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## I

# Major Programs

Ethical Societies are communities  
dedicated to bringing out the  
best in the human spirit,

Appreciating the unique capacities within  
each person,

Sustaining a community of people who support  
each other through the stages of life,

Raising the quality of relationships in our fami-  
lies, friendships, workplaces, and communities,

Doing our part to create a more just and loving  
world for all.

We seek members who want to work  
toward these ends while remaining  
free from any formal creed.

## MAJOR PROGRAMS

### **What is an Ethical Society?**

Ethical Societies are communities of people united in the belief that the essential moral and spiritual values are found in raising the quality of human relationships. Members are inspired by faith in human worth and dedicated to ethical living. People from many different religious backgrounds find a personal community and participation in a greater purpose.

Ethical Culture leaves questions of the origin and destiny of the universe for individual exploration. Members are encouraged to develop their own philosophy of life which need not even agree with the basic beliefs of the Ethical Culture philosophy. What members share is a common interest in eliciting the best from the human spirit and creating a more humane world.

## MAJOR PROGRAMS

### **2. What are Sunday Platform meetings?**

Through ideas, people, and music, the Sunday Platform meetings inspire a sense of purpose and community. These Sunday morning meetings are an opportunity to pause in our ordinary daily activities and meet with people in the community to reflect on the direction and challenges of our lives.

"The spiritual destiny of humankind is to develop a higher human type that sets free the unique talents latent within each person."

FELIX ADLER

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## MAJOR PROGRAMS

### What is the purpose of the family Sunday school?

Most children are exposed to rule breaking, lying, cheating, stealing, hitting, and emotional abuse from peers and sometimes from adults. They must learn how to respond effectively to create for themselves a kind and fair environment. Yet children and adults are caught in a crossfire among conflicting moral and religious opinions and anti-religious attitudes from friends and in the media. Being part of an Ethical Society community validates a family's values.

Children benefit from the reinforcement of ethics classes, ceremonies, and seeing a community of people actively choosing to care about other people. By providing for the spiritual-ethical side of a child's education, we strengthen his or her sense of personal well-being and moral clarity. Children develop a positive picture of what really matters, and how life can ideally work. We teach practical lessons about how to take personal stands that will cultivate good relationships and strengthen character.

Our approach to teaching children is threefold. First, we pay attention to *internalization*: When adults state clearly what is right and wrong, a young child develops an inner voice of conscience that speaks up for good behavior. Second, we encourage *empathy*: When children experience what other people might be feeling, they care about the consequences of their own behavior. Third, we stimulate *moral reasoning*: When children understand the consequences of their behavior, they develop their own personal standards.

## MAJOR PROGRAMS

### 4. Do Ethical Societies sponsor service projects?

Service is a cornerstone of Ethical Society communities. Members are inspired by their vision of *a world where every human being is respected and nourished*. We care for people in crisis. And we seek improved political rights for people who are suffering the greatest need for respect, fairness, and kindness.

Ethical Culturists believe that the lasting meaning of our lives is determined by our contributions to improving the ethical quality of the societies that we inherit. In each generation we face political challenges that determine the direction of human society.

By being politically active, members respond to the spiritual pain that arises from enjoying prosperity while others suffer deprivation. Lifting the heavy weight of social injustices, a person becomes spiritually stronger, a better leader, better able to meet personal and professional needs, and gains confidence as one who can positively influence the future.

Ethical Societies participate in a national interfaith lobby coalition, publish a legislative newsletter—*Washington Reports*, and hold non-delegate status at the United Nations. Each Ethical Society sponsors programs in areas such as hunger and homelessness, human rights, ecology, and global peace.

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“Without ethical culture there is no salvation.”

ALBERT EINSTEIN  
At 75th Anniversary of Ethical Culture

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## MAJOR PROGRAMS

### Why do Ethical Societies emphasize continuing education for adults?

People are not born knowing how to build good relationships, create ethical cultures, or experience spiritual wellbeing. These are lessons to be learned by trial and error. Once learned, they enable us to succeed in each stage of life.

Our aim is not to adapt individuals to their existing social circumstances, but to develop each person as a leader who can raise the quality of relationships in his or her family, friendships, workplace, community, and country.

Ethical Societies offer programs in areas such as philosophy, relationship building, public policy, and leadership, with special programs for men, women, singles, couples, children, parents, and seniors. Ultimately, quality of life is determined by quality relationships.

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"Ethical Culture grows with our growth. It is the highest expression of our human nature."

FELIX ADLER

"All significant battles are waged within the self."

SHELDON KOPP

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## MAJOR PROGRAMS

### 6. What holidays are celebrated at Ethical Societies?

Through human history people have experienced the influence of seasons. Each season is a progressive cycle of birth, growth, death, and rebirth that shapes the future. Every year is like a blank canvas on which we create our lives. Ethical Culturists celebrate seasonal holidays with ceremonies that honor our most cherished aspirations, bind us to family and friends, and encourage us to consider the meaning and direction of our lives.

In each Ethical Society members find unique ways to celebrate with the ceremonies that are most important to their community. A calendar of Ethical Society celebrations might include:

**New Year**—Creating a Personal Vision for the New Year  
**Martin Luther King, Jr., Day**—Being a Drum Major for Social Justice

**Valentine's Day**—Making Friends To Create a Better World

**Spring Dinner Ritual**—Freeing Humankind from Oppression

**SpringFest**—Recreating Your Life To Realize Your Dreams

**Founders Day**—Honoring People Who Have Created Our Heritage

**Community Day**—Dedicating Ourselves to Our Highest Ideals

**Remembrance Day**—Acknowledging People Important in Our Lives

**Thanksgiving**—Appreciating Our Bounty

**Winter Festival**—Celebrating the Preciousness of Life

## MAJOR PROGRAMS

### 7. What programs are commonly found at Ethical Societies?

Programs vary among Ethical Societies because members develop their own activities:

#### **COMMUNITY**

*Traveling Through The Stages Of Life*

Sunday Platform Meetings

Seasonal Celebrations

Life Passage Ceremonies:

Weddings, Namings, Coming of Age, Memorials

Counseling and Consultations

Social Activities

Caring Support and Friendships

Activities for Singles, Couples, Families, Seniors

#### **EDUCATION**

*Raising the Quality of Human Relationships*

Classes for Adults and Children

Basic Beliefs Seminars

Relationship Building Skills

Workshops for Singles, Couples, and Parents

Ethical Issues Forums

Leadership Development

#### **SERVICE**

*Doing Our Part To Create A Better World*

Beyond Poverty

Human Rights

Earth Ethics

Global Peace

Legislative Representation

## MAJOR PROGRAMS

### 8. Are the Ethical Societies a national and international movement?

The Ethical Societies in the United States are associated in a federation called the American Ethical Union (AEU). The AEU provides opportunities for lay and professional leaders of Ethical Societies to coordinate the growth and development of the Ethical Culture movement. Through this cooperatively supported organization the Ethical Societies jointly set standards, issue publications, train leaders, award grants, issue statements on moral issues and public policy, and coordinate national projects such as youth programs.

