Not a matter of right or wrong

This dualist understanding of morality is, more often than not, used to establish moral principles and thereby causes more diversity and division than the order and decency desired.

It might be better to distinguish the realm of moral principles by simply using the word <u>righteousness</u> to define the wholeness of the concept we wish to set forth. The dictionary defines righteousness as, "adhering to moral principles". By using this one word we can speak about all principles regarding morality without the notion of the dividing dualism of the either / or of right and wrong. Principles are not categories but moral concepts that are either adhered to or not so it is more appropriate to say that one is following a life of righteousness or unrighteousness. This enables us to have a holistic way of describing our adherence to our moral principles effectively without causing argument or categorical division. A person is either practicing or not practicing these principles, they are righteous or unrighteous. After all, one is either living by moral principles or one is not living by moral principals, it has little to do with right or wrong.

Religious divisions are commonly caused by assuming that one group is right and the another is wrong. Unfortunately religious definitions of right and wrong are more likely based on doctrinal belief rather than on moral principles. Comparing religions by their moral principles is more likely to show their concepts of common similarities and celebrate their holistic unity. Here are some words that may suggest these common principles.

<u>Love</u>, <u>Grace</u>, <u>Justice</u>, <u>Mercy</u>, what do these words mean?
   Love: 1, a strong positive emotion of regard and affection; 2, any object of warm affection or devotion; 3, a beloved person.
   Grace: 1, elegance and beauty of movement or expression; 2, a sense of propriety and consideration for others; 3, a disposition to kindness and compassion; benign good will.
   Justice: 1, the quality of being just or fair; 2, the administration of law; the act of determining rights and assigning rewards or punishments; "justice deferred is justice denied".
   Mercy: 1, leniency and compassion shown toward offenders by a person or agency charged with administering justice; 2, a disposition to be kind and forgiving; 3, the feeling that motivates compassion.

In the writings of the Apostle Paul, the earliest books in the New Testament, we hear these words pointing out that laws cannot necessarily make these principles a reality in our lives. These come from a higher, deeper, and more pervasive and universal truth.

"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other." (Verses 22-26) *"The entire law is summed up in a single command: "*
'Love your neighbor as yourself.' If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other." (Verses 14-15) (Galatians 5: NIV) Perhaps it was the Hebrew prophet Jeremiah in 31:33 who exposed this beautiful relationship with God when he said, *"This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time," declares the LORD. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people."*

Most people are familiar with a "common sense morality", based on norms such as "treat others as you would like to be treated", "keep your promises", "be fair" and "do your best". Along with these common sense guides

to behavior, there are also values that are generally held to be "good": happiness, honesty, justice, charity, courage, integrity, community, love, knowledge and freedom. Most people are familiar with these ideals, which do not depend on any religion, but "common sense" principles of morality may be insufficient when considering complex situations. Philosophers have used these ideals to develop moral theories to help guide behavior and have postulated ethical standards and principles based on them. The failure of any predominant theory to emerge is because in practice it may be difficult to rely on any one theory in all situations. Some flexibility may be needed in applying different theories at different times or in combination. Rather than specifying a theory and then trying to apply it in all cases, a better alternative may be to attempt to specify a comprehensive set of basic principles, that may universally be regarded as having general moral value. [http://home.alphalink.com.au/~jperkins/humoral.htm - ref]

Resnik has suggested a basic set of eight such principles, together with brief annotations:
        [Resnik, David B., "The Ethics of Science: An Introduction". Routledge, New York 1998.]

Non-maleficence: Do not harm yourself or other people.
Beneficence: Help yourself and other people.
Autonomy: Allow rational individuals to make free and informed choices.
Justice: Treat people fairly: treat equals equally, unequals unequally.
Utility: Maximize the ratio of benefits to harms for all people.
Fidelity: Keep your promises and agreements.
Honesty: Do not lie, defraud, deceive or mislead.
Privacy: Respect personal privacy and confidentiality.

While the meaning of words such as "harm", "benefit", fairness", "rational", and "deception" may be debated, it can be seen from this list that it is indeed possible to postulate a reasonably comprehensive list of principles that may form a useful guide to a general moral system. The list incorporates many principles that are common to all cultures. It may accord in part with certain religiously inspired principles but does not rely on them. The principles are not absolute rules but guidelines to be used in conjunction with each other. There may be conflicts between them. For example it is generally presumed that honesty is good, but there may be circumstances where it is not, for example if honesty would assist a person with known and immediate malevolent intentions. When faced with an ethical dilemma, it is suggested that after gathering information and exploring different options, a balanced decision could then be made by evaluating the options in relation to these principles. This procedure is known as "moral reasoning" leading to a state of "reflective equilibrium", or balanced judgement.

When righteousness becomes encoded into law or doctrine it takes on the character of being 'right'. This written code tends to last forever even though cultural changes and progress may render them pointless. When these laws become out of date, they are not removed but simply ignored. Principles do not grow old because their intent is connected to the very fiber of life and living. This idea is best summarized in a hymn written by an American poet, James Russel Lowell, who writes in the third stanza, *"New occasions teach new duties; time makes ancient good uncouth; They must upward still and onward who would keep abreast of truth."* [http://www.thinkinganglicans.org.uk/archives/000645.html] The truth that is spoken of here comes to us in universal principles that time does not change. These principles are common to all people everywhere, in all time, and in all places and can be summarized in one word, righteousness. While laws are helpful they can never be universal forever.

