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The Task of Religious Ethics

The Master said: 'The noble-minded may not always be Humane. But the small-minded—they never are.'

— Confucius, *The Analects* 14.6.

By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things.

— St. Paul, Gal 5:22–23

Religion and Moral Convictions

The world's religions have diverse beliefs, practices, stories, and teachings as well as sages, saints, and saviors to help guide adherents in how they should live. Although one of the so-called Ten Commandments dictates "You shall not murder," other religions express the prohibition of murder through stories or prescriptions about helping others, even loving one's enemies. And although some religions ground their moral beliefs in the command of God, still other religions – and sometimes the same religions – speak about the ability of human reason or sensibilities to apprehend the demands of justice, or they look to the lives of saints and sages as the embodiment of moral perfection. The various ways to instruct and empower proper conduct constitute the "moral convictions" of a religion because in different ways each religion's morality is about right and just actions and the kinds of persons and communities one should strive to become in relation to other persons, other communities, and the divine or the sacred.

Often moral convictions among the religions are surprisingly similar. Religious people praise unselfish behavior, have codes of sexual conduct and fidelity, treasure the bonds of friendship, share beliefs about what is just and right in social life, and they even hold remarkably similar ideas about human

flourishing and its relation to right conduct and to virtuous character. But the outlooks of the religions on the proper conduct of human life can be surprisingly different as well. Consider the examples cited at the head of this chapter. Confucius (Kong Qiu or Kong Fuzi [“Master Kong”], 551–479 BCE) related Goodness to the life of the noble-minded one. In order to be a noble-minded one, one must abide by rituals performed rightly and in the right circumstances and also follow the laws under heaven, as Confucius called them. St. Paul, the great early Christian thinker (c. 5–67 CE) from Tarsus in Cilicia, composed letters, like the one cited previously, that make up a good portion of the New Testament in the Christian Bible. (The other portion of the Christian Bible is called the “Old Testament.”) According to Paul, the life of faith is lived in the power of the “Spirit” and it has no law but is manifest in love, peace, joy, and other fruits, as he calls them. Separated by time and space, these religious sages are divided not only by how they think about God or heaven but also by how they believe human life should be properly lived. The conduct of life is connected to law or to the divine spirit, abides by ritual requirements or it manifests the spirit’s fruits, and it is lived under heaven or in the power of Jesus Christ’s spirit.

The examples of religious similarity and difference, that is, the analogies among the religions, could be endlessly multiplied. If one casts a glance at the teachings of Buddhism in its many forms, Islam and Judaism in their many forms, and also what we call Hinduism or Christianity (again, in their many forms), ideas about how one ought to live and the practices that characterize that life would be strikingly – and shockingly – different. The devout Buddhist seeks Enlightenment and the dissolution of the “self” from its desires in order to escape *samsāra*, the round of suffering and rebirth. A pious Muslim, conversely, expects to stand alone before Allah on the Day of Judgment in order to account for his or her actions. And yet, again, there are similarities in moral convictions as well. The Buddhist and the Muslim agree that compassion and mercy are at the core of the moral life. A Jew and a Hindu are committed to the right ordering of social life and thus some idea about moral order and justice even while they differ of what that “order” is and what counts as a just social order. What is more, the striking similarities and profound differences in religious outlooks become more difficult to summarize when one includes so-called indigenous or native religions. Some indigenous religions involve practices of divination or the interpretation of dreams by a *shaman* for the discernment of how to live. For instance, among the Candomblé, a Brazilian African religion, the gods descend on priests and priestess during ritual dances in order to teach and protect worshippers in the conduct of their daily lives.

How are we to understand let alone assess religious outlooks on life? What resources might the religions contribute to ethical reflection? What are we to make of the amazing similarities but also befuddling differences among the religions in their teachings and practices about how one ought to live? How

might the study of the religions and their moral convictions about human personal and social conduct actually enrich ethical thinking in a global age when the religions are interacting and shaping human existence around the world? How is it even possible to study, compare, and assess moral convictions? Are there constitutive features of human existence that can be analyzed and understood through the interpretations of a religion's patterns of thought and practice?¹ The study of religious ethics seeks to answer those questions for scholars, students, religious adherents, and anyone concerned about the moral life.

The similarities and differences among the moral convictions of the religions are vexing, to say the least. This is especially true in our global times when people from different religions interact, sometimes violently but mostly peacefully, and people must find common solutions to shared human problems, like, say, the environmental crisis, economic injustice, or ethnic violence (to name just a few). The root question, then, is how to develop an approach to religious ethics.

The Aims of This Book

This book presents an approach to “religious ethics,” and it aims to do three things. The first aim of the chapters that follow is to define the field of “religious ethics” as a discipline of inquiry of interest to anyone who asks about the relation between “religion” and “morality.” Although “religious ethics” is a relatively old idea, as we briefly explore in this chapter, it is still in need of clarity and definition. The book will present a definition of and approach to religious ethics – its *meaning* (definition) and *method* (approach) – that makes sense of the similarities and differences among the religions in their teaching and practices about the conduct of human life.

Second, the book is *not* a survey of the world's religions about their moral teachings. There are fine volumes that provide that information.² As noted in the Introduction, too often the world's religions are subjected to forms of

1 Among moral philosophers, it was Immanuel Kant who most forcibly raised the question of the *possibility* of a supreme principle of morality and then sought to find its grounds in reason itself. Our tactic is more anthropological and hermeneutical. In that respect, our argument is less foundationalist than Kant's, without, we hope, loss of scope. We contend that this approach is warranted by the religions themselves and this book seeks to make good on that claim. For a related but different approach, see Miller, R.M. (2016). *Friends and Other Strangers: Studies in Religious, Ethics, and Culture*. New York: Columbia University Press. Other works by the author of this book can be found in the bibliography.

