which means that some roles are not open to women (e.g. roles in the priesthood). Catholic and Baptist theologians, like John Piper (b. 1946), justify complementarianism by emphasising the gender of the Twelve Apostles and passages from the Bible that support this perspective.

Racism: the Bible was written at a time when slavery was acceptable, so there is no Biblical prohibition against it. Nevertheless, today slavery is almost universally acknowledged as unacceptable, along with all types of racism. Christianity reflects this perspective, and most churches are committed to fighting racism. In particular, the Anglican Communion has redoubled its efforts to eradicate institutional racism, with the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby (b. 1956), saying, "I'm ashamed of our history and I'm ashamed of our failure," and committing the Church of England to stronger action.

Ableism: most churches are committed to fighting ableism; however, this perspective is inspired by the Christian belief in the sanctity of life as much as the idea of equality before God. The Catholic Church considers some disabilities to be blessings, and Pope Francis (b. 1936) has declared, "People with disabilities are a gift for the family." Importantly, the strong anti-abortion stance of the Catholic Church means that Catholics resist abortion on any grounds (including the identification of a severe disability during pregnancy). Some Protestant churches (e.g. some Methodist churches) accept abortion of severely disabled unborn children, which is necessarily ableist.



John Piper

3. **Why** are the religious perspectives in social ethics important?

One significant reason why the religious perspectives in social ethics are important is because there are so many religious people on Earth. Today, there are approximately 2.2 billion Christians alive (28 percent of the world population), of whom 85 million belong to the Anglican Communion, and 1.3 billion belong to the Catholic Church. The numbers involved mean religious leaders are incredibly powerful, and their views have a significant effect on how religious people behave towards others in society. Importantly, the Catholic Church extends throughout the Americas, Australia, Europe, and sub-Saharan Africa; its complementarianist perspective on sexism may influence how fast discrimination based on gender is eradicated in these parts of the world.

Beyond this, the religious perspectives in social ethics are important for reasons that are already familiar. First, social issues affect everyone around the world on a daily basis, and religious perspectives are central to how religious people respond to them. Additionally, even though religions often appear inflexible, religious perspectives do change over time, and the direction of such change has a tremendous impact on how billions of religious people address social issues. Finally, religious perspectives are incredibly complex; unlike well written laws, scriptures are open to a wide range of interpretations, which means denominations often diverge from one another in their perspectives in social ethics.

George Thinks

Religion often gets a bad wrap in developed societies, especially within social circles that have a high concentration of atheists. When you consider the Christian perspective on the social issue of sexism, it's easy to see why some people lazily assume religion is a malign force in the world; certainly, it's very difficult to argue that complementarianism isn't an intrinsically sexist perspective. Of course, I understand the Catholic Church maintains that men and women are held in equal esteem by God; however, denying women admission to the priesthood is difficult to describe as equal treatment. As usual, I know you won't necessarily see eye to eye with me, but I'm attempting to be as honest as I can in explaining how things appear to me.

However, and this is where I think things become more interesting, the very perspective that opens the Catholic Church up to the charge of sexism is the same one that protects unborn Catholics from a particularly controversial act of ableism: abortion on the basis of disability. Killing an unborn human being because he or she is disabled is necessarily discriminatory, and many disabled people strongly and understandably disagree with the practice. It is the Catholic Church's belief in the sanctity of life and strong anti-abortion position that precipitates its extensive protection of disabled people; and, in many ways, it's an incredibly progressive champion of disability rights as a consequence of its deeply conservative views on the role of women.

