Saving One Another: Moral Formation in Community

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Abstract

The article illustrates how community relationships can influence an individual's behavior. Humans develop their moral selves within the framework of communities and relationships, and so it is not right to reduce moral formation to a solitary intellectual act or a process disconnected from community involvement. Belonging to diverse communities, including family, religious congregations, educational institutions, and even virtual communities, and affiliation with them can transcend physical proximity. The liturgical acts within religious communities contribute to moral formation by reminding individuals of their Christian identity and moral responsibilities. The article emphasizes the multifaceted ways in which communities impact the moral development of individuals, from the transmission of values and narratives to the influence of moral role models and accountability mechanisms.

Keywords: Community, Moral Formation, Conscience Formation, Liturgy

Introduction

Imagine a scenario where a person oddly gets Rupees 4000 from the ATM when he asked only for Rupees 3000. Consider another situation where the same person mistakenly gets Rupees 1000 extra from the local grocery shop. Will the person be motivated with the same force to return the money, in the first instance to the distantly located unknown

bank manager and in the second instance to the familiar shopkeeper? Arguably in the second instance, he will be better motivated to return the money because of the relational factor. Relations matter heavily in moral exchanges because men and women are morally formed and bound by communities built on the network of relationships.

Wittingly or not, humans develop their moral self in the network of relationships or within the format of a community. However, we do not venture here to examine how specific community units like religious congregation, family, schools, or university provides moral formation. In this attempt, we shall not reduce moral formation to a lone intellectual act, an exclusive concern of moral psychology, or a process similar to tapping moral resources from certain distant reservoirs. Moral formation in the community is an ongoing process in which the individual and the community are mutually and dynamically engaged in a give-and-take manner. Moral formation, both for the individual and the community, never ends. The article explains the role of community in moral formation from various angles. Concomitantly, it also suggests the structural limitations of moral formation supposed to take place in the community.

Locating Community

Humans are community species bound and spurred by their shared language. It seems that community is so ubiquitous that it is often obfuscated. Community can refer to one's own family or the clan to which they belong or even the caste if it applies. Community also implies the social unit to which one belongs, be it a workplace or the Church or the smaller social groups such as educational institutions, religious communities or even a pilgrim community on the move. It may also refer to the larger society in a country, or it may even cover the entire human race. The sense of belongingness and the consequent binding character shall vary as per the intimacy and interaction with one another in the community. For instance, in certain cases one person could be more influenced by the wider society than his/her immediate community called the family. A Carmelite living in a particular religious community may actually belong to another community, perhaps physically far away if s/he shares greater affinity and intimacy with that community. The functional sense of unity and camaraderie effectively places every person in actual community fellowship.

Community in the real sense shall not be reduced to close physical entities. One may belong more to a community that exists more in

spirit than to a present and physically actual community; for example, a person may get morally formed by the spirit of Taizé community rather than by his/her parish community to which they belong. Assisted by the proliferation of technology, one may belong rather to a virtual community far away from his/her apartment. Virtual churches are the best examples of the same. They offer convenience, variety and easy accessibility. People may find meaning in belonging to online communities rather than to real social units.

Not only that individuals belong to a community, but sometimes a community can belong to a greater community. For example, a local church may form its identity about the universal church. The local unit of a political party may function supported by a superior community of the same party. However, we cannot but mention that the sense of community is also under challenge in many parts of the world. For, the basic sense of solidarity with others gets threatened. A sense of connection, shared fate, mutual responsibility, etc., are the fabrics of a genuine community. Briefly, individuals do not escape communities in their identity-building and socialisation. Significantly, communities function as agents of moral formation in multiple ways, as we shall explain after a while.

Moral Formation: A Christian Approach

To identify the role of community in moral formation, we need to mention how we conceive morality given the variety of understandings of morality. We shall not simply reduce morality to moralism, an enterprise concerned with determining right and wrong or good and evil. Similarly, morality is not merely a matter of acquiring virtues. Here we take morality in terms of genuine and integral human flourishing, particularly from a Christian perspective. However, the language of human flourishing can be interpreted broadly. Some views count scientific advancements scientists make as a kind of moral growth. For scientists, too, are advancing scientific virtues related to human flourishing. From a Christian perspective, integral human flourishing, in effect, means growing into the likeness of Christ which presupposes living in a Christ-like manner. Such a living of course entails right relationship with God, with oneself, with others and with creation. Growing into the likeness of Christ, in its turn will raise personal, social, spiritual, ecological and political demands.