2 In fact, cross-reference to *The Blackwell Companion to Religious Ethics* (edited by the authors of this book with an expanded edition in the works) will be possible throughout the following chapters in order to provide historical background to the work of this volume, and also the forthcoming *Encyclopedia of Religious Ethics*.

thought – say, psychological, philosophical, or sociological ones (to name a few) – developed by scholars so that the religion studied does not contribute to thinking about, say, psychology, philosophy, or sociology.³ The religions are “data” for theories and methods of explanation, including ethics. The religions thereby do not provide the means and resources to develop these theories, including ethics.

This book significantly alters that standard approach and with surprising results. The various tensions and perplexities found in religious texts – say, the *aporia* between law and Spirit in St. Paul’s writings or between the Good and the noble-minded ones in Confucius’ – help us to develop an approach to religious ethics *from within* religious thought and life. A robust religious ethics, we argue, entails five interacting dimensions of thought that arise out of distinct but related tensions, *aporias* or perplexities, that religious texts and practices deploy in order to illuminate the structure of human existence. More details on those dimensions will be noted later because they structure this book as a whole. The novelty of this approach, we believe, is that it demonstrates how the religions provide resources for the development of normative ethics for how one can and ought to orient the conduct of life.

By engaging the religions and developing an account of religious ethics, the third purpose of this book is to enable people in our global times to think intelligently and clearly about religious outlooks on life and how they can and may be lived in ways that respect and enhance, rather than demean and destroy, the integrity of life.⁴ We admit that the book poses a challenge to many religious adherents who believe that their religious traditions possess every moral truth and that there is, accordingly, little to learn from others. The real moral challenge for those people is how to be, say, an authentic Christian, a devoted Hindu, or an enlightened Buddhist. Learning from others is beside the point; the real task is to live by the truth of one’s own religious and moral convictions. Further, the aim of this book to provide a way to address moral problems will be rejected by adherents and scholars who insist that comparison among the

3 The major contributors to this work are well known: Sigmund Freud, Friedrich Nietzsche, Karl Marx, Émile Durkheim, and the like. We cannot engage extensively these figures in this volume.

4 “The Integrity of Life” is our concept for the encompassing moral and religious good. Our task in this book is not to develop that idea and so we use it simply as a place-holder for the highest good, or, as we call it later, a “transcendent good.” It is given different, if analogous, symbolic and narrative expression in the religions: God(s), spirits, *nirvāṇa*, *ātman*, etc. The task of religious ethical thinking is to correlate critically this concept with those symbolic and narrative forms. Likewise the two most basic norms for responsible action are the “respect for” and “enhancement of” the integrity of life. As will be shown, the religions are keen to clarify the domain of noninterference and care for others (respect) as well as actions meant to better others’ lives (enhancement). For a brief but substantive account of “the integrity of life” as well as respect and enhancement see Klemm, D.E. and Schweiker, W. (2008). *Religion and the Human Future: An Essay on Theological Humanism*. Oxford: Blackwell.

religions is impossible and can add nothing to ethics. Their claim is that religious worldviews and convictions are so utterly different that there is no possibility of comparing them. It is not just that one's own tradition has all truth; it is also the case, they claim, that there is no vantage point and form of thought adequately to compare religious and moral convictions in order to develop something called "religious ethics." For both of these outlooks, then, the third aim of this book is impossible. Comparison is either morally unnecessary or it is ethically impossible.⁵

We are convinced that those two prevalent and widespread ways of rejecting the idea of "religious ethics" are neither true of the religions themselves nor a proper account of moral thinking, religious or nonreligious. One thing discovered in the following chapters is that quite often a religious community or thinker shows how their community can and must learn moral truths from the outsider, and, what is more, that human beings can and do have some basic moral knowledge, whether innate or learned. The first objection to the aims of this book is then incorrect with respect to the religions themselves, at least about moral matters.⁶ The religions are not only extraordinarily different in their moral convictions, they are also and often surprisingly similar in their teachings. If that is so, then it must be possible to isolate similarities and differences and thereby to show the analogies among the religious moral convictions. The *method* we develop in this book unfolds the analogical structure of religious ethics through five dimensions of reflection that arise from within religious ways of life in response to the perplexities of human existence. In this way, we take seriously the point about religious difference without succumbing to the idea that among the religions there is only difference.

There is one other reason to pursue the third aim of this book. All ethical thinking arises in response to problems and challenges about how human beings can and should live. Certainly, in the present age one problem and one challenge is to develop ways of being religious that escape the cycles of misunderstanding and violence too often seen among religious people. At this level, the book seeks, perhaps with some audacity, to intervene into religious life in the name of responsible moral convictions. The book aims to enable the reader to see the various ways to live within and among religions and thus to make judgments about which ways are most responsible, most humane, and most

5 On this question see the typology of reasons for comparison (facilitative, persuasive, dialectical, reconstructive, and transformative) in Clairmont, D.A. (2011). *Moral Struggle and Religious Ethics: On the Person as Classic in Comparative Theological Contexts*. Oxford: Wiley Blackwell.

6 No doubt there are grave and maybe insurmountable differences among the religious on questions of enlightenment or salvation ("soteriology") as well as the nature and identity of the religious community. Our point is simply that granting those differences there are still similarities enough on moral matters to back the work of religious ethics.

devout. In this way, we hope the book itself serves the purpose of moral education, the sharpening of moral perception, and also character development.

Providing an account of religious ethics with these three purposes in mind is a daunting task. Yet it is a task demanded by a global age when religious people interact in many ways around our shared planet. This chapter introduces the book by expanding on its three aims. We start – rightly – with some history.

Some History

The idea of “religion” and the discipline of “ethics” are products of Western thought. What sense, then, does it make to speak of “religious ethics” and how does that field of inquiry relate to the actual religions? As a discipline of thought, religious ethics must develop a form of reflection subtle enough to explore the religions themselves. In this light, the idea of religious ethics has a specific history.