The AEU is a member of the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU). Through conferences and publications the IHEU stimulates dialogue and cooperative programs across national boundaries.

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"Ethics is the sense of solidarity with  
other human beings."

ALBERT SCHWEITZER

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## 9. What is the history of the Ethical Societies?

The first Ethical Society was founded in 1876 by Dr. Felix Adler and 100 people who sought a community founded on ethical living rather than on worship of a supernatural deity. Ethical Societies developed around New York City and in Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, St. Louis, and Washington, D.C. The Ethical Societies used a congregational model with a leader, Sunday schools for teaching ethics, and humanistic ceremonies. In 1957, Judge Warren Burger wrote in a landmark opinion that the Ethical Societies, a religion based on ethics, have the same rights as other religions.

Ethical Society members have been instrumental in founding associations that work for social improvements. Among the most prominent:

- First Free Kindergartens, New York and San Francisco,

- Visiting Nurses Service,

- Legal Aid Society,

- Child Study Association,

- Hudson Guild Farm,

- Madison Settlement House,

- NAACP—National Association for the Advancement of Colored People,

- CORE—Congress For Racial Equality,

- Fieldston Elementary and Secondary

- Schools, Encampment For Citizenship,

- Riverdale Mental Health Clinic,

- Washington Ethical High School,

- Weis Ecology Center,

- Helping Hands, a national program benefiting homeless and hungry.

## 10. Who was Felix Adler?

Felix Adler, Ph.D. (1851-1933) founded the New York Society for Ethical Culture, the national and international Ethical Culture movements, and the New York Ethical Culture schools. He was professor of Social and Political Ethics at Columbia University from 1902 until 1933, and he delivered the Hibbert Lectures at Oxford University in 1923.

Dr. Adler was an ardent social critic, civic and religious leader. He pioneered in labor, housing, and educational reform and in the movement to abolish child labor. Dr. Adler served as president of the American Philosophic Association and the Free Religious Association. His major books include: *The Moral Instruction of Children*, *The Religion of Duty*, *An Ethical Philosophy of Life*, *The Reconstruction of the Spiritual Ideal*, and *Our Part In This World*.

Dr. Adler believed Ethical Culture had a mission and a message. See page 12.

## MISSION AND MESSAGE

"Morality has become sentimental and secular. The strictness of principle is going out of it. Hence it happens that in a crisis, when the moral forces alone can save us, they prove impotent. The powers of evil sweep over the life of cities and individuals because the vital quality is eaten out of our morality.

"The religion of duty has a difficult task in such an age. But it has a mission, and this is its message.

"The moral law is not a convenience, nor a convention. It is not imposed in order that we may achieve happiness for ourselves or others. The moral law comes out of the voice that speaks in us out of the ultimate reality of things. It is not subject to us; but we are subject to it, and to it we must bend our pride. It is the expression of our own highest nature, which is consonant with the universal nature; but there is also a lower nature in us, and this we must subjugate to the higher leading.

'We should build up in ourselves an absolute and majestic realization of ethical laws so that, when issues of right and wrong are before us, we may realize the necessity of obedience and the awful wrong of transgression, to train ourselves to do the right as far as we are able.

"Reverence and awe in the presence of this moral law is the beginning of true religion."

FELIX ADLER (1851-1933)  
Ethical Culture Founder

## II

# Community Membership

## The Golden City

Hail the glorious golden city,  
Pictured by the seers of old.  
Everlasting light shines o'er it,  
Wondrous things of it are told. Wise  
and righteous men and women  
Dwell within its gleaming wall.  
Wrong is banished from its borders,  
Justice reigns supreme o'er all.

We are builders of that city. All  
our joys and all our groans Help  
to rear its shining ramparts. All  
our lives are building stones.  
Whether humble or exalted, All  
are called to task divine. All  
must aid alike to carry Forward  
one sublime design.

And the work that we have build-ed,  
Oft with bleeding hands and tears,  
Oft in error, oft in anguish,  
Will not perish with our years.  
It will live and shine transfigured  
In the final reign of right.  
It will pass into the splendors  
Of the city of the light.

FELIX ADLER



## 11. What are the benefits of belonging to an Ethical Society community?

An Ethical Society welcomes you at every stage and in every circumstance of life. You can meet and socialize with a diverse group of like-minded people. The community stimulates you to clarify your personal philosophy, your politics, and your appreciation for good relationships. Members cooperate together to be citizen activists cultivating a just and loving society. At times of personal need, members work together to support each other with caring and assistance. Facing the different challenges of life (e.g. being single, creating community, coupling, parenting, career and leadership development, retirement), especially when going through a transition, members form educational workshops and support groups. Ethical Society leaders are available to all members for consultation and personal counseling. With humanistic ceremonies we celebrate the seasons of the year and the personal meaning of birth, marriage, and the death of loved ones.

It is inspiring to experience a culture that challenges us personally and verifies our innermost values. Ethical Societies are laboratories where we learn how to face the discord in life and create harmony. Ultimately the Ethical Society becomes a portable state of mind and culture as well as our personal community.

## 12. What are the responsibilities of membership?

Membership is open to every person who wishes to join our community. The nature and extent of participation depends on individual needs and interests. Newcomers are especially encouraged to participate regularly so they can get to know members personally and discover what they want to get from their community membership.

All members make an annual financial pledge. Contribution guidelines among Ethical Societies range from 2 to 5 percent of income which is the approximate level necessary to maintain a successful community program. However, there is no set membership fee, and no one is excluded because of an inability to pay or participate.