The above-held conception of morality is strongly founded on biblical revelation. The core of morality explicated in the Ten Commandments

is founded on the covenantal relationship with God. In fact, the commandments were given as a sign of enduring relationship with God. Therefore, Israelites were asked to love God with their heart, soul and strength (Dt 6:5). In covenantal terms, Israel was chosen to be God's people and God promised them to be their God (Ex 6:7; Lv 26:12). The heart of covenant was the source that brought forth demands of individual, social and institutional relationships (Ex 20:1–17; Dt 5:6–21). The same spirit of relationality continued in the New Testament but through the life and teaching of Jesus. He highlighted the essence of the law to love God and one's neighbour (Lk 10:27–28; Jn 13:34–35). According to Jesus, the right relationship with God (Jn 15:1–17) and others was the sum of morality, the demands of which need to be deciphered context-wise.

Moral formation assumes several understandings as per the different shades of understanding of morality. If we understand morality as the sum total of one's relationship with God, the self and others, including nature, moral formation concerns integral human flourishing and holistic well-being. Thus moral formation focuses on the means and processes to attain this flourishing and well-being. It involves all the processes that equip a person to lead moral relationships, moral living and the flourishing of humans and all creation in harmony with God. It is interesting to see how St Paul couches the content of moral formation in theological terms. He hopes for a day when believers are "changed" (1Cor 15:52) and sanctified (1Thess 5:23). He encourages them to "be transformed" (Rom 12:2), anticipating the time when all will be "conformed" (Rom 8:29) to the image of the Son. Interestingly Paul never uses the word "ethics" but speaks instead of being transformed, living "worthily of the gospel" (Phil 1:27), walking in the Spirit (Gal 5:16), and doing the will of God (Rom 12:2; 1Thess. 4:3). In that sense, moral formation equals spiritual formation. In sum, moral formation does not merely mean the formation of moralists.

Discussions on moral development for quite a long time was dominated by the contributions of Lawrence Kohlberg (1927-1987) and different responses to him in developmental psychology. Behaviourism and psychoanalytic theory were used profusely to explain children's adoption of moral norms before Kohlberg. Theories predating Kohlberg held that the exercise of parental authority was heavily instrumental in children accepting moral norms. But the novelty of Kohlberg consisted in explaining that rational and autonomous claims of justice lead individuals to develop their moral capacities. He did not deny that

children follow a stage-by-stage development of moral maturation from simple compliance to developing an autonomous conscience.

Kohlberg's theory did not go uncontested. Other perspectives of moral development around the key notion of care evolved after the groundbreaking research made by Carol Gilligan (1936-), predominantly from women's approach. It does not mean that Kohlberg based himself on justice and abstract universal moral principles to exclude relational elements in moral decision-making. But Gilligan emphasised two kinds of valid moral reasoning. One based on an ethic of justice and rights, as Kohlberg held, and the other based on an ethic of care and responsibility for others. In her scheme, morality functions in response to emotions and customs apart from disengaged reasoning and abstract, formal rules. Briefly, moral formation cannot be left to a one-sided emphasis on justice but on justice and care. We do not mean to open an exploration of the Kohlberg-Gilligan debate as regards moral development.

It cannot be left unsaid that moral development is not merely the growth of moral reason. It also covers the development of moral sense, moral emotions, moral discernment and moral imagination. If we understand moral development as human flourishing, it will appeal also to the aesthetic aspects of morality. For the perceived sense of beauty can transform people morally as well as spiritually. Inspired by St Augustine, Jennifer Herdt writes: "Our wills are transformed, our loves reordered, insofar as we are granted glimpses of divine beauty… In order for our loves to be properly ordered—ordered, that is to God— we must be inspired, we must fall in love, with God." The totality of areas such as reason, emotions, imagination, will, etc. would constitute moral development of person manifested through moral character. It is beyond the purview of this study to explore the interconnections among these elements. However, our claim that moral development is greatly influenced by community remains to be established.