In one respect, the idea of “religious ethics” is rather ancient. During the period of what has been called the “axial age” (800–200 BCE), thinkers around the world, in China, India, Persia, and the West, developed patterns of thought, including “monotheism” or belief in one God, as well as paths to enlightenment that included moral convictions.⁷ In each case there were criticisms of accepted ways of thinking and acting and proposals for new modes of thought and action. The Greek philosopher Socrates (c. 469–399 BCE), for example, advanced ethical thinking by isolating basic moral standards and concepts but was condemned for supposedly corrupting the youth and creating new gods. Analogously, the great Hebrew prophets, like Isaiah (eighth century BCE), challenged traditional religious cult and ritual with the demands for justice, especially for the poor and the outcast. Siddhārtha Gautama (the Buddha or “Enlightened One” [c. 563–483 BCE]) taught, as explored in a later chapter of this book, the Four Noble Truths for attaining Enlightenment and that the path to *nirvāṇa* (the quality of having desire “extinguished” which would lead to liberation [*mokṣa*] from suffering [*duḥkha*]) included specifically moral traits and actions. In each of these cases, and others could be noted, the validity and meaning of moral convictions were tested and even revised from *within* a religion and its way of life. The axial breakthrough in these religions was both conceptual and ethical, a fact we will also see in some of the indigenous religions we will explore.

7 The idea of the “axial age” was developed by the German philosopher Karl Jaspers. For a brief comparison of “axial age” thinkers see Jaspers (1962). *Socrates, Buddha, Confucius, Jesus: The Paradigmatic Individuals*, (ed. H. Arendt; trans. R. Mannheim). New York: Harvest/HBJ Book. For a recent discussion see Bellah, R. (2011). *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Harvard University Press.

Thinking about, assessing, and applying religious and moral convictions to the conduct of human life continues throughout history. The rise of Islam and Islamic law (*shari'a*), the development of early Christianity within the context of Judaism and the Roman Empire, and the advances of Jewish Rabbinic patterns of thought into the so-called Western Middle Ages each shows the vibrancy of religious and moral thinking and thus, in early form, “religious ethics.” This continued and was intensified in the early modern period in the West by thinkers as diverse as Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677 CE), David Hume (1711–1776 CE), Immanuel Kant (1724–1804 CE), Joseph Butler (1692–1752 CE), and many others. The attempt by these “Enlightenment” thinkers was to show either the independence of morality from religion (Hume), the unity of religion and morality (Spinoza), or a complex relation of religion’s dependence on morality (Kant) or the inverse (Butler). Further, with these developments in modern thought the question of how, if at all, to compare the moral convictions of the religions came into focus. This interest in religion was due to the realities of the wars of religion in Europe, expanding trade, colonial domination of peoples by Western powers, and growing fascination with the history of cultures.

The current situation of religious ethics in the Western academy draws on and expands this complex and at times troubling history. Here too there are important and exemplary events. In 1993 a Parliament of the World’s Religions was held in Chicago, Illinois to commemorate the original parliament convened at the Colombian Exposition in Chicago 100 years earlier. Representatives of the many and different religions met at the 1993 Parliament: Buddhists, Sikhs, Muslims, Hindus, Druids, Christians, Jews, indigenous peoples, and many more. The purpose of the Parliament, which continues to meet every four years at locations around the world, was to enhance understanding and cooperation among religious people and leaders. Yet something distinctly important happened at the 1993 meeting. The delegates gathered in Chicago issued a “Declaration on Global Ethics” that was meant to show the common moral wisdom of the world’s religions and the ways in which that wisdom could help address the many moral and political challenges facing people around the world. Although the “Declaration” rightly has its critics – including the authors of this book – and has been superseded by other concords and patterns of thought around the world, it was a sign of a pressing need in our global times. In a world of cultural and religious diversity, there is the need for ways to think about the moral challenges and possibilities that affect the whole planet and are shared by human communities. To undertake that task requires not only finding points of commonality among the religions but also developing patterns of thought to interpret and to analyze the moral teachings and practices of the religions. Again, that is the task of this book and so too religious ethics as a discipline.

It was hardly surprising that delegates from the world’s religions eventually had to think about a common ethics. Religious and moral challenges are found

everywhere and people have to encounter the beliefs and practices of others, violently or nonviolently. There are many shared, global problems that reach beyond the power of any one nation or culture to address: global climate change, worldwide poverty, diseases, war, genocide, human trafficking, and the like. It also seems that human beings have some shared aspirations and sentiments: the desire for dignity and happiness, beliefs about justice, feelings of sympathy for others, love of one's children and family, and also outrage at senseless violence and death. Yet although global moral thinking is needed, it is exceedingly difficult to do. The customs and practices of some religions seem almost incomprehensible to others. And, in fact, in every known human society the connection between religion and morality is deeply entangled and yet at times also strongly contested.

One can easily see why that is the case. For some people, in order to be a moral individual, that is, a responsible person, one must be religious because any moral standard of what is right or wrong has its source in, say, "God's will." The divine will is revealed in texts like the Ten Commandments of the Jewish and Christian Bibles or for Muslims in the *Qur'ān*. In order to have a just and peaceful society one must follow God's will and form a morally unified society. Other people believe the opposite. They note that many nonbelieving people are good and just, often in ways that are far more obviously virtuous than religious people. They note that imposing religious and moral beliefs on people leads to tyranny, inequality, and conflict rather than peace and justice. Morality, they contend, finds its source in human reason, the social life of people, or in beliefs about what is needed in social cooperation to achieve human flourishing. Let people be religious if they like, but morality, so this argument goes, has its own source and purpose.

The debate rages across the centuries and also across cultures and religions. Each side in this well-known debate casts a skeptical eye at the book in your hands. For the religious believer, the idea of "religious ethics," rather than, say, Hindu, Christian, or African ethics, would make no sense. There is only one true religion – one's own religion – and so ethics, if it is to be valid, must be based on this true religion. The nonreligious person could hardly imagine why one would need a book on "religious" ethics. The very idea of religious ethics is confused; one ought to drop religion from thinking about how we ought to live, that is, from ethics.

Mindful of these perspectives on "religious ethics," this book seeks another way. What is this different approach to "religious ethics?" To give it a perhaps too high-sounding name, it is a hermeneutical (or interpretive) and multidimensional method of religious ethics. The method interprets and draws on the resources of religious traditions in order to articulate and explore moral understanding and the responsible orientation of human life. The book is a constructive presentation of the *meaning* and *method* of religious ethics. In order to develop the approach requires clarity about terms and also how religious ethics as a discipline has previously been conceived.

