

# Morality Over Religion: Ethical Culture Is a Cause

Bob Greenwell, Mini-Platform Address to AEU Assembly 6/13/09

There is something important at stake with Ethical Culture. This is evident from the fact that so many of you have traveled great distance, at great cost, to attend this national assembly of our movement. I am honored to be the one to address you with this “Welcome Platform.” I am not going to let this opportunity pass without presenting to you, luminaries from around the country, my most developed thought about our movement. Yet I must be brief. I can present only the core. Still, I hope that what I have to say resonates with you, and in some way adds to your appreciation of Ethical Culture, and your commitment to it. I look forward to hearing your comments.

There is something important at stake with Ethical Culture. It’s a question of how the world will be. Will we find a method, like the scientific method for facts, to resolve moral differences, or will we continue on the path of ideological differences with no mutually agreed method to resolve them?

Ethical Culture has a positive vision. It’s a vision that is not grandiose, but can appeal to anyone who has ever said, “Can’t we all just get along?” I would put our vision this way: the full play of simple basic goodness throughout the world.

But there is a force in the world that militates against the full play of simple basic goodness. It is that the world puts religion over morality.

This assumption goes way back, and is deeply laid. People say, “Of course religion is the source of morality; everyone knows that.” But this is a backwards priority. It is an inversion, a perversion.

Traditional religion holds itself lord over morality, and it imprints this inversion on old and young alike. As long as religion is lord of morality, there will be people in every religion who turn against people of other religions, not on the basis of violations of simple basic morality, but on the basis of religious differences.

Religious differences can be matters of creed, cult, or code. Creed is the belief system. Cult simply means culture—how a group does things together, its religious language, dress, movement, art, music, rituals, and overall sense of belonging to the special group. Code, that is, code of conduct, is a religion’s morality, but it’s not a clean, unadulterated morality. When religion is held over morality, morality is distorted by creed and cult. Ethical Culture is the first movement to recognize this, and to work to free the morality in religion from infection by the cult or the creed in religion.

The full play of simple basic morality throughout the world is our aim. But to get there, the inversion must be set aright. Therefore, a primary motto for Ethical Culture is “morality over religion.” Asserting this does not negate religion; it changes religion. It enables us to say, ‘morality over religion’ is our religion.

The deepest and most insidious problem with traditional religion is that when religion puts itself over morality, it sets morality up to fail.

Once people get the training to put some religious idea or religious group over simple basic morality, it’s a very short step to putting some other idea or group over morality. Instead of the *religious* idea over morality, you put the idea of getting rich over morality. Instead of creed over morality, it’s greed over morality, or an ideology over morality. Instead of religious cult over morality, it’s some other group culture over morality.

From day one of infancy training, we booby-trap our children with the assumption that some idea or some cultural practice is to be placed over morality. Some people grow up and simply carry the unexamined assumption of religion over morality into their adult years. Others hit adolescence and make a turn toward independence. In this moment of liberation, however, instead of realizing that it’s time to turn things upside down and put morality over religion, the young person automatically searches for some *new* idea or group to put over morality. The liberated young person, feeling so adult, leaves behind the childhood faith, but carries forward the childhood assumption.

Oh how everyone thinks they respect and honor morality—but they don't!

Traditional religion, subjecting morality to the warping influences of creed or group culture, is trouble. It's not just something for us personally to avoid. It's a root problem for the world, something for us to change. This is the Ethical Movement's cause: to turn the world upside down, to everywhere bring morality up over religion.

Ethical Culture has three other priorities that are undoubtedly more familiar to you: the priority of Deed Over Creed, the priority of Worth Over Value, and the priority of First Bringing Out The Best in the Other. These three plus the priority of Morality Over Religion comprise a set of priorities that are our bond, that hold us together.

Two final comments.

First, there is a point of contention in our Movement over how to understand the official claim that Ethical Culture is a religion. Some take it as a religion in the fullest and most complete sense—a movement or ideal to which one gives one's utmost allegiance. Others in the Movement, however, hold that Ethical Culture is a religion in a merely technical or legal sense, and that this sense is sufficient for Ethical Culture to perform weddings, to be exempt from taxation, and to give individuals the right to claim conscientious objection against wars. Members who think of Ethical Culture in this way do not regard it as "really" a religion, and they don't like programs or activities that remind them of traditional religion.

My hope is that the fourth priority, Morality Over Religion, can bring these two sides together in a surprising way, making us a much more coherent movement. Those who feel that Ethical Culture is not really a religion can rally enthusiastically around the words Morality Over Religion. Those who feel that Ethical Culture is truly a religion can now say, "Morality Over Religion is our religion." The agreement between the two sides is the affirmation of Morality Over Religion.

The north star of religion, is found: Morality. Creed and cult are relegated to secondary place (where they will be much happier!). Any group or movement will always develop certain beliefs and certain ways of doing things, and so Ethical Culture will have its beliefs and its culture. But these will always be subject to change, dependent on morality's lead. Morality at long last is given its true, original, independent place.

My second comment is that as a Leader I hear a complaint from time to time that the Society is not engaged in enough social action in the world. I too feel this way sometimes, and wish we had the resources to do more, and I look for ways to do more with the resources we have, and to raise resources. Nevertheless, there is a subtle mistake in the complaint. The mistake is to not recognize that the Ethical Movement is itself a cause.

The usual idea is that you join an Ethical Society, then you look around outside the Society for a good cause. You want to contribute to one, or become involved in one. Will social justice capture your attention, will it be charity toward the poor and dispossessed, will it be women's issues, will it be racism? What's overlooked is that Ethical Culture is itself a cause. Its cause is to reverse the primacy of religion over morality.

This cause may be the most important cause of all. Today we have a world trying to get along on deformed morality. Unless a re-formed morality, an original, independent morality, replaces in large measure the subordinated morality, how much lasting success can any social cause have?

When you're looking for a cause to support, don't forget Ethical Culture itself. There could hardly be a nobler ethical action than creatively devising ways to give it traction in the world, not in this case to bring members into Ethical Culture, but to elevate morality over religion, regardless of religious allegiance.

A part of us may not want Ethical Culture to be a cause. We each have a zone of comfort. The easier path is to emulate liberalism's inclination to live and let live. The easier path is to cultivate our own garden, while letting others suffer in the gardens they don't know how to weed. But there is a higher zone of comfort to which we aspire, the zone of satisfaction in being part of the movement to set the upside-down world upright, and let the play of simple basic goodness, throughout humanity, throughout the world, begin.