Community Engaging Moral Development

All sorts of formation is greatly determined by the environment in which one is placed. Community significantly offers the nurture of an individual in different areas of his/her development. As regards moral formation it is platitudinous to hold that a child reared in a community of violence is formed prone to tolerate or engage in violence. Similarly, a kind community is likely to form kind people. But in what follows, we examine the foundational ways in which a stable community contributes towards the moral formation of individuals and groups.

Community Weaves Moral Identity

Perhaps the primary factor that builds up moral sense and then regulates moral behaviour is one's sense of identity. The awareness of who one is provides the norms as to what one should do, though the realisation of the same may not always happen. A sense of belongingness to a particular community puts forward the standard of behaviour as per that community. Briefly, the identity of the people is the foundation for the community's ethical life. Religious communities by virtue of their theological wisdom offer the elements of identity-awareness, which is capable of shaping moral formation of its members.

To illustrate this point, let us take one example from the Old Testament. While traveling through the arid wilderness, after their escape from Egypt, Israelites longed for the rich food of their land of slavery (Exodus 16). It suggests that though they had gotten out of Egypt, their economic vision and passions were still enslaved by Egypt. That economy flourished within a centralised land ownership system. The poor slaves worked hard, and the rich masters reaped its fruits. Listening to their cries in the wilderness, the Lord gave them manna in abundance but in a measure satisfying only their daily need. By doing so, God was leading them to a new economy. They are no more to live in an economy of oppression, hoarding and the consequent scarcity. They need now to depend on God's supply distributed equitably among all. They need to work to bag it. It was an indication about the economy in the new land where they will have to harvest from the vineyards they did not plant (Dt 6:11). Identity of the community as one belonging to the Lord shall shape its moral response covering all areas of human life including economic relationships and financial transactions.

Awareness of identity assured and confirmed by communities enable their members to distinguish themselves from outsiders. In a more external fashion, community introduces a distinctive vocabulary for ethical discourse. For all communities need such a vocabulary to maintain its identity, as Lindbeck argues: "Human experience is shaped, moulded, and in a sense constituted by cultural and linguistic forms…." (Haslam, 2011). Communities in effect, create a symbolic world that includes the use of insider language by which communities define themselves. As an example, St Paul noticeably avoided ethical language of the Greek polis while he introduced a new language of ethical discourse. In fact he refers explicitly to virtue only once (Phil 4:8). The four cardinal virtues do not appear in his vocabulary. He

does not advise the pursuit of the individual's eudaimonia (human flourishing), a major theme of Greek ethics. Similarly, ethical ideals of the Greek polis such as eusebeia (piety), kalokagathia (nobility), eleutheriotēs (freedom of spirit), megalophrosynē (greatness of mind), megalopsychia (greatness of soul), and megaloprepeia (magnificence) do not make part of Paul's letters.

While rejecting Greek ethical categories, St Paul tried to inculcate moral formation of his gentile converts by building up their identity using the identity awareness of Israel (Judd Jr., 2019). They based their identity as the elect (1The 1:4; 2:12; 4:7) and holy people (klētois hagiois, Rom 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:2) who are supposed to live their divine calling (Rom. 8:30; 9:12, 24; 1 Cor. 1:9; 7:15, 17, 21; Gal. 1:6; 5:13; cf. Eph. 1:11; 4:1, 4; Col. 1:12; 3:15). In the case of gentile converts Paul made them aware that they are the elect in Christ and they form a community, irrespective of their identities such as male/female, gentile, Jews, etc. That community awareness gives them the moral stand to behave and act as Christians. It is this identity that makes them different from others and bound to follow the gospel. Perhaps the distinctive contribution of Christianity to ethics stems from the sense of Christian identity out of which emerges appropriate moral demands.

Transmission of Values

The process of moral formation hinges around the personalised receptivity of values. These values help us understand what kind of persons we must become and what kind of actions we must do. Value perceptions need to pass from person to persons, generation to generation and from community to individuals. Every community uses stories, traditions, religious teachings, social norms and ethical rules to realize value transmission.