Conceptions of Religious Ethics

There are longstanding disputes about the meaning of “religion,” “morality,” and “ethics.” For some thinkers, ethics is the philosophical analysis of the codes of conduct and beliefs about what is good, just, and right in a society, that is, a “morality.” “Ethics” is a form of metareflection that seeks to interpret the meaning of some “morality” in order to assess its validity for orienting human existence. Thinkers and scholars of this type have spoken about “religious ethics” by applying some moral theory to religious sources. One might draw on the ethics of the Greek philosopher Aristotle and his ideas about “virtue” and then apply his theory to the texts and practices of a “religion,” for example, Buddhism, to show that “Buddhist Ethics” is a kind of Aristotelean virtue ethics. One might use the moral theory of Immanuel Kant, the great eighteenth century European Enlightenment thinker, about practical reason and universal duty in order to show that, say, Jewish ethics is really a “deontological” ethics or a morality of duty. On this strategy “religious ethics” is an instance or kind of moral philosophy. Its distinctiveness is that religious people have peculiar beliefs about gods, the after-life, salvation, or enlightenment. But in that case, the religions with their rich and complex heritages of texts, symbols, rituals, and practices do not provide novel and deep ways to sense, feel, and think about ethics and ethical problems.

There is a genuine problem with these *formal* approaches to religious ethics, as we can call them.⁸ A formal approach begins with a definition of “ethics” and “morality” and then explores how a “religion” fits that formal definition. Typically, philosophical definitions of “morality” seek to show how it is to be understood with respect to one, singular attribute, say, that morality is about “duty” (Kant) or it is about virtuous behavior (Aristotle) or it is about consequences and utility (Jeremy Bentham [1748–1832 CE]). Ethics becomes one dimensional because its task, again, is to interpret, elaborate, assess, define, and apply “morality.” Yet what if morality, or at least the moral convictions of the religions, is not one-dimensional? How might that change the very conception of ethics? Does either Confucius or St. Paul, cited in the chapter opening, neatly fit into an ethics of duty, virtue, or consequences? They seem to speak about duties, consequences, and virtues as well as other traits of a life properly lived.

Another method and approach to religious ethics is historical or *descriptive*. Here the task is to describe as precisely and carefully as possible those beliefs, values, and practices religious communities use to orient their lives and the lives of their adherents. This approach notes that different religions call reflection on beliefs, values, and practices different things. Rarely do the religions call it “ethics.” For Muslims the name for thinking about the conduct of life is the interpretation of the *Qurʾān* and the Prophet’s life, the

8 For a discussion of these issues see *The Companion to Religious Ethics*, especially the Introduction and Part I.

ḥadīth, and teaching in the form of law (*sharī'a*). The term “ethics” derived from Greek philosophy therefore does not describe Islamic “moral” thinking. African religions, as another example, often rely on practices of divination to orient life in relation to the ancestors and changing situations. It would seem odd to call that kind of thinking “ethics.” Again, Confucius is interested in the noble-minded one whereas St. Paul notes the fruits of the spirit. Are they talking about “ethics?”

From the *hermeneutical* perspective of this book, there is a genuine problem with *descriptive* as well as *formal* approaches to religious ethics. The labor of interpreting and understanding the moral resources of the religions is itself a kind of metareflection that includes but exceeds descriptive and formal approaches. “Hermeneutics,” from the Greek god *Hermes* (a divine messenger from the gods to humans but also a trickster), is the art of interpretation in the service of understanding.⁹ It seeks to attain understanding of texts, symbols, practices, and persons who make some claim to be meaningful but in ways that are ambiguous, tricky, and hard to decode. If the *formal* approach to religious ethics risks simplifying the moral convictions of the religions in order to find commonalities, the danger with *descriptive* approaches to religious ethics is that the search for distinctiveness can deny any commonality among moral convictions.

What if the moralities, or at least the moral convictions, of the religions reveal some analogous features? How might that change the idea of religious ethics? A hermeneutical approach to religious ethics seeks to isolate the similarities in differences, the analogies, in moral and religious understanding and the strategies of interpretation used to address life’s challenges and to orient conduct. We contend that a distinctive feature of religious thinking about the moral life is the attention to tensions, the *aporias*, found in personal and social existence. Unlike philosophical forms of ethics that too often seek to elide the tensions of life, the religions seek to sustain but also to render productive and meaningful those tensions in order to provide right orientation for the conduct of human life with its oddity, joy, sorrow, conflict, confusion, and delight. The rest of this book presents that approach to religious ethics. And this requires clarity about the meanings of morality, ethics, and religion.

Morality, Ethics, and Religion

By *ethics* we mean, again, a kind of metareflection, a second order reflection on the first order morality of religious people, that provides the interpretation, elaboration, assessment, and application of a community’s “morality” for the

9 The literature on “hermeneutics” is vast and complex. We refer to specific thinkers in the course of our argument. Yet it is no surprise that we borrowed the claim about religion from Friedrich Schleiermacher, quoted at the beginning of this book, insofar as he is recognized as the “father” of modern hermeneutics.

sake of orienting human life, individually and socially. Every religion is a form of reflection on and practice of interpreting human existence, the nature of reality, and how one should live.¹⁰ Religious *ethics* is a specific kind of reflection on that first-order reflection. It is a metareflection analogous to other kinds of reflection on religion: e.g. historical, anthropological, sociological, philosophical, psychological, and so on. Although not every religion speaks about ethics, it is the case that every religion, and indeed every community and every human being, develops or adopts some form of metareflection on moral convictions, whatever they call that kind of thinking. *Morality*, then, is a set of convictions and practices about the proper conduct of life and the kinds of persons and communities one should strive to become. A religion's morality is found in its beliefs, practices, stories, teachings, sages, saints, doctrines, and social structures. The book is about *religious ethics* because the moral convictions that are interpreted, elaborated, assessed, and to be applied to actual life are found within the religions, a point addressed later. In other words, the subject of this book is how to think "ethically" about and also from within the moral convictions found in religions. What then do we mean by "religion?"