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"An Ethical Society cannot succeed by presenting lectures, by devising rituals, or even by establishing social service projects and good works, however indispensable these may be. The Ethical Society's mission is to give birth to personalities who have attained for themselves an abiding ethical faith and are aflame with it."

FELIX ADLER

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### 13. How are Ethical Societies governed?

Members elect trustees who lead committees that plan and implement community activities. A professional leader, chosen by the community, is consultant to the trustees, committee chairs, and staff. Smaller Ethical Societies may be led by volunteer leaders. Members vote approval for the annual budget and programs.

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"We hold up the moral ideal,  
as the ideal for all human beings,  
where no man or woman shall be  
mere hewers of wood or drawers of water for  
others;  
where no man or woman shall be used as tools  
for the lusts of others, or for the ambitions of  
another,  
or for the greed of others,  
where every human life,  
the life of every man and woman and child,  
shall be esteemed  
as a sacred utterance of the infinite universe."

FELIX ADLER

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### 14. Do Ethical Societies have a clergy?

Professional leaders serve Ethical Society communities by presenting an ethical philosophy of life and addressing the personal and political challenges faced by members. Leaders support members in their efforts to create service, educational, and social programs. Leadership duties include Sunday Platform meetings, seasonal celebrations, officiating at passage ceremonies (weddings, namings, comings of age, and memorials), counseling, teaching, public outreach, welcoming newcomers, consulting community leaders, and public service. Leaders are legally authorized to perform weddings.

All members are eligible for leadership training. Candidates selected for professional Ethical Society leadership are enrolled in a nationally supervised program, evaluated and certified by the federation of Ethical Societies, the American Ethical Union (AEU). Each Ethical Society elects its own leaders. Adjunct leaders are member volunteers who are trained and certified to respond to the frequent public requests for humanistic wedding and memorial ceremonies.

## 15. Is Ethical Culture a religion?

Some people choose the Ethical Society as their community without viewing Ethical Culture as their religion because to them "religion" means dogmatism and the worship of a supernatural God. For most members the Ethical Society does serve as a religious congregation where they build a community of friends, find inspiration and purpose, celebrate the seasons, and clarify their world view. Professional Ethical Society leaders fill most of the roles of a religious clergy.

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"I do not invite you to accept my religion. I ask you to consider the practical directions for the conduct of life which follow from it, and if having tested them, you find them valid in your experience, then they will be of service to you."

"The Ethical Society unites in one community people who have a religious feeling and those who simply believe in moral betterment."

FELIX ADLER

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## 16. Do Ethical Societies have a creed?

No. The philosophy of Ethical Culture respects the beliefs of each member. No one is bound by any community creed or dogma. Ethical Societies emphasize the importance of developing a clear personal philosophy that makes your life understandable and meaningful. Learning to benefit from a diversity of viewpoints is one of the challenges of membership. Members encourage each other to think freely and disagree without being disagreeable. "Deed Before Creed" is our motto.

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"If there is a single instinct in me that is stronger than any of the rest, it is the instinctive desire to be truthful with myself and others. I will not be self-deceived. I will look life straight in the eye."

FELIX ADLER

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## 17. How do Ethical Societies celebrate marriages?

A couple celebrates their choice to become partners for life by gathering their families and friends to witness their public expression of love and commitment. An Ethical Society leader, who is legally authorized to officiate at weddings, assists each couple to design their ceremony. With music, readings, rituals, and vows, a couple uniquely expresses their personal sense of love and marriage. The celebration itself provides a joining of two families and expresses their spiritual aspirations for the marriage. Celebrants acknowledge people who are important to them and ask their guests to be active participants in their lives.

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"Those whom we love are not given to us merely for our joy and happiness. Their truest ministry consists in being to us the revealers of the divine. They quicken in us the seed of better thoughts; they help us estimate rightly the things that are worth trying for; they help us become more equal to the standard of our own best insight and grow into our truer selves."

FELIX ADLER

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## 18. How do Ethical Society members celebrate the birth of a baby?

Parents invite their family and friends to participate in a celebration called a Naming or Welcoming Ceremony. Through childhood, this is the circle of people who will be this child's world and culture. How family and friends relate to each other will determine what conclusions this child will draw about how life works. Therefore, this community is asked to make a conscious commitment to this child, mother, and father.

The Naming Ceremony recognizes that parenthood is the ultimate expression and the severest test of a marriage. The greatest act of love parents can give their child is to love each other. The interactions between a mother and father, husband and wife, form the family relationship that serves as a child's nest. Parents renew their vows to each other, commit themselves to their child, and ask their community to join in promising to love their child unconditionally, respecting his or her uniqueness, and eliciting the best from him or her.

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"Parents supply that concentrated love for the individual child, that intimate cherishing which the most generous teacher, whose affections are necessarily distributed over many, can never give. The child needs this selective affection. The love of the parent is the warm nest for the fledgling spirit of the child. To be at home in this strange world, the young being with no claims as yet on the score of usefulness to society or of merit of any kind, must find somewhere a place where he or she is welcomed without regard to usefulness or merit. It is this love of the parents that makes the home, and it is his own home that makes the child at home in the world."

FELIX ADLER

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## 19. How do Ethical Societies celebrate the coming of age from childhood into young adulthood?

When children become teenagers, they individuate from their families by taking greater responsibility and freedom in shaping their destiny. To acknowledge that a child is no longer a child but a young adult, families renegotiate their relationships and agreements to make room for the new emerging identity of the adolescent son or daughter.

At a ceremony for family and friends the passage to young adulthood is celebrated with music, readings, and personal statements. Parents and adolescent exchange vows affirming some new hopes and ground rules for their family life. One popular ritual is a statement (nowadays videotaped) prepared by the teenager addressed to his or her own future adult self offering advice for what to avoid and what to cherish. The presentation might also include acknowledging people, personal goals, and political challenges facing his or her generation.

To prepare for a coming of age ceremony a family meets with an Ethical Society leader. Together they agree on a variety of experiences, responsibilities, and privileges that will define young adulthood. For example, readiness for *independence* might be demonstrated by being able to keep agreements, to tell the truth, to negotiate for what he or she wants, to admit mistakes, to resolve conflicts, to get up and out to school without assistance, to cook a meal for the family, to handle an emergency, to travel alone using public transportation, to take leadership of a project. An expression of *social consciousness* might include articulating a personal stand on a major social issue, visiting a legislator, volunteering to work in a homeless shelter. Young adults may demonstrate *religious identity* by describing basic concepts of religion and ethics, as well as their own thoughts about the purposes and meaning of life.

