I do not share the view of Nietzsche, Sartre, and some Christian Evangelicals that if God did not exist, then everything would be permitted. Nor do I believe that, as a matter of empirical fact, if religion were to disappear, morality would collapse. I do think that the ontological and epistemic relations between religion and morality are tighter than some secular thinkers suppose. I will support this claim by sketching two arguments. The first contends that theists have good reasons for identifying moral facts with divine commands (or something else of the sort). The second argues that anyone who believes that moral values are objective has at least some reason for adopting theism or some other religious position.

**First argument**

Important strands of the Christian tradition stress God's absolute sovereignty. This emphasis is particularly clear in Augustine, William of Ockham, Martin Luther, and John Calvin. It is also an important theme in Islam and in Dvaita Vedanta. If God's sovereignty is indeed unlimited and unqualified, as these traditions attest, then there is nothing distinct from God on which he is dependent and nothing distinct from him which is not dependent on him. It seems to follow that moral truths aren't independent of God. If God is truly sovereign, his will must somehow make them true or constitute the moral facts which they express.

For suppose it doesn’t, and that God’s will is wholly or partly determined by independent standards of value. If it is, then God's activity is not wholly self-determined; he is subject to things that exist independently of him.

And in fact, leaving questions of divine dependence aside, the very existence of independent moral and value facts compromises God’s sovereignty. For if essences, eternal truths (including moral truths), values, and the like aren’t “part” of God or created by him, then God’s sovereignty does not extend over all being. So by making moral facts dependent on God’s will, divine command theory effectively protects his sovereignty—and, for theists, this is an important consideration in its favor.
Divine command theory is vulnerable to two powerful objections, however. First, the theory seems to imply that in logically possible worlds in which God fails to exist or commands nothing, such things as promise-keeping or fidelity wouldn’t be obligatory, and gratuitous cruelty, treachery, and the like wouldn’t be forbidden. It seems to many of us, however, that promise-keeping and fidelity would be *prima facie* obligatory in all possible circumstances, and that gratuitous cruelty and treachery would be forbidden. Moreover, to make matters worse, divine command theories seem to imply that not only might things like gratuitous cruelty be permitted, they might even be obligatory. For if divine command theories are true, then if God *were* to command gratuitous cruelty, gratuitous cruelty would be morally obligatory. Yet surely one of our most deeply entrenched moral intuitions is that there is no possible world in which it would be *prima facie* obligatory to gratuitously inflict pain on others. In other words, “It is *prima facie* wrong to inflict gratuitous cruelty on another” appears to be a necessary truth.

Divine command theorists who believe that God is self-existent have a response to this: God necessarily exists and is such that in any possible world in which creatures like us exist, he commands them not to lie, to protect the innocent, and so on.¹ Robert Adams says that he doesn’t “believe that there is a unique set of commands that would be issued by any supremely good God.”² And this is surely correct. A supremely good God might, for example, issue one set of ritual commands in one possible world and another set in another. Yet this admission is fully consistent with claiming that there are some commands that any supremely good God would necessarily issue to beings sufficiently like us. The second table of the Decalogue is, arguably, an example. If moral obligations are best understood as divine commands, then these necessary moral truths can be construed as commands God necessarily issues in the appropriate circumstances.³

¹ So, strictly speaking, what is necessarily true in worlds in which there are no appropriate recipients of a divine command such as protect the innocent (because no rational creatures exist in it or because in those worlds innocents can’t be harmed) is that if there were beings like us, God would command them to protect the innocent, and hence they would have an obligation to do so.
³ One might doubt that necessity is compatible with willing but not everyone does. Aquinas, for example, thought that we necessarily will our own happiness, and Jonathan Edwards’s theological premises commit him to the claim that God necessarily wills to create some world or other.