Ironically, none of what is usually called the world's religions call themselves a "religion." The term must be used, then, in order to indicate some commonality, some point of comparison, between vastly different beliefs and practices. The definitions of religion are legion.¹¹ Consider just a smattering of them. Religion is belief in a God or gods; it is a sense of the sacred; a religion is about what people believe to be ultimate, their deepest concern; religion is defined by a sense of mystery and the holy; the idea and study of "religion" is an invention of scholars to order, classify, and compare different cultural forms; and so on. Depending on the definition, religious ethics could mean the kind of reflection related to belief in gods and what the gods command, or it could mean thinking about human conduct in the light of what is sacred or some other account of religion. In that case, the beliefs, practices, and teachings of what we usually call "religion" might not be that important for religious ethics.

Again, none of the "religions" originally used the term religion to define themselves – some describe themselves as "the way," the *dharma*, submission (*Islam*), or some other conception – just as they do not usually speak of their way of life as a "morality" or thinking about that way of life as "ethics" (but, maybe, law, philosophy, or theology). The problem is that the term "religion" has to pick out similarities among the bewildering differences among "religions" and yet not blind one to those differences. And, further, it must clarify how a "religious ethics" is distinctive from a nonreligious or antireligious

10 Another reason we adopt a hermeneutical method in religious ethics is because the activity of interpretation can take many forms – formal treatises, ritual practices, symbolic and narrative forms, etc. – and thereby elides the simple distinction between thinking and practice.

11 For a recent discussion of the problem see Schilbrack, K. (2013). What isn't religion? In: *Journal of Religion* 93 (3): 291–318.

ethics. What the traditions, beliefs, communities, and practices examined in this book seem to share is that *they provide ways for a community of human beings to get access to, empowerment by, and orientation from something(s) believed or experienced to be ultimately real and ultimately important and related to but not isolated from other domain(s) of meaning and reality*. So, religion, we contend, is (i) about what is ultimately important and real (the sacred or divine), (ii) which some group of people or a community (iii) seek access to, empowerment by, and orientation from (iv) for the sake of the proper conduct of life, that is, their moral existence, within (v) interrelated forms or realms of reality, including alternate worlds.¹² This definition of religion is an abstraction, a rational summary (we might say), based on the world's actual religions. No one is "religious" in this general sense. One is a German Catholic Christian, a Thai Buddhist, a Hindu from Mumbai, or an American Pentecostal living in Brazil, and so on. Recall the banner quote for this book taken from Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834 CE), the great nineteenth century theologian and philosopher of religion and ethics: "In the religions you are to discover religion."¹³ "Religion" is, again, a construct of the scholar derived, we hold, from engaging actual religions, their histories, and sources. One needs the idea of "religion" in order to identify, relate, contrast, and evaluate the religions. And the same is true about the idea of "ethics."

Religion is about what is ultimately *important* to persons or some community of people and so what they value the most; religion has metaphysical and empirical qualities as well because it claims to be about what is ultimately *real*; existentially and socially any religion seeks access and empowerment from

12 We are mindful that the religions hold different ideas about what is "*real*." For instance, speaking of *nirvāṇa* in Buddhism as "*real*" might seem to be a category mistake. Buddhists generally hold that the condition of *nirvāṇa* is anātman ("not-self" or "no-thing-ness") and hence not "*real*" as a substance, body, individual, and even material objects arise through dependent generation and therefore have no objective or permanent "essence." It is an extinguishing or "blowing out" of desire that leads to a state free from conditioned reality – a liberation. Granting that point, we use the term "*real*" analogically in our definition of religion and realize that the metaphysical commitments about the nature of "*reality*" of the religions vary in profound ways. The point of using "*real*" in this analogical sense is that even for Buddhists *nirvāṇa* is not a fiction or imaginary construct but is the inner truth of all things and hence "*real*" as we use the term. By a "*world*" we mean any determinate, bounded realm of meanings. The idea of living in and between multiple worlds is actually a common feature of human life. In addition to everyday reality marked by cause and effect, there are worlds of "play," imagination, art, deep affections, love, and the sublime that intersect with the everyday world. For the idea of religion and ethics as involving a movement between "*worlds*," see Schweiker, W. (2004). *Theological Ethics and Global Dynamics: In The Time of Many Worlds*. Oxford: Blackwell.

13 Schleiermacher, F. (1988 [1799]). *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers* (trans. R. Crouter), 190. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. For an excellent account of the major theories of religion see Pals, D.L. (2014). *Nine Theories of Religion* (Third Edition). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

what is sacred or divine as ultimately important, empowering, and real for the conduct of life. What is more, religion is deeply personal and yet also fundamentally social in character. Rituals, prayer, and sacraments have these aspects as do religious forms of thinking, reading, and writing. And the religious life entails a movement between the world here and now and some other reality, some “alternate or counterworld,” even if that world is found to be the ultimate truth of the “here and now.” Notice: something can be real and yet not ultimately important or even ultimately real for the conduct of life (say, the runs scored in the sixth inning of a recent White Sox baseball game); someone might have an experience that is ultimately important for them and yet not be presently real (say, a dream, vision, utopia, or a nightmare) in a conventional sense; one might acknowledge that something is ultimately important and real for others, and nevertheless not be empowered by it (how one might view some other religion). In each of these cases, that thing or experience would not be religious in terms of our definition even though they are social and personal in character.

Of course, it is popular to think that the religious are just about subjective experiences or that religious beliefs are psychological projections or ideologies. Yet for the religious person that is not the case. The proper conduct of life from a religious perspective requires *access* to, *empowerment* by, and *orientation* from and toward what is ultimately important and real and it takes place within some community of coreligionists. Religions differ in terms of how importance and reality are conceived, how to access the divine or sacred and be rightly empowered, and how life ought to be conducted by persons and communities. They also differ in terms of how they understand the “reality” within which human life takes place and how the movement between “worlds” happens. Most religions hold that there are multiple realities intersecting in human existence, some await a final coming of a divine judgment day that will end reality as we now know it, and still others teach that unseen and divine realities in fact surround and support our daily lives and which only the faithful perceive and know.