## 20. What do the Ethical Society communities and philosophy offer people facing personal suffering?

Suffering is seen as an inevitable part of life that confronts us with important personal challenges. Illness, accident, loss, and violence raise walls of isolation and hopelessness. Pain concentrates our attention within the self. We experience ourselves separated from the creature comforts, people, and ambitions that usually define us. By isolating the self, pain exposes our inner needs and strengths.

In the throes of suffering, a will-to-live is inspired by the people and purposes you love. A network of people supporting you when you are in need is a powerfully nurturing experience. This network reminds you that you are not alone. You feel people caring and your own caring as well. This love can rescue you from fear and allow hope to rise again. •

Convalescence is a time of refuge from daily routines. It provides an opportunity for considering the strands of the life we are weaving. We can project forward to new possibilities and opportunities. The frustrating stumbling blocks, which can seem like barriers, can be better understood as stepping stones. These are the lessons that must be mastered to progress on our chosen path. Belonging to a network of people, we can find practical assistance for getting beyond frustration. Imagining the kind of future we want inspires us with renewed purpose.

## **21. When a loved one dies, what do Ethical Societies offer?**

A memorial or funeral ceremony honors the life of a loved one and fulfills the needs of family and friends to say good-bye and mourn their loss. Gathering with a community of people who share grief acknowledges the life and death of people we love.

To plan the memorial service the family meets with an Ethical Society leader. The memorial ceremony tells the personal story of the deceased loved one from family of birth through the stages and challenges of his or her life. Various speakers help the family to see their loved one from different perspectives. Mourners honor the achievements and appreciate even the failures for the lessons they provide. The ceremony also reminds us what is meaningful in our own lives and affirms the importance of our interdependence with people.

Finally, the leader asks each person to choose, from a loved one's finest characteristics, one trait to become a mental crystallization of the most positive dimension of the deceased's "way of being." By allowing this purified memory to dwell in our minds, we can encourage this special quality in our own personalities and in people we meet. Thus we honor loved ones by keeping their spirit alive.

## **22. What comfort do Ethical Society communities and philosophy offer when you face your own death?**

The spiritual challenge at death is to say good-bye to people and memories. It is the time to complete unfinished business, communications, and acknowledgements. Ideally we forgive people who have done us harm. We forgive ourselves for our own mistakes, and for what we cannot complete. We pass on gifts to those we will leave behind. Although we may feel anger and grief, we also know that the source of these feelings is our love for what we must surrender.

Members help each other with special needs and requests and make themselves available for final feelings, thoughts, and wishes. We assist each other to experience an appreciation for life itself, the simple joy of just being alive, and to marvel that life and the universe exist. We wonder at the future of humanity and see our contributions as stars in the vast human galaxy. At the end, some accept serenity while others rage into the night.

## 23. What kind of community is an Ethical Society?

Our identity is conveyed through our community itself, that is, in the actual relationships and personalities we ignite by participating in the Ethical Society programs and community. When newcomers find people inspired by faith in human worth, relating to each other fairly and kindly, and working to create a better world, they experience a powerful attraction. The success of an Ethical Society depends on how well we create among us an ethical culture.

Ethical Society members appreciate the uniqueness and autonomy of each person. The right to say no and to ask for what you want is respected. Members are encouraged to join with people of similar interests to develop programs that meet their needs. The community forms a supportive network to encourage and assist each member.

Through service projects and educational workshops, we clarify our basic beliefs and learn to improve the quality of our personal and political relationships. We celebrate holiday seasons, as well as weddings, namings, and memorials. These ceremonies honor our vital connection to humankind, nature, and the spiritual values that make life meaningful.

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"The human spirit yearns for goodness  
as the eye longs for beauty."

FELIX ADLER

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## 24. How does an Ethical Society community serve as a source of inspiration and friendship for its members?

All Ethical Society programs are opportunities to expand our network of relationships, exchange gifts, pool talents, build friendships, clarify our values, and share sorrow and joy.

Who we become and how our personalities mature depend on how well the circle of people around us influences us—especially during times of uncertainty and transition. The ultimate product of any community is the kind of people we become. Ultimately, a community becomes a training ground for our evolving self.

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"We must somehow learn to regard the empirical traits, whether vulgar, charming, or commonplace, as the mask, the screen, interposed between our eyes and the real self, the spiritual self, of others. We must acquire the faculty of second sight, of seeing the lovable as the true self."

"If we could see the unique beauty concealed within our fellow beings, we would be drawn towards them by the most powerful attraction."

"It is only face to face with the god enthroned in the inner most shrine of the other that the god hidden in me will consent to appear."

FELIX ADLER

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## 25. How is a community more than a friendship circle?

Most people in modern society have circles of relationships but no real community. People move away and change jobs. Even personal friends drift away to be replaced by new ones. Most friendships are based on mutual compatibility. When you really get to know someone, you discover how different they are. Then you inevitably have some disagreements. Once compatibility is lost, meetings may become more conflicted, less fun, and less frequent. Other friends seldom help friends through difficult relationship stumbling blocks because friends of friends usually don't know each other so they can't contribute constructively. Instead, worn-out relationships get replaced when new compatible people come along.

Friendships come and go when people distance themselves in response to stress, disappointments, and conflict. This can produce an illusion of individuality and independence, but actually leads to alienation and isolation.

Our communities are more than friendship circles. In an Ethical Society community, people are drawn by a similar purpose rather than loyalty to any one person. You meet people from different ages, backgrounds, and interests than you likely would have selected. You get to know people over many years. If you stop paying attention to someone, they don't go away. People around you know each other and form webs of relationships. This is a community that develops a culture with its own values, history, and aspirations. Within this environment you make friends and learn to improve the quality of your relationships.

## 26. How does a community strengthen individual autonomy?

In recent generations many of us have moved away from small communities. The anonymity of large impersonal neighborhoods allow us the freedom to be more independent and unique. Unfortunately, anonymity also brings isolation and the depersonalization that comes from being among strangers. Real autonomy requires learning to be unique and independent while remaining in committed personalized relationships. Ethical Society communities meet this need by respecting each person's need for both autonomy and belonging.