Value transmission takes place through the narratives which the community holds dear. It will be found in the folklore, religious texts, myths and even popular imagination. Narratives can inform our character. The community narratives mold persons into characters. Thus one may act morally or immorally as per the narratives which one has interiorized. Some of the horrendous crimes were performed by men and women because of the heinous narratives which formed them. Stories of genocide in Rwanda, Nazi atrocities in Hitler's Germany, recent communal attacks in India became possible because of the narratives its perpetrators accepted and circulated. Bad narratives can be countered only by the persuasive power of good narratives. But the

deeper problem is that categories of good and bad are determined by certain metanarratives. At least in certain sense, moral formation is a struggle between narratives and counter narratives.

Values attract others not exclusively on rational foundations. They do have an affective part also. Community transmits values not as a set of rational imperatives of abstract nature rather claims couched in affective mode. For instance, community transmits the value of compassion less by direct preaching than by projecting compassionate acts of others. By highlighting the social worth of values, the community is engaged in transmitting those values. For instance, democratic values and ecological values are propagated by their collective social approval. Values often get subjected themselves to moral imagination of the community members.

The charitable actions that take place in a society are an agent of moral formation. People get to know that compassion is valuable and we need to practice it. The welfare activities undertaken by society teach people that we are supposed to live in solidarity also contributing to common good. Defending the hapless by the government communicates to society that everybody enjoys certain human rights irrespective of their social standing. The judicial system prevalent in a society transmits the notion of justice to all people, including the ones who have never been subjected to any judicial trial or process. Though not always much vociferous and ostensible, value transmission is a continuous process which any community is engaged in.

Moral Role Models from Communities

Community engages in moral formation by way of providing, projecting and promoting moral role models. Looking up to moral role models is not equal to hero worship. Role models refer to people and events that highlight living values in attractive and sometimes irresistible ways. Any community will have a number of such role models in stock. They are found in their sacred scriptures, past memories or folklores. They appeal to the mind and heart of the community members. Role models engage in a kind of constant moral formation of the community members. At times they raise moral challenges against the existing practices.

Moral role models are persuasive agents. They do not just teach, rather they nudge people in their conscience. There are stories of justice, kindness, generosity, compassion and fairness in every community. Religious texts abound in such persuasive role models; for instance,

in Apocalyptic literature. Role models emerge not only from religious communities. But in every living community, there are persons poised to function as role models. For instance, in an academic community or in the guild of nurses or the chamber of business persons, chances are high that they project persuasive models of moral living. Sometimes in communities, role models remain passive figures but exercise deep or dormant influence on their members. When the role models continue to exercise their influence even after their death, they are hailed as saints or hallowed figures.

The expression role models should not create the false impression that they are perfect moral icons. They are mostly role models relative to a context, profession or field. For instance, community provides role models in various areas such as sports, politics, business, spirituality and education. The fact that the putative model is perfect does not diminish its significance as role model.

Having affirmed the significance of role models operative in communities, I must also acknowledge that there are people skeptical about the idea of moral role models in a given field. Similarly, we need to accept that apart from role models there are other mechanisms which strongly influence moral formation, sometimes in a negative manner. Fear of punishment, for example, hell, has been serving as a strong persuasion for moral formation among religiously motivated persons.

Conscience-Formation Assisted by Community

Conscience belongs to the moral core of the individual in the strict sense of the term. However, community plays a significant part in forming a conscience. The core of conscience-formation consists in personalising the objective norms of morality into subjective norms and standards of behaviour. By the process of education, value clarification, positing examples worthy of emulation, the community engages in conscience-formation. Certain values such as solidarity, love, tolerance, communication, mutual respect, understanding, etc. function at the base level of the community. Without these values, at least in certain functional measures, the community will not survive. Those values and concurrent emotions lead community members to the formation of conscience towards those values. For at work behind the community is a moral sense of the community, not just a social contract that has garnered people into a community. "When the term community is used, the first notion that typically comes to mind is a place in which people know and care for one another…. This we-ness

(which cynics have belittled as a "warm, fuzzy" sense of community) is indeed part of its essence. Our focus here, though, is on another element of community, crucial for the issues at hand: communities speak to us in moral voices. They lay claims on their members. Indeed, they are the most important sustaining source of moral voices other than the inner self."

In view of deviant behaviour, the community sometimes exercises external sanctions. In effect, that helps maintain moral discipline in that community. Each member in a way reminds the other of his/her moral duties and of their social responsibilities. The mores, cultural practices, social rituals and even enacted laws play their role in forming the conscience of the community.