With each culture and religious group encoding principles into laws and doctrines they set righteousness into codes and pronouncements that must be enforced. While universal principles may be behind these laws and doctrines, their delineation into law and doctrine in local cultures and religions can make them appear to be in opposition. Even though we live in a time when communication enables us to see and hear about peoples and cultures around the world, we may not be aware of what life is actually like for them or how these differences may be interpreted in their laws and doctrines. With a significant amount of unity regarding basic universal principles of righteousness, local nuances can distort this uniformity when it comes to local customs and codes of living. This is especially true among the many and various religious expressions in their practice, custom, and doctrine. The variety that exists in what we call marriage may be a good example.

"Through most of Western civilization, marriage has been more a matter of money, power and survival than of delicate sentiments. In medieval Europe, everyone from the lord of the manor to the village locals had a say in deciding who should wed. Love was considered an absurdly flimsy reason for a match. Even during the Enlightenment and Victorian eras, adultery and friendship were often more passionate than marriage. These days, we marry for love—and are rewarded with a blistering divorce rate." [http://www.psychologytoday.com/articles/200505/marriage-history] If you believe that marriage is always and only about one man and one woman then you need to read the outline of the history of marriage in this, Psychology Today webpage.

Over the centuries, and even today, the practice of polygamy exists. There are basically three forms; *"polygamy - where a man has multiple simultaneous wives; polyandry - where a woman has multiple simultaneous husbands; or group marriage - where the family unit consists of multiple husbands and multiple wives. Historically, all three practices have been found, but polygyny is by far the most common."* [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Polygamy]

Then there are various religious views that appear to conflict if we insist that only one of them is right and the others are wrong. It changes when we are willing to concede that it is not a matter of right or wrong but righteousness, ending dualistic thinking for a wholelistic appreciation of adhering to moral principles which all the religions try to understand and practice.

- In **Buddhism**, marriage is not a sacrament. It is purely a secular affair and the monks do not participate in it. Hence it receives no religious sanction.
- In **Hinduism** polygamy was practiced in many sections of Hindu society in ancient times.
- In **Judaism** multiple marriage was considered a realistic alternative in the case of famine, widowhood, or female infertility like in the practice of levirate marriage, wherein a man was required to marry and support his deceased brother's widow, as mandated by Deuteronomy 25:5–10. Despite its prevalence in the Hebrew bible, scholars do not believe that polygamy was commonly practiced in the biblical era because it required a significant amount of wealth. **In the modern day**, Rabbinic Judaism has essentially outlawed polygamy. Ashkenazi Jews have followed Rabbenu Gershom's ban since the 11th century. **Israel** has made polygamy illegal,[22][23] but in practice the law is not enforced, primarily so as not to interfere with Bedouin culture, where polygamy is common.
- In **Christianity**, Saint Augustine saw a conflict with Old Testament polygamy. He refrained from judging the patriarchs, but did not deduce from their practice the ongoing acceptability of polygamy. On the contrary, he showed that polygamy of the Fathers, tolerated by the Creator because of fertility, was a diversion from His original plan for the human marriage.
  The New Testament does not specifically address the morality of polygamy. 1 Timothy, however, states that certain Church leaders should have but one wife. Periodically, Christian reform movements that have aimed at rebuilding Christian doctrine based on the Bible alone (sola scriptura) have at least temporarily accepted polygamy as a Biblical practice.

- In **Islam**, polygamy is allowed, with the specific limitation that they can only have up to four wives at any one time. The Qur'an clearly states that men who choose this route must deal with their wives justly. If the husband fears that he cannot deal with his wives justly, then he should only marry one.

In both our cultural and religious areas of living we have primarily considered ourselves to be a part of separate tribes or groups that individually and collectively identify who we are, what we think, and how we act. Until recently the lack of easy travel and communications limited our knowledge and understanding of the other and allowed us to assume that our tribe or group was better and more advanced. Our identity, our knowledge and understanding, our behavior as a people was not only right but also superior. As methods of travel and communications evolved, and we were more apt to come together in each other's space and time, our awareness was more inclined to see the differences rather than the similarities. Since human nature seems more prone to allow us to see our own worth more than that of another, we may easily judge that we are right and the others are wrong. The lack of uniformity in custom and expression gave easy rise to division and contempt rather than any compromise toward unity and mutual respect. Unfortunately any progress in travel and communication seems to contribute to greater notions of negative judgments toward others instead of encouraging more impetus toward compromise and mutual respect.