**"Love your intellectual enemies and keep an open mind to opinions which repel you. The views most contrary to our own are sure to contain some element of truth which we cannot afford to disregard, and which will serve the purpose of correcting and supplementing such truth as we may ourselves possess."**

FELIX ADLER

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## 27. How does a community support strong individuals?

Belonging to an Ethical Society community can strengthen your ability to be a more autonomous person capable of enjoying a variety of relationships. To be happy in a community requires learning how to:

- include yourself when you want,
- be confident in your ability to say no,
- ask for what you want,
- build trust into your relationships by keeping agreements with people,
- act firmly but fairly even when you dislike someone,
- tell the truth with kindness,
- resolve conflicts,
- give and receive forgiveness.

In community you see friends deal successfully with difficult relationships in ways you never imagined. You get opportunities and support for practicing leadership. When someone else takes leadership, you can make your contribution count by working cooperatively with others.

## 28. How do I know if I am ethical enough to join?

Everyone is welcome. No one is born knowing how to build good relationships. However, every act has its consequences. Our aim is to learn from our successes and our mistakes. What we share in common is our urge to create a better world.

### How to Become a Member

Join us at our Sunday morning Platform meetings, ask to be on our mailing list, attend a newcomers meeting, enroll in an education workshop, visit committees, celebrate with us. Most importantly meet people. Become a member when you feel identified with the Ethical Society purpose, program, and community and ready to support us financially.

To become a member, ask for a membership form, give it to any member or leader, or send it to the Ethical Society.

JOIN US.

### III

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## Basic Beliefs

Mid changing systems, fading creeds,  
That fail us in our deepest needs,  
Our striving souls refuse to rest And  
call our present good the best. Our  
eyes in rapture seem to see A  
mightier faith that is to be.

Our fathers' faith we do not slight;  
'Twas truth's gray dawn across the  
night; Yet on this world we trust will  
shine Some larger beams of light  
divine. As one by one the shadows flee,  
We seek the faith that is to be.

A faith where truth shall not be feared,  
But to it temples shall be reared; Where  
beauty unashamed shall dwell With  
goodness, and its secrets tell; Where  
love shall reign supreme, and we Shall  
live the faith that is to be.

DAVID MUZZEY

American Historian  
Ethical Culture Leader

David Muzzey, Ph.D. (1870-1965), American historian and Ethical Culture leader, was known to several generations of college and high school students who learned American history through his textbooks. Dr. Muzzey taught at the Ethical Culture Schools in New York, the University of Chicago, and for many years at Columbia University. Quotations are taken from *Ethics As Religion*.

## 29. Why develop your own philosophy of life?

Every day we make choices, small and large, that affect the future. When we face uncertainties that common sense does not resolve, our personal philosophy provides us with principles that enable us to make decisions. Since we see the world not as it is but as we picture it in our minds, our task is to find the mental concepts that most accurately describe how the world does work and how to create well-being.

Too often, rather than building a coherent philosophy for living, people make do with a partially conscious and sometimes contradictory philosophy pieced together since childhood. Often we are clearest about what we do not believe. However, what shapes our identity is what we do believe.

Since 1876, generations of open minded people have participated in Ethical Societies to clarify their personal philosophies of life and contribute to the development of a philosophy called Ethical Culture.

## 30. What philosophy of life inspires the Ethical Societies?

"Ethical Culture" is the name of an evolving body of ideas that inspires the Ethical Society communities. For Ethical Culturists, the ultimate religious question is not whether God is real, but rather, "Toward what kind of world does a religion lead?"

The challenge to any religion is to go beyond ritual worship and pleasing imagery. Whatever metaphor one prefers, Personal God, Higher Power, or Ethical Culture, the real test of a religion is whether it conveys principles for living a good life.

Ethical Culture is clear and emphatic about the reality of ethical principles in human relationships. Despite how uncertain we might feel about our personal standards, or how best to apply them, for an Ethical Culturist, there is unquestionably a good and evil, a right and wrong. For a good life, love must prevail, truth must be respected, honesty esteemed, justice secured, and freedom protected. Learning how to realize these ideals in our personal and political relationships is the purpose of Ethical Societies.

### 31. What is Ethical Culture?

Ethical Culture is a philosophy of life that conceives of the spiritual ideal as a state of harmonious relationships among all humankind and with nature.

An ethical culture is a community of interdependent beings who relate to each other so as to elicit the best from each and every person. We create an ethical culture by treating people as intrinsically worthy and uniquely evolving beings and by encouraging their full capacity for greatness and spiritual harmony. We believe that by having faith in human worth, acting as if every person has the capacity for goodness as part of their human nature, we cultivate an ethical society.

For an Ethical Culturist, ethics are more than social conventions. They are the conditions necessary to elicit the best from the human spirit. Ethical culture exists in the realm of ideal possibilities. This ideal is not a state of being that will, someday reign, but an alternative that we strive to create during particular passing situations or moments. The determination to overcome injustice and cruelty and the yearning for ideal moments of relatedness generate strong energies from the human spirit. When relationships are failing, we suffer negative consequences and disappointments. Brief experiences of ideal relatedness inspire us because they generate a sense of spiritual well-being that makes life worth living.

At the heart of the major world religions are ethical principles. These are often called God's Laws because they make possible the bliss of experiencing ethical culture. Despite the many ways of personifying the spiritual-ethical ideal, God-metaphors gain power when they represent ethical principles that enable people to create a harmonious interdependent community of evolving beings.

### 32. What are the basic beliefs of Ethical Culturists?

Although we have no formal creed, the philosophy of Ethical Culture rests on these basic beliefs:

- Human worth—Human beings have the capacity for kindness, fairness, honesty, and joy and for creating an ethical culture.
- We make an ethical culture possible when we attribute worth to all human beings.
- Creating an ethical culture enables us to claim more fully the capacities of the human spirit.
- We find the best in ourselves by seeking the best in others.
- We bring out unique talents and cultivate the good in people by appreciating the differences among people.
- We experience spiritual harmony within ourselves and in our relationships when we live by the principles of love, justice, honesty, freedom, and forgiveness.
- Spiritual experience arises from moments when we feel our connection to humanity, nature, and our inner values.