We can now say that by “religious ethics” we mean *the ethical study of the moral convictions of a religion and the comparison and assessment of different religions’ moral convictions for the sake of orienting life, religiously and morally*. This is to admit that religious ethics is the labor of the scholar or an adherent within a community or those who live outside of it. How to undertake such work?

Method in Religious Ethics

This book is about the *meaning* and *method* of religious ethics. We have been writing so far about the *meaning* of religious ethics and we will return to that topic later. In thinking about the challenges posed to the study of the moral convictions

of the religions, we have been naturally led to the question of how one can and should study, compare, define, and assess the moral convictions of various religions let alone undertake constructive religious ethical thinking. The question of *method* is actually related to the first two aims of the book noted previously and how this book differs from other approaches. What do we mean?

Recall that two aims of the book were, first, to define the *meaning* of “religious ethics” as a discipline of inquiry of interest to anyone who asks about the relation between “religion” and “morality,” and, second, to explore exemplary convictions of religious traditions in such a way that the *method* of religious ethics is developed and clarified. In order to accomplish these aims, the book develops an account of ethical thinking that is keyed to basic tensions, or *aporias*, widely seen to characterize human existence and how the moral outlooks of different religions articulate and respond to them. This assumes, and it will have to be demonstrated, that these “tensions” are somehow constitutive features of human existence as it is known the world over and throughout history. The experiences of these tensions provide the analogical structure to religious ethics rooted in the dynamic character of moral understanding within religious traditions. The five experiences of the tensions in human existence are (i) blindness and insight, (ii) good and evil, (iii) perplexity and wisdom, (iv) freedom and bondage, and (v) truth and illusion. These tensions structure the five dimensions of religious ethics. To be sure, other scholars might isolate other tensions or perplexity. We have found that these five enable us to give a coherent and yet supple account of religious ethics (see diagram that follows).

Our contention is that the religions thrive on tensions, perplexities or *aporias*, in human existence rather than trying to resolve or do away with them as many forms of theology and philosophy often seek to do. The religions, in our judgment, try to render these tensions productive rather than destructive in human life, to make human life flourish in deeper and more profound ways. Comparison and judgment across traditions are possible because of the analogical nature of human thinking, that is, the human capacity to grasp similarities in differences and differences in similarities.¹⁴ As noted, five “tensions” found in the religions themselves are used to structure this book; they set the framework for analogical ethical thinking, religious or not. And they give rise to five dimensions of religious ethics (descriptive, normative, practical, fundamental, metaethical).

By considering these features of experience adduced from the study of the religions, the book presents the method of religious ethics in terms of the five basic dimensions of thought each of which is treated in a chapter: descriptions

14 Although we will explore human moral capacities later in the book, it is not our task to establish empirically, scientifically, or metaphysically the grounds for the human ability to engage in analogical thinking. We take that as a given fact and one that is found in every human being. See Yearley, L.H. (1990). *Mencius and Aquinas: Theories of Virtue and Conceptions of Courage*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press and Tracy, D. (1981). *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism*. New York: Crossroad.

of moral situations (Chapter 2); normative judgments about the basic, moral, and transcendent goods of human life (Chapter 3); the complexity of practical decision making (Chapter 4); the meaning of free and responsible human action (Chapter 5); and the truth status of moral judgments (Chapter 6). In this way the book provides its readers with a broad array of classic religious texts and descriptions of religious practices as well as a method to engage these critically and constructively, sensitive to the highest ideals and deepest failures of religious pursuits. Figure 1.1 can serve as a guide to the chapters to follow:

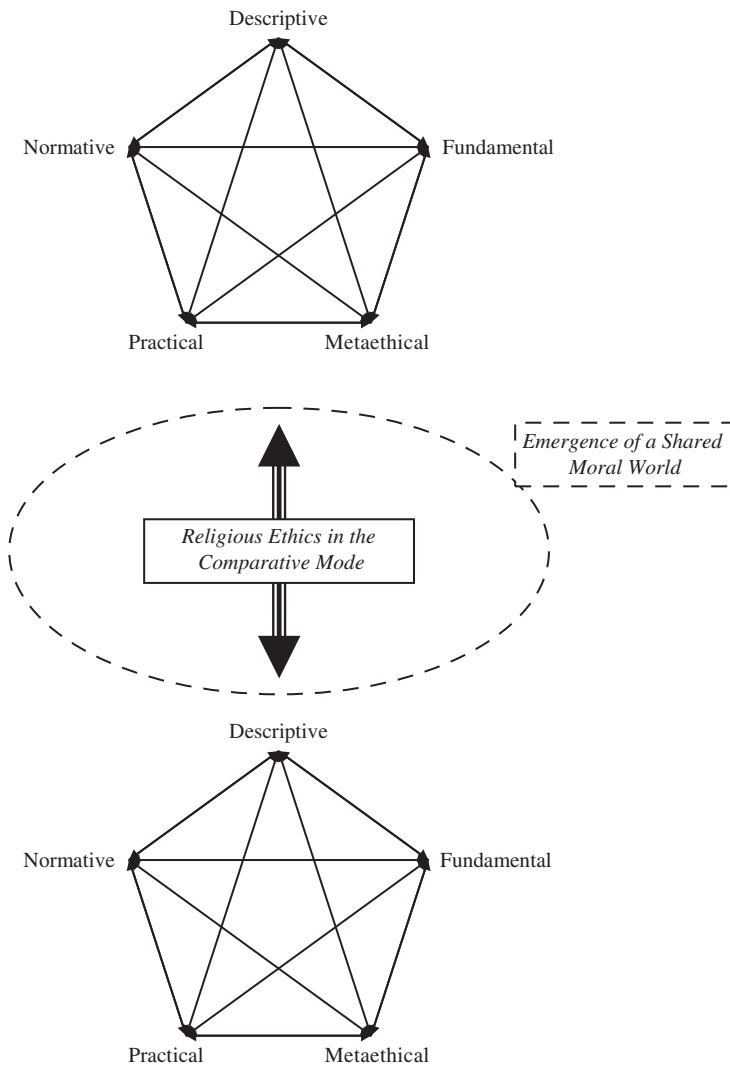


Figure 1.1 The Dimensions of Religious Ethics.

