

## Religion Experts Column

*This is my response to this week's question of **Ask The Religion Experts**, a feature in the Sunday **Ottawa Citizen**. Questions are the editor's. All responses are available on the Citizen's online blog for the feature. We invite you to consider this response and share your own. It is our hope this will generate some thoughtful discussion of the real-life applications of Buddhadharma and deeper understanding for us all.*

---

*Sunday, February 13, 2011*

**Q** : Do others have the right to define what's ethical for me?

**A** : Many others are given or conferred rights to define what is ethical for us in aspects of our lives. Various government decisions, such as abortion legislation, deployment of troops or standards on the treatment of animals are meant to promote and protect specific ethical positions. Allowing this power establishes some of our identity as a nation and also ensures, through regulatory bodies, that these standards are monitored and enforced on our behalf.

As professionals - doctors, lawyers, police - its is very common for us to have a college or governing body who sets the boundaries of what is acceptable and ethical in that profession. Again, as members of these colleges, we empower or confer this right onto others. It is these standards, in fact, which give our clients and public the confidence and respect for us that allow us to practice successfully.

Looking more narrowly at our roles here as representatives of our faith communities, we can ask the same question. Can a priest, pastor or minister define what is ethical for their community? Within the tradition of Buddha-dharma, the answer would be

a clear and emphatic "no". Buddhist clergy hold their positions because of their willingness to take on a leadership role, their openness to have their lives and actions scrutinized publicly and because of their determination to grapple with teachings and interpret them fairly and practically for the community. Buddhist clergy (and I suspect this is true for most faiths) never set ethical standards, but interpret existing traditional teachings for concrete situations.

An example of this has been the debate in Buddhist communities over eating meat. Some leaders, stressing the teaching to refrain from causing suffering, are vocal spokespeople for a strict vegan diet. Others support different degrees of vegetarian discipline. Others still, pointing to the patterns evident in nature, see nothing unethical in eating meat. In all these cases, there are no moral absolutes asserted, but rather ethical positions to interpret. Herein, clergy, by agreement, are given the right/obligation and relied on to articulate ethical stances for their communities.

*Rev. Innen Parchelo, doshu,  
Red Maple Sangha*