Conscience formation occurs in communities in a deep way by establishing moral identity of its members. It may not happen with all communities. But in a faith community like the Church, conscience of its members will be nurtured by way of reference to truth, goodness and common good. Carol Cardinal Wojtyla writes: "Conscience, as the key element of the self-fulfillment of the personal self, points in a special way to transcendence and, so to speak, lies at its subjective center. Objectively, transcendence is realized in a relation to truth and to the good as "true" (as "benefitting," honestum). The relation to the common good, a relation that unites the multiplicity of subjects into one we, should likewise be grounded in a relation to truth and to a "true" good. The proper dimension of the common good then comes to view. The common good is essentially the good of many, and in its fullest dimension, the good of all."

There remains an open question whether conscience formation imparted to individuals, in any meagre degree as the case may be, would always be morally acceptable. That need not be the case all times. For, the community has its social preferences, which may not be in par with moral values. For example, dominant social views and preferences may look at reality from the perspective of the powerful and the ruling class. Slavery, bonded labor and many other social evils became acceptable for a long period of time because of this social preference. To arrive at contrary disposition would be revolutionary. For example, in a revealing note Dietrich Bonhoffer writes how he came to greater solidarity with the oppressed (Bonhoeffer, 1971). He wrote in his letter of Christmas 1945: "We have for once learned to see the great events of world history from below, from the perspective of the outcast, the

suspects, the maltreated, the powerless, the oppressed, the reviled – in short, from the perspective of those who suffer."

Conversely, instead of community forming individual conscience, at times individuals would form social conscience. For instance, Archbishop Oscar Romero acted and spoke as the lone conscience of El Salvador during the reign of an oppressive regime. He was forming the conscience of the community to stand against the government and its troops. Having been gunned down one day in 1980, he became a standing influence of conscience formation not only in El Salvador but elsewhere (BBC, (7 March, 2018). Rule by foreign powers for long had made the conscience of the majority of the Indians somewhat submissive and tolerant to the mighty machine of oppression, barring occasional expressions of revolt and mutiny. But it was Mahatma Gandhi who reformed the conscience of India to fight the British regime but in a nonviolent manner. Except for this man, non-violence would not have been accepted as a powerful moral ideal by the political community in India. Briefly, as much as society forms the conscience of the community, charismatic individuals continue to form the conscience of communities.

From Sacred Acts to Moral Living

Religious communities do have sacred acts proscribed and performed in several ways. They get several ritual and periodic enactments. As far as Christians are concerned, liturgy constitutes the most important sacred acts. They are not merely ritual and traditional acts performed by assigned persons. They serve in the moral formation of individuals belonging to that community. Because the identity of the Church in itself brings forth certain moral demands. For instance, "the traditional marks of the church - oneness, catholicity, apostolicity and holiness - are all to be expressed in the moral life of its members. Oneness calls for deepening love and communion; catholicity involves welcome to rich diversity within community; apostolicity suggests reaching out to neighbours in sharing truth received from Jesus Christ; and straightforward, unself-conscious goodness is an essential dimension of holiness. These are central expressions of what it means to be the body of Christ." Here, we briefly address the question how sacred acts—liturgy—contribute towards the moral formation of a community. As a meaning-making event in the life of the faithful, liturgy transmits values and also moral motivation.

A word about the significance of liturgy as a meaning-making event in Christian life is in place. Liturgical acts are not flat human deeds. Liturgy, in all churches, is three-dimensional implicating the past, present and future dimensions of time. Liturgical enactments remember the past; they are performed in the present and anticipate the future, but all at once. Going a step further, though odd it may sound, we can also hold that it remembers the future. In liturgical terms, Sunday is not the seventh or the last day of a week. It is the eschatological eighth day or the first day of the New Creation. So on Sunday, by celebrating the Eucharist, the church remembers the past and the future. The earliest Christian liturgies remember not only Christ's crucifixion, resurrection and ascension but also "his awesome and glorious second coming." This affirms, from a Christian perspective, that liturgy cannot be understood merely as a sociological event or a ritual act.

