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“The Morality of God”
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One of the most memorable lines in the 2008 movie “Frost/Nixon” is when the former president says bluntly, “when the president does it, that means it’s not illegal.”

The actor Frank Langella delivered that line with such punch that the producers made it the climax of the film’s trailer. Even people who did not see the film heard that claim over and over again during the weeks it was advertised on TV (www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ibxs_2nDXUc).

What makes the statement so shocking is that, in a nation based on the rule of law, the most powerful man, the president, claims he is above the law. Here is the nation’s leader stating that he is so powerful that his personal will -- not that of Congress or the courts - - determines the law. Did not our country’s rebellion against Great Britain begin when its king made the same claim?

What if someone even higher and more powerful, such as God, made the same claim? Would it have the same shock value? Would we view it with the same dismay?

A video podcast allows us to experience just that. In a satire of the trailer for “Frost/Nixon,” the comic podcast “Mr. Deity” portrays God responding to a question by saying, “when the Deity does it, it’s not immoral.” (See “Mr. Deity” on iTunes, “Larry Deity interviews the trailer” or www.youtube.com/watch?v=tXjaNEc09k8.)

Although some pious people will find the satirical presentation of this remark offensive, it actually points to one of the great paradoxes of Christian belief, a paradox focusing on the question: What is the relationship between God and the rules of morality? Christianity sees these rules, which also are called ethics, as coming from God. God is the source of morality and, hence, must be ethical himself.

Therein lies the rub. What makes particular rules or actions moral? There are only two possible answers to this question, and neither of them fit easily into Christian belief.

The Nixonian statement uttered by Mr. Deity, “when the Deity does it, it’s not immoral,” actually constitutes a succinct statement of one answer. Whatever God does is moral merely because God did it. The logic of the theological position is this: If God is the ultimate source and embodiment of morality then, by definition, anything he does or says is moral. By definition, he cannot do anything that is immoral.

The “Mr. Deity” satirical presentation highlights the problem with this view. It suggests that God, like Richard Nixon, can act on a whim. His actions may be arbitrary, accidental or contingent. He may act from motives other than morality. These could include love or justice on the one hand, or vengeance, anger or the desire to protect His followers on the other. By definition, such actions would be seen as moral, even if they were not necessarily intended that way.

OK, if that explanation does not quite work, what is the other option?

The description of the relationship between God and morality the satire does not mention is that there is a fixed standard of morality and that God always acts according to that standard. Fair enough. But, that impacts the belief in a sovereign God who is all-powerful. If there is a moral standard outside God, to which God adheres in his actions and words, then God is no longer all-powerful. Instead, he is limited by that outside standard. He cannot act except in ways that standard allows. God is, therefore, not all-powerful or even self-governing.

Is there a resolution of this paradox? No. Christianity, Western philosophy and related religions have wrestled with it for more than two millennia, but the paradox still stands. Usually, it is ignored, and most believers remain unaware of its existence. Many simply adhere to the evangelical saying, “God said it, and that settles it.” End of story.