The remainder of this book makes good on the promise that these experiences and the dimensions of thinking provide a coherent, analogical, and nonreductionist account of religious ethics. It is important that the various dimensions of religious ethics be conceived in their *mutual interactions* rather than ordered into some hierarchy. Religious and moral reflection moves in and through and back and forth among these dimensions rather than ticking off answers to one and then turning in a deductive fashion to the next dimension. This is why religious ethics is a *hermeneutical* task. Like the Greek god *Hermes*, one seeks to convey meaning by crossing over and through different domains of existence. It is a movement among “worlds”: realms of meaning, value, practical action, judgment, and community. The *method* of religious ethics seeks to articulate the complexity of experience while also providing a coherent way of thinking about moral problems and responsibilities. Ironically, the mere ordering of the chapters of the book can give the wrong impression about its argument. Although there is not a straight line of argument, the book does reference other chapters so the whole may be understood. We encourage readers to begin with any chapter they like and then move between them. That course of reading is more in the spirit of the method of religious ethics presented in the chapters to follow than assuming that there is a straight line of argument chapter to chapter.

In terms of moral theory, the book is making a specific and even radical point. As noted previously, ancient and modern theories of ethics tried to isolate one basic and defining feature of “morality” and then to organize ethical thinking with reference to it. From Aristotle’s ideas about “happiness” and “virtue” to Kantian theories of duty and also utilitarian ideas about the greatest good, these positions, we can now say, were, in terms of method, *unidimensional*. The contention of this book, conversely, is that if one takes seriously the resources of the religions about how to explore, articulate, and orient human life, a more complex picture of morality and ethics emerges, a *multidimensional* one. By presenting a method for religious ethics, we are proposing a conception of morality and moral thinking that clarifies the profound contribution of the religions to ethics, even while this approach to religious ethics aims to provide a way to clarify and to assess the moral convictions of the religions. As noted in the Introduction, we enter a hermeneutical or interpretive circle. The aim is to show the need to enter that circle but also how it is neither vicious nor self-validating.

This point about moral theory returns us in a new light to the third and most contested aim of this book. Recall that the third purpose of this book is to enable people in our global times to think intelligently and clearly about religious outlooks on life and how they can, may, and must be lived in ways that respect and enhance, rather than demean and destroy, the integrity of life. We will have more to say about the idea of the “*integrity of life*” in Chapter 7, the book’s conclusion. The lives of creatures, and, perhaps, especially moral creatures, make a demand for fulfillment; integrity denotes both the demand and a kind of completion or fulfillment. Yet if the approach to religious ethics developed in the pages of this volume is correct, and we certainly believe that it is, then two things follow. First,

we will have identified an analogous structure of moral thinking across the religions and in doing so exposed the religions to wisdom found in other traditions even while overcoming the widespread idea that somehow one cannot compare moral convictions. We will have identified a structure and dynamics of thinking from within the religions and thereby avoided the frequent tactic of applying theories to the religions. In a word, we will have shown how the religions contribute to the *method* and *meaning* of moral reflection. Second, the approach to religious ethics developed in the book will also mean that religious adherents and nonreligious people as well have the grounds and the reasons to assess and even reconstruct their moral convictions in ways that respect and enhance the integrity of life. The book hopes to show how the religions can be sources of moral wisdom open to anyone in our global age even while the religions must be open to ethical criticism and revision in terms of the way their moral convictions are understood and lived. In this way, the book seeks to intervene within religious life in an age of global human interaction and endangerment.

Contents

The chapters that follow move in and through the dimensions of religious ethics attentive to the tensions found in human life. In each chapter, we place examples from Christian moral thinking and practice in conversation with examples of the moral thinking in other religious traditions. It should be clear, given our approach to the meaning and method of religious ethics, that we do not intend that the tradition illustrated in the chapter be taken as more focused on the dimension of ethics explored than any other dimension. For instance, just because Igbo religion is placed in conversation with Christian ethics in order to explore the practical dimension of religious ethics, or Buddhist religion to illustrate the metaethical dimension, does not mean that Igbo life is more focused on practical decision making than any other dimension of ethics or that somehow Buddhists are not concerned with the practical life. Our approach means that religious ethics is multidimensional and so is each religious tradition from which ethical wisdom can be drawn. Moreover, we link the traditions under discussion in a chapter to prior and subsequent dimensions and traditions we explore.

Chapter 2: Blindness and Insight takes up the central interpretive question that confronts religious people living in a changing world. How do we best describe the reality that confronts us? This question arises from the fact that human life is lived in the tension between blindness and insight about one's moral situation and true knowledge about reality. Here we seek to unfold what we mean by the *descriptive dimension* of moral thinking, and to do so we offer readers a selection of religious texts and practices that provide various answers to this question. For example, one might look to the *Qur'ān* to answer the question, "If Allah is the creator of the world and all life within it, how do we best describe the pervasive pursuit of material goods and pleasures among people

worldwide?” Or we might look to the teaching of the Buddha in the *Dhammapada* to answer the question, “To what do we attribute the suffering in this world? Why do people seem constantly in a state of dissatisfaction?” In each of these questions, we present different religious readings of the human condition and our various attempts to respond to its challenges.

In Chapter 3: Good, Evil, and Beyond, we address the question of what norms and values ought to guide human life and so the *normative dimension* of religious ethics. Each religion asks basic questions about what human beings ought to pursue, what difference there is between transcendent goods and moral goods, and what principles or rules ought to govern our life together. But this dimension of reflection too is rooted in a tension within human existence between good and evil, broadly conceived, and what is beyond good and evil. For example, one might examine the revelation of God to the people of Israel in the form of “law” (*Torah*). What basic values do the commandments of God seek to protect? How do these laws function to facilitate the moral growth of individuals and a peaceful life for the community? Or one might examine the African practice of palaver, a kind of community discernment through the back and forth exchange of pertinent moral observations, through which the religious group mediates the values of past generations to address present problems. Frequently, the content of these values depends on the deployment of certain sources for moral judgment, which themselves require some account for why these sources (such as sacred texts or guidance from religious authorities in particular traditions) ought to be normative rather than other sources.