BASIC BELIEFS

BASIC BELIEFS

"I do *not* find worth in others or in myself, I attribute it to them and myself. And why do I attribute it? By virtue of the reality-producing functions of my own mind, I create the ethical manifold—the possibility of an ethical culture. This ideal is a community of uniquely differentiated individuals. In order to advance toward it, I must help others become conscious of their uniqueness and interrelation with others. I must help others in order to save myself. I must look upon other people as ethical individuals, moral beings, in order to become a moral being myself."

FELIX ADLER

"The second postulate of ethical religion is the existence of a spiritual element in human nature which makes us capable of seeking the fulfillment of the moral law in our daily conduct. It is on the ground of this capability that we attribute worth to human beings."

DAVID MUZZEY

"Let us remind ourselves that this conception of human worth is not a mere abstraction. Every outcry against political oppression, or against whatsoever is morally hideous, affirms the cardinal principle that human beings are not to be violated, not to be used as mere tools by others, but to be respected and revered as an end in themselves."

FELIX ADLER

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### 33. What is human worth?

An ethical culture starts with the assumption that every human being counts. Each person is to be treated as a unique and important member of the human family. This respect for human worth is based on our intrinsic human nature rather than on anything a person does.

Attributing worth to human beings is accepting on faith and acting as if each person has within himself or herself the possibility for kindness, fairness, joy, and the capacity to create ethical relationships. Given this capacity for goodness each person deserves to be treated with dignity.

### 34. Why have faith in human worth?

When human worth is unconditionally attributed, we create the possibility of a world where everyone is treated as somebody special. Experiencing our faith in this ideal, we find the power to make it happen. Despite the evil people do, Ethical Culturists believe that every person has the urge to do good, has a sense of right and wrong, can experience the pain of failed relationships, and has the longing to improve the quality of relationships even when his or her understanding and know-how make it impossible.

No one can prove that each person experiences an inner urge to act with kindness, fairness, honesty, and joy, but we do know that human well-being depends on our extraordinary ability to cooperate. Human beings are capable of acting with kindness and fairness to create mutually supportive cultures. This capacity for serving our common welfare as our own is inherent in human nature.

We can never prove whether every person experiences the yearning for kindness, fairness, honesty, and joy, but we can know whether we find it within ourselves. Do you feel an urge to do good? Do you have a sense of right and wrong? Do you experience a happy satisfaction after doing a good and generous deed? Do you long to give and receive love? Are you outraged and hurt in response to dishonesty, unfairness, and unkindness? Do you feel compassion for strangers suffering from misfortune, oppression, poverty, or hunger? Can you believe in your own capacity for goodness? Can you imagine that other people experience the same good will? Ethical Culturists find this yearning for goodness in their own experience, and we choose to act as if this capacity for love and justice is inherent in human nature and therefore can be elicited from people.

### 35. Why respect the worth of people who violate other people?

Ethical Culturists see human worth as the *source* of good behavior rather than the prize awarded for it. We need faith in human worth, especially when people act destructively, to look beneath particular behaviors and find the human capacity for goodness.

Individuals must protect themselves and each other from treatment that disrespects human worth. Every act that is unkind, unfair, or dishonest damages people and cannot be justified even toward a person who is guilty of wrongdoing. We cultivate an ethical society when we impose consequences that restore respect for human worth and awaken the inner longing to create a more humane world.

Consider what kind of world we live in when we assume that some individuals, based on their bad behavior, lack human worth: Those found "unworthy" would be "justifiably" subjected to less humane treatment. We would all have to continually prove ourselves or risk being stripped of human dignity. Our mistakes and destructive feelings would make us uncertain of our own worthiness. Our self-doubts would blind us to the capacities for goodness within ourselves. This would lead us to become resigned to the worst behaviors from ourselves and others because we would no longer be looking for the good possibilities within human nature. To transform our hostile habits and relationships we need faith in the human capacity for goodness.

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"The vice that underlies all vices is that people hold each other cheaply, and worse, that in our inner most being, we hold ourselves cheaply as well."

### **36. Why is human worth the foundation for self-esteem?**

People often base their self-esteem on their value, that is, their usefulness, approval, or achievements. When self-esteem is conditional on success, we must repeatedly prove ourselves to keep our self-esteem from slipping away. Inevitably, self-esteem founded on value rather than inherent worth rises and falls with our circumstances. Everyone suffers times of illness, misfortune, social and economic downturns, frustrations and failures. We most need strong self-esteem when facing the risk of an ambitious challenge or when experiencing loss, but at these times, value-based self-esteem is most in doubt. Even the natural process of learning by trial and error is undermined when we experience mistakes as lost self-esteem.

Faith in human worth means seeing yourself as deserving of respect, as a good and creative being, regardless of circumstances. Founding your self-image, not on what you achieve, but on your human worth allows you to give your best to the most difficult challenges because you are not putting your self-esteem at risk. Instead you are giving yourself an opportunity to explore and express your good and creative nature.

The one occasion where self-doubt is based on behavior is when you act unkindly, unfairly, dishonestly, or without joy. When self-esteem is founded on worth, self-doubt indicates that we have treated ourselves or someone else disrespectfully. However, we are never trapped by self-doubt because by expressing our good will we can regain our sense of self-respect. Material success may be illusive, but the ability to act rightly is within our power.

### **37. What does ethics mean?**

Ethics defines the elements essential to human wellbeing and proposes principles to be used as guidelines for generating an ethical culture. Ethics also refers to the specific values, standards, rules, and agreements people adopt for conducting their lives.

Ethics, most broadly, is the study of human behavior and its consequences in the light of what is ideally possible. For example, ethicists might study a society's mores or morals to determine what effect they would have on humankind if they were used as universal standards.

Ethics are not merely social conventions, like table manners. Ethics define the social conditions necessary for human beings to thrive.

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"People learn to act ethically for the same reason that they put oil and not sand in their car engines."

EDWARD KIENLE

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### 38. How do we know what is ethical?

Ethical wisdom is the product of a long history of human struggle. By trial and error societies discover how to create mutually enhancing relationships. Yet ethics also come from the reality-producing function of the mind.

In addition to being propelled by events of the past, human beings are simultaneously drawn forward by their view of the possibilities of the future. When people act "as if" something can happen, they can behave so as make it a self-fulfilling prophecy. The challenge is to understand what conditions lead to human well-being, to envision an ideal ethical culture, and then derive principles that would create a good life.

