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Ethical values and society

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In a paper read at an OPA seminar in 2003, I defined Ethics as "the value structure that guides the actions of a person, whether individual or corporate, in his/her/their dealings with any other person, or with society in general."

Ethics has also been defined as "the study of voluntary human action, both individual and collective, according to moral precepts." Many philosophers have dwelt on the subject of human values. Aristotle viewed happiness as being cultivated by virtue. The Stoics associated virtue as flowing from harmony with nature. Mahatma Gandhi connected ethics with religion and politics.

In practice, an individual's ethical value is more than not based on his personal religious values, and happily all the great religions of the world, (of which four Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity and the Muslim faith, are practised in Sri Lanka) - teach common ethical value to guide man's actions and behaviour; - i.e. to be honest and truthful, not to give or to take bribes, to be helpful to

one's neighbour; irrespective of his race, caste or creed, to be morally sound; to respect authority and the rule of law; to value life; to temper justice with mercy, and so on. Religions can and do have their unique teachings and beliefs on subjects such as creation, life after death, forgiveness and salvation from sin, human suffering and so on, but ethical values as described above, largely remain common to all the great religions.

At a personal level or indeed at a national level, ethics which guide and govern actions and attitudes need not however necessarily be based on any particular religion, but can flow from shared human values. Some of these are now enshrined in recognised international covenants and conventions, relating to various facets of Human Rights, - e.g. right to life and dignity, right to practise and manifest one's religion, freedom of speech, freedom of information, and so on. *(To be continued)*

Note on the Author

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