As long as we think that uniformity will be achievable and continue to insist that it should become a reality, then we are likely to continue having strife and divisions. As long as we believe that dualism is an appropriate concept that should be engaging us in healthy discussions, we probably will continue struggling with our divisions. As soon as we embrace holism and seek unity, rather than uniformity, and appropriate compromise for solutions in our existential varieties, we have a chance to live together in harmony and tranquility. This does not mean that all struggles and conflicts will end but it does mean that we will more rapidly find the equilibrium necessary toward more peaceful existence. Both birth and death are not without their turmoil, but we need new birth and we cannot avoid death.

As a matter of fact, righteousness is a moral imperative; you are either adhering to moral principles or you are not. The dictionary defines an imperative as, *"some duty that is essential and urgent"*. To be successful in life it is essential and urgent that you are a righteous person and that in body, mind, and spirit you live righteously. Life is an expansive process that grows and develops through change by modification and alteration. Without righteousness, nourishment for the body, renewal of one's mind, and buoyancy of spirit, life cannot continue in health and wellbeing. In the reality and vitality necessary for living well, right and wrong are too simplistic and empty in comparison to comprehensive richness of righteousness. In the Realm, or Kingdom of God, that Jesus announced, preached, and demonstrated, we are shown the righteousness that was sorely lacking in the earthly kingdoms of humankind. This is why his presence and ministry was so offensive to the leaders of his day and why they reacted so violently to what he represented. His witness and lifestyle was far above the simplistic notions of right and wrong. The unrighteousness of the world in Jesus' day was in sharp contrast to what Jesus said God had intended for all people, in every place, for all time.

Christians often speak of one Lord, one Faith, and one Baptism when they aspire to unity. Difficulties develop when their divisions begin because of their doctrinal declarations about Lord, Faith, and Baptism with no room for any variance. It is precisely in those particulars that Christians become divided into literally thousands of separate identities by which they define who is right and wrong. Too often the doctrines developed by a host of individual denominations and communities have little if anything to do with righteousness and keeping moral principles. *"Christians came from Europe to American in order to find religious freedom and get away from the persecutions of the established church. Many groups, like the Quakers and Puritans, formed the first 13 colonies on the basis of their religious beliefs. Although the plan was to escape persecution, there was actually some amount of persecution happening in the colonies. As more people came religious diversity grew and the*

persecution diminished. By the adoption of the Constitution in 1777 the separation of church and state was finalized. Overall, religion was an important aspect in the colonization of America." [http://www.uncp.edu/home/canada/work/allam/16071783/religion.htm]

Even though people came to America for freedom to live and worship, they were rather unkind and uncaring toward the Indians, the indigenous people of this land who continue to be oppressed as a people. It is also true that religious people who wished for freedom did little or nothing to prevent the magnitude of slavery that developed in America. Their interpretation of the Bible, in fact, led credence to this cruelty as allowed by God. Under constitutional government only land owners could vote and, even to this day, the election of our president is not one person one vote but through an electoral college. The religious understand of those who sought freedom continued the belief that woman and children were under the control and authority of men. A woman's right to vote and labor laws, for women and children, did not come until the twentieth century. To this day religious freedom is not so much a fact for each individual person but rather that people can form religious communities that maintain religious practices as they choose and believe as a group.

In America we talk about one nation with liberty and justice for all in the dream that will bring a hospitable government and a wholesome environment for all people in our land. As more and more people immigrate from a variety of ethnic backgrounds and cultures we become inundated with even more diversity. They bring with them an understanding and experience of life that is often very different than ours. We, who are born here, may also tend to forget our own progression and development to new ways and ideas as we grow older. There is, however, one common denominator and word that unifies us all, *"Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a disgrace to any people."* (Proverbs 14:34 NIV) It is our unrighteousness that is our common disgrace and scourge and unrighteousness boils down to one other contrasting word, inhospitality.

To put it another way, life is either a yes or a no; moving forward or moving backward, living righteously or not. In chapter 3 of Revelation the Spirit says, 1. *"I know your works; you have a name of being alive, but you are dead. 2 Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is on the point of death…"* **15** *"I know your works; you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either cold or hot. 16 So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spit you out of my mouth."* **20** *"Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me."* One is either adhering to the universal and eternal moral principles or one is not. Life is a choice, like flipping a coin that has two sides – heads or tails as we say while neither side is right or wrong. We are moving forward and making progress or we are moving backward. There is no standing still in life as the scripture indicates, you are hot or cold, in or out, living or dying! We are welcoming or unwelcoming, hospitable or inhospitable, inclusive or limiting and hopefully we choose what is life giving and life enhancing. Those who drive well and move forward in life look through the windshield and not the rear-view-mirror. Backing up may have its place at times, but moving forward is what gets us to our destination.

Dualistic understanding of morality - right or wrong - is, more often than not, used to establish moral laws that cause more diversity and division than the order and decency desired. Moral principles should not be divided into right or wrong because they define <u>righteousness</u> and the only opposing value to righteousness is unrighteousness, simply meaning lacking in righteousness. It is one or the other and not a matter of right and wrong to judge or condemn. Adhering to and practicing universal moral principles will enable us to create and experience the unity and peace for which we all long. We can hope to live in unity and peace when we stop judging one another with right and wrong and inspire and encourage one another to live in righteousness – adhering to moral principles.