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"Anyone can become angry—that is easy, but to be angry with the right person, to the right degree, at the right time, for the right purpose, and in the right way—that is not easy."

ARISTOTLE

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### 39. What does it mean to act ethically?

Ethical Culture proposes that the state of spiritual-ethical harmony would be created whenever people live by these three guidelines taken together:

- Act as a member of an ideal ethical culture with a sense of interdependence with humanity and nature.
- Act so as to achieve your own full and unique potential.
- Act so as to elicit the best and most distinctive qualities in others and thereby in oneself.

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"The greatest disease in modern society is lack of purpose."

FELIX ADLER

"Life devoted only to living is incapable of preserving people from weariness and the feeling that all is vanity. Human life must serve some end which seems, in some sense, outside human life, some end which is impersonal, such as God, good, truth, or beauty. Those who best promote life do not have living as their purpose. They aim rather at bringing into human existence something eternal. Contact with this eternal purpose brings a strength and a fundamental peace which cannot be wholly destroyed by the struggles and apparent failures of daily life."

BERTRAND RUSSELL

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#### 40. What ethical principles might members use in daily life?

- **Human Worth.** I am an evolving person cultivating goodness. Every person is a creative source with an inherent capacity for goodness.
- **Responsibility.** I am in charge of who I am and what I do. Everyone is accountable for his or her actions.
- **Love.** I encourage the beauty, goodness, and creative power in every person. Everyone has the right to be all he or she can be.
- **Freedom.** I appreciate and express my uniqueness. Everyone has the right to make his or her own choices.
- **Kindness.** I care for the well being of people. Everyone has the right to safety.
- **Fairness.** I act as I wish ideally to be treated. Everyone has the right to an equal opportunity.
- **Trust.** I honor my agreements. Everyone is accountable for his or her promises.
- **Truthfulness.** I speak without misleading. Everyone can face reality honestly.
- **Forgiving.** I admit my mistakes: by expressing sorrow for causing harm, by making amends, and by learning a better way. Everyone can learn by trial and error.
- **Joy.** I choose to find within me delight in being alive. Everyone can experience the bliss of being in harmony with his or her ethical yearnings.

#### 41. Why do people act ethically?

The urge to act ethically is rooted in our human capacity for feeling, thought, and free will.

Feelings are our most primitive means of knowing what we value and of generating passion for what's important to us. Recall how satisfying it feels to do a good deed, or how upsetting it feels to be treated badly. When we act cruelly or unfairly, we usually pay the price with feelings of fear, alienation, or guilt. We damage our ability to love and trust as well as the ability to be loved and trusted. When we are able to empathize with another person, we genuinely care about the consequences of our behavior and enjoy the good we do.

While feelings show us our values, thought, in the form of memory, imagination, and reason, enables us to anticipate what behaviors might have long-term benefits or negative consequences. Reasoning can verify whether our deed is likely in fact to elicit the best from life. When we are addicted to habits that feel good or familiar but are destructive, our vision of a better alternative gives us the possibility and hope to change what we are doing.

Thought and feeling aligned is a powerful force, but to create a more desirable future requires a strong will capable of taking new and independent action. Behaviors are usually motivated by either our habits or impulses. Free will occurs in a moment of choice when we take a course of action that expresses our inner values. Free will, like a muscle, must be strengthened by exercise and practice.

Will, when impassioned by feeling and guided by thoughtful purpose, generates a sense of confidence in ourselves, in our power to influence our destiny, in the reality of ethical values, in the possibility of building good relationships, and in our ability to create spiritual well-being.

## 42. Why don't people act ethically?

When facing challenges or difficulties, people often lack a picture of an ideal outcome and how to achieve it. In our stress, we may resort to habits that might provide some immediate relief but damage our relationships in the process.

Although good intentions are necessary, building good relationships also requires an ethical education. We must learn how and when: to trust authority, to listen to our own needs and values, to cooperatively exchange with peers, to respect laws, to apply ethical principles, and to value and cultivate spiritual well-being. To tell the truth, to act with kindness even when in stress, and to resolve conflicts fairly require considerable practical expertise.

Often, people use the wrong they see others do to justify the wrong they do themselves. (He started it. She deserves it. They would have done it to me.) When we see people acting badly, we are challenged to look beneath their negative behavior to address the creative self that may need encouragement and firm guidance to act kindly, fairly, honestly, and joyfully.

The willingness to see some behaviors as mistakes (sins) allows us to learn, by trial and error, good ways to handle difficult situations. Being unaware of the mistakes we are making condemns us to repeat them while thinking ourselves powerless to escape our troubles.

Evil is also a reality in the world. Evil occurs when people understand that their actions are destructive but choose to repeat them anyway. We cannot allow individuals to do damage to people or the social environment. We must take stands strong enough to stop intentionally evil behaviors, or we destroy the hope of an ethical culture.

## 43. Does Ethical Culture offer forgiveness?

People inevitably make mistakes (sins) that harm other people. Therefore, we must know how to heal the hurts, or we destroy the interrelatedness that is the source of our well-being.

The two most common means of forgiveness are personal apology and religious ritual. Yet even after receiving forgiveness and absolution, the damaged relationship may not recover. To be healing, forgiveness must include three essential elements:

First, the wrongdoer must admit that an act was a mistake and express sorrow. This means understanding specifically what the mistake was and what damage was done.

Second, amends must be made. To be complete, forgiveness requires compensation for both the material loss and the damaged personal respect. If the wrong cannot be made right, some compensation or other symbolic gesture that has meaning to the wronged person needs to be negotiated.

Third, a new agreement must be reached about how similar matters will be handled in the future. Even when regret is expressed and amends made, restoring trust requires an understanding of a good way to handle similar situations.

An evil act is more than a mistake, more than the damage done by people who suffer broken relationships because they do not know how to negotiate forgiveness. Evil is the intentional attempt to succeed at the expense of someone else. Evil comes from knowingly doing harm, or ignoring the damage, or continuing to benefit at the expense of another person.

All human beings make mistakes, often from ignorance and sometimes with negative intent, but the power to act rightly is always before us.

## BASIC BELIEFS

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"Spirituality is consciousness of  
infinite interrelatedness."