Chapter 4: Perplexity and Wisdom addresses the difficulties that each religious tradition faces with respect to its patterns of practical reasoning about actual moral problems. There is a *practical dimension* in religious ethics. Human life is marked by the tension between perplexity and the search for wisdom, that is, the capacity to discern and decide the fitting thing to do in a specific situation. Just because one has gained clarity about the problems that confront someone or the values we ought to embody in our life together does not mean that one has adequately addressed the problem of how to act here and now. How do religious traditions think about what constitutes a proper moral response to difficult moral issues? For example, when confronting unplanned pregnancy due to rape or incest, how do Buddhist and Christian responses illustrate different ways of respecting and enhancing basic goods of bodily and social life? Even within a single religious tradition we are often able to discern different patterns of practical or case-based moral reasoning. Although religious traditions often draw moral thinking into a casuistic mode, the practical dimension remains a central consideration for addressing moral problems in faithful yet creative ways.

All of the major religious traditions of the world would agree that talk of distinctly moral responses to situations, or the imputation of blame for poor decisions, makes no sense if people are not, in some sense, free to act. And yet every religious tradition probes and seeks to respond to human moral failure, in, say, weakness of the will, sin, or craving. The problem arises when one

begins to acknowledge that the demands and constraints upon one's freedom go hand in hand with the recognition that one is part of a broader reality that one did not create for oneself. Likewise, religions seek to communicate the means to free people from their bondage to powers operative within human life and on human life, powers like demons, sin, or craving, to name a few. Religions differ in their account of the meaning and limits of freedom and bondage, including questions about the proper role of authority in educating people in responsible exercises of freedom.

Chapter 5: Freedom and Bondage, presents religious texts and accounts of moral agency that illuminate these differences. How do religions understand the capacities and limitations of humans as moral actors, as agents? How do practices like religious reading or education in religious law train people in the responsible use of their freedom? How do religious traditions deal with difficult problems such as individual conscience while still respecting the inherited wisdom of a tradition? Confucian approaches to ritual and filial piety, noted previously, intend to cultivate in people a disposition to act freely out of respect for one's family and friends, out of duty to ancestors, and to ensure that people of well-formed character occupy positions of leadership. Similarly, Christian attempts to balance the education in the faith with the primacy of the individual conscience before God, as St. Paul writes, echo the same difficulties of forming character and virtue. These matters are part and parcel of the *fundamental dimension* of religious ethics; they are about what it means to be a moral agent within a religious outlook on life and reality.

Chapter 6: Truth and Illusion concerns the difficult problem of the truth of religious worldviews and the possibility of deception about what is good and true, one that people wrestle with constantly as they are confronted with an array of seemingly incommensurable moral traditions. The burden of this chapter will be to demonstrate that every student of religious ethics, as well as any religious practitioner, must cultivate a sensitive awareness of the ways that various sources of moral knowledge come together to form moral judgments. This means asking on what basis particular judgments by religious communities are rendered but also about the criteria used by various communities to evaluate claims to moral truth. For example, Buddhist insights into the nature of ultimate reality are mediated through teaching traditions constituted by a scholarly class of monks and nuns. Tradition and its authoritative interpretation are taken to be authentic sources of moral knowledge. However, the Buddha frequently stated that his teachings ought to be held up to scrutiny in one's own experience and one's own practices. In Christian thought the question of the truth of moral judgment is both a matter of revealed teaching and yet there are also convictions about natural moral knowledge available to all human beings. In other words, religious judgments about truth are as complex and reflexive as any judgment made in more avowedly secular branches of society. Religious ethics in its *metaethical dimension* addresses the question of the truth of moral convictions and judgments.

Chapter 7: The Point of Religious Ethics draws together the previous analysis in order to show how our approach to religious ethics enables scholars and adherents to understand the complexity of a religion's outlook on the moral life. Specifically, this chapter shows, with reference to Buddhism and Christianity, how the various dimensions of ethics interact and shape each other: how one decides to define the moral situation, for instance, is shaped by and also shapes what a religious outlook holds to be the standard of good and evil and an understanding of freedom and so on. This mutual, reflexive interaction of the dimensions of religious ethics provides not only a salient way to understand the moral outlooks of specific religions but also the means to show the importance and relevance of religious traditions for addressing current shared human and global moral issues. In order to demonstrate the point, we address moral issues comparatively from this hermeneutical multidimensional approach. The chapters thereby show in an exemplary way this approach to current moral problems.

Conclusion

The careful reader of this introduction has already learned two important things needed to proceed through the rest of the book. Unlike geometry, engineering, or the study of, say, Sanskrit, we come to moral questions in the normal course of life and always shaped in various ways by the communities of which we are a part. Some of those communities are the world's religions and they have shaped for good and for ill the moral convictions of untold billions of people throughout history. If we are naturally interested and involved in moral problems and challenges, then it is a short step to see that "religious ethics" can and should be the interest of everyone as well, and this is especially true in a postsecular age of global dynamics.

The second lesson of this chapter is that although moral questions and challenges are regular features of our lives, how one is best to think about them, that is, how to undertake the work of "ethics," is not so obvious. The study of "ethics" is at root about how to think carefully, coherently, and truthfully about the responsible orientation of personal and social conduct. The chapters that follow provide an account of religious ethics as the way to explore and assess the moral convictions of the religions. We have tried in this chapter to give a brief description of the situation of religious ethics and to begin to introduce the normative concepts, practical distinctions, claims about human moral thinking and agency in the structure of ethics, while also posing the question of the truth of our proposal. It is our hope that readers will find this account of the meaning and method of religious ethics a goad to their own engagement with the religions, but also, and more important, a helpful approach to their own moral and religious reflection.