Liturgy reveals to us that moral formation describes one aspect of a much broader and deeper process by which we grow into human flourishing and holiness. As Christians, we are supposed to become holy, not merely moral. In the liturgy and Christian worship, God calls us to go beyond morality and ethics. He calls us to perfection in the communion of love for one another and with God. Believers are exhorted to become perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect (Mt 5:48).

Liturgy celebrated meaningfully provides the Church with certain moral reminders. As a worshipping community, the faithful are admonished to live morally. For, in the liturgy they encounter God. They are not people supposed to follow the morality of the rest of the society. For, they are persons bound to follow God's will. They form a community of Christ-followers, called the Church. What the liturgy bequeaths is not a set of moral norms, rather a confirmation of their Christian identity which requires them to follow the Gospel ways of life. "What distinguishes them is a willingness to belong to a community, which embodies the stories, the rituals, and others committed to worshipping God. Such a community, we believe, must challenge our prideful pretensions as well as provide the skills for the humility necessary for becoming not just good, but holy."

Moral formation makes qualitative improvement in our lives. But it is incapable of making us free, liberated and fulfilled. Liturgy can surely lead us to that level of liberation as true worshippers. However, we cannot claim that liturgy automatically provides moral impetus and formation to the Church members. There must be a dialogical interface

between liturgy and morality. Both are in need of mutual purification and empowerment. On the one hand, morality has to purify the practices of liturgy, observing whether liturgy becomes a vain lip-service before God or a tool of division in the community, particularly in the wake of liturgical reforms in different Churches and the call for the reform of the reforms and the so called liturgy-wars. Liturgy becomes ineffective in moral formation, if it helps legitimize or condone unjust systems in the Church or society. If liturgy remains divorced from the social context of the worshippers, it loses its power to make moral formation. Similarly, if it accommodates racial or ethnic prejudices or factional interests, it fails in moral formation. On the other hand, morality can move to affirm one-sided human flourishing, for example, in terms of social justice but effectively ignoring the rest of moral values. Liturgy offers a permanent challenge to morality to focus on integral human flourishing, leading persons to worship of God in spirit and in truth (Jn 4:23).

Accountability to Community

Any community has an inherent mechanism to hold its members accountable for their actions. The social system is such that one cannot live irresponsibly forever. There are punitive means by which the community controls deviant behaviors. It starts with social disapproval, minor punishments, and then exclusion from the society (temporary or lifetime imprisonment) and finally in heavy and unbearable cases excommunication from the world (capital punishment). This helps the community ensure that its members behave in a moral way. This is obviously negative way of moral formation.

It is reasonable to ask whether threats of punishments really serves moral formation. In the long run, it is hoped, it will add to the moral formation of the community. For example, in societies where stringent punitive measures are taken against crimes, usually the crime rate goes down. It may not reveal for certain as much the quality of individual morality as the acceptable social/moral standards in a given society.

Conclusion

While emphasizing the role of community in moral formation in multifarious ways, we need to acknowledge also that community can do a sort of moral deformation of individuals. At times, community can baptize evil, taking it as though morally acceptable, particularly when only a minority are victimized or affected. Systemic corruption existing in societies opens a series of corruptions. So, the larger community

deforms the morality of its members. Uncritically assimilated ideology transmutes itself into a way of life. Thus, it directly or indirectly helps in institutionalizing evil. Tribalism may prevail in communities, closing oneself in the ghetto of one's own political party or religious groups or Churches and counting others as enemies to be defeated at any cost. It nurtures discriminative and prejudicial attitude to others. In such cases, the individual members are likely to share these socio-moral pathology and consequently their moral views and approaches will be ill-formed.

It is good to admit that at times communities may go irrational. Based on certain myths, cultural practices, ideological twists, etc., communities may entertain irrational practices which are inherently immoral also. They include, for example, female circumcision, treating mental disorders with physical torture, witch-hunting, sorcery, Sati in India, etc. Communities without the critique of rationality can become tyrannical, oppressive and even demonic. They need to be subjected to the lens of rationality. However, the isolated use of rationality without any moral reference may not serve the purpose. That means, sane, morally informed human experience has to play a critical role in purifying the practices of the community. Ultimately, the burden of moral formation cannot be limited to individuals alone; it applies equally to communities themselves.

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