FELIX ADLER

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## BASIC BELIEFS

### **44. What is humanistic spirituality?**

Spirituality means respecting spiritual well-being as deserving special attention, not to be trivialized or violated. Practices, such as being in nature, listening to music, meditating, and celebrating with rituals can be aesthetically pleasing, but to make them meaningful a definition of spirituality is necessary.

Humanistic spirituality is experiencing ourselves as vitally connected to other human beings, to nature, and the universe. As we travel through the stages of life from birth to death, we learn to create satisfying relationships with people, nature, and the universe, or we suffer the consequences.

The ancient Greeks called the principles of spiritual wellbeing "melos," the root word for melody, meaning the harmony of all good. Ethical principles, like musical notes, guide us to find ethical harmony within ourselves and in the world around us. Our ultimate spiritual experience is the kind of person we become and the culture of relationships we build. By bringing out the finest capacities in the people around us, we stimulate the spiritual life within each of us.

Our secular society stimulates us to pay attention to the external world around us: waking to an alarm, driving, working, watching TV. Yet ultimately the quality of our lives is determined less by these outer circumstances than by the condition of our inner state of being. Whether we are asleep or awake, our brains are perpetually creating. We experience our animating vitality as sensations, feelings, voices of thought, pictures from memory and imagination, intentions, wants, and choices. How well we harmonize emotion, thought, and will determines the spiritual quality of human life.

## BASIC BELIEFS

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"The conviction that there is in the human being an essential spiritual self and a spiritual universe is not a gift to which we fall heir at birth, or by the experience of ancient teachers, or by a dogma. Spiritual conviction is a supreme good that must be arduously worked out by ourselves, discovered in our own experience and nurtured in our personalities."

FELIX ADLER

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## BASIC BELIEFS

### **45. What is religious experience?**

Religious experiences are common among human beings even though each person describes them with the language of his or her own philosophy or religion. For example, "Jesus (Mohammed, Zeus, Grandfather, etc.) spoke to me." These experiences occur during meditations and ceremonies, listening to music, and walking in nature. In these moments people experience their vital connection with people, nature, and the evolving universe. When people sense their belonging in this larger context of existence, they may transcend their customary social identity.

A religious experience brings a new understanding of past frustrations and illuminates new possibilities. This expanded world view inspires new options that allow people to reconsider their identity and destiny.

When people align their conduct with their new insights and feelings, the religious experience can change their lives. When a person, facing a great challenge or in a dark period of despair, feels supported by a new sense of reality, sometimes his or her personality is forever transformed by the experience.

## BASIC BELIEFS

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"The first postulate of Ethical Culture is the existence of a moral law as permeating as the physical laws of nature. Is this ethical conception of god less real, less inspiring, less reasonable than the concept of an absolute creator and ruler of the universe?"

DR. DAVID MUZZEY

"There is a higher standard for religious truth than kneeling before a Man-God as if that image were an idol. If God and good, and good and God be one, there is no God save what dawns upon us in the experience of doing good."

"God, we would spell with two O's — GOOD."

FELIX ADLER

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## BASIC BELIEFS

### **46. Do Ethical Culturists believe in God?**

Ethical Societies take no position on the existence of God. Many members describe themselves as agnostic. However, if by theism one means a Man-God in the sky or an external power who will intercede with special favors, very few members would be theists. Most members consider the question of the existence of or non-existence of God as being of lesser importance than treating human beings with respect, kindness, and fairness.

The aim of Ethical Culturists is to grasp the meaning behind the traditional religious metaphors. Historically, religions have personified the ethical-spiritual dimensions of life with a wide variety of images in different centuries, for example, the God of Western religions has been depicted as an ideal Son, Father, King, Judge, Lord, and Creator. These personifications, like all symbols, are metaphors chosen to convey in language actual human experiences and lessons.

Whether you believe in God or do not believe in God, Ethical Culture asks you to consider whether you believe in what god-metaphors ideally represent: the capacity for good in the human spirit and the power of ethical principles.

#### **47. Is Ethical Culture founded on Biblical teachings?**

Over centuries *The Bible* has greatly influenced Western character and culture and contributed ethical principles necessary to human well-being. *The Bible*, however, is a selection of ancient stories which also contain superstitions and violence that do not express any ethical-spiritual ideal. Ethical Society members draw from a diversity of sources, religious and secular, ancient and modern, to develop our understanding of how life can ideally work and our part in this world.

#### **48. Is Ethical Culture based on Judaism and the Ten Commandments?**

No, but we do respect the core of ethics at the heart of Judaism and other world religions. Jewish members and leaders of the Ethical Societies distinguish between their religious and ethnic identities. Our aim is to free from dogma and ritual the ethical message of religion and apply it to our lives. We welcome into our community everyone who places ethics at the heart of religion and everyone who shares our passion for creating ethical culture.

When Moses presented the Ten Commandments as proof of the superior power of Yahweh, he formally united religion and ethics. Judaism is particularly clear that "God's Law" prohibits violating another human being. The Ten Commandments are an example of the ethical common ground that links the major world religions. As Moses went to the mountain top and returned with the Ten Commandments, Buddha sat under the bo tree, determined to know the truth of life. He discovered the central truth of Buddhism: "From good comes good." Whether you study Moses's Ten Commandments, Buddha's Eight-fold path, the Five Commands of Uprightness, the ancient chants from the Egyptian Book of the Dead, the Babylonian Incantation Tablets, or Jesus's Sermon On the Mount, all espouse respect for life, justice, love, truth, and living by ethical principles.

## BASIC BELIEFS

### 49. Do Ethical Culturists believe in the divinity of Jesus?

No, but we do appreciate the contributions of great religious leaders such as Moses, Jesus, Mohammed, Buddha, Lao Tzu, and Confucius.

Jesus teaches, for example, an ethical message important to Ethical Culture. Jesus saw the spiritual realm as inside a person—"The kingdom of heaven is within you." Jesus, like Buddha, called upon people to live ethically rather than merely satisfy the rules of religious ritual. For Jesus, the evil deeds of others never justify one's own evil. The ethical response to evil ("Love thine enemies as thyself.") is to elicit the good within people and to transform the evil in oneself.

## BASIC BELIEFS

### 50. One Golden Rule

The human spirit has journeyed along the varied paths charted by six major faiths, but a single ethical principle serves as the common ground for men and women of all these religions.

