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Religion, Ethics, and Storytelling

Human religiousness is defined by two opposing deep structures of human experience and imagination that shape the way stories are told, heard and interpreted. Moreover, our understanding of good and evil is defined by the kind of story we think we are in and the role we see ourselves playing in that story. The terms "sacred" and "holy," which have typically been used interchangeably, are proposed here as names for these opposing deep structures. The sacred defines the experience of those who share a common identity as "human" and see all others as profane and less (or less than) human. The sacred generates a morality expressed in narratives of mistrust and hostility toward the stranger. The experience of the holy, by contrast, generates an ethic which calls into question every sacred morality in order to transform it in the name of justice and compassion. An ethical story is one that questions sacred morality in the name of hospitality to the stranger and audacity on behalf of the stranger. The task of an ethic of the holy is not to replace the sacred morality of a society but to transform it by breaking down the divisions between the sacred and profane through narratives of hospitality to the stranger which affirm the human dignity of precisely those who do not share "my identity" and "my story."

Comparative Religious Ethics: A Narrative Approach to Global Ethics, Second Edition.
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Storytelling: from Comparative Ethics to Global Ethics

In April of 1968, Martin Luther King, Jr., often referred to as "the American Gandhi," went to Memphis to help black workers settle a garbage strike. At the time, this Baptist minister from the black church tradition was looking forward to spending the approaching Passover with Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. Heschel, who had marched with him in a civil rights protest at Selma, Alabama, three years earlier, had become a close friend and supporter. Unfortunately, King was not able to keep that engagement. Like Gandhi before him, on April 4, 1968, Martin Luther King, Jr., a man of non-violence, was violently assassinated. Another of King's friends, the Buddhist monk and anti-Vietnam war activist, Thich Nhat Hanh, whom King had nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize, received the news of his death while at an interreligious conference in New York City. Only the previous spring, King had officially come out against the Vietnam War, partly at the urging of Thich Nhat Hanh and Abraham Joshua Heschel. This occurred under the auspices of Clergy and Laymen Concerned about Vietnam, founded by Heschel, John Bennett, and Richard Neuhaus. Now, he who had called for an end to hatred, violence and war was dead. But the spiritual and ethical vision he shared with his friends, across religions and cultures, is not. It is alive and well.

Our task in this book is to understand how a Christian minister, a Jewish rabbi, and a Buddhist monk, all inspired by a Hindu "Mahatma" (Great Soul), Mohandas K. Gandhi, were able to share a common ethical vision of non-violence while maintaining their respective religious identities. We shall do so while taking into account important questions concerning this ethic raised by the Muslim Malcolm X and the feminist voices of Rosemary Ruether (Christian) and Joanna Macy (Buddhist). Out of the dialogue among them we believe an important spiritual and ethical path for a global ethic is emerging. It is what John Dunne calls "the way of all the earth" – a biblical phrase that could also be translated "the way of all flesh" or the way of all mortal beings.

We live in a developing global civilization made up of many religions and cultures interconnected by mass media, international transportation, international corporations, and the internet. No longer can any person, country, or religion be an island: we are more and more interdependent. The twentieth century began with great hopes that science and technology would usher in a secular age of rationality, peace, and progress. Instead, it ushered in an age of apocalyptic nightmares – an age of nationalism, racism and global conflict leading to two world wars and an estimated 100 000 000 deaths. Science and technology, it seems, were better at creating instruments of mass destruction, like the gas chambers of Auschwitz and the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, than the instruments of peace. The question that hangs over our heads is whether the next century (indeed the next millennium) will bring more of the same, or whether diverse religions and cultures will find ways to build bridges to an era of peace. It remains an open question whether the religions of the world will be part of the problem or part of the solution.

In addressing this question we are, moreover, faced with the serious challenge of cultural and ethical relativism. Are religions and cultures so different from one another that all their interactions inevitably result in conflict and misunderstanding? Are they so

different from each other that no ethical consensus can be reached? The study of ethics must be more than an "objective" survey of abstract theories taught in a noncommittal fashion. It ought to convey the wisdom one generation has to pass on to the next. To leave the next generation with no wisdom in an age as dangerous as ours is to create a cynical generation that believes there are no standards and so one view of life is thought to be as good as another. The wisdom that has come to birth in our time, we are convinced, is that which has emerged in response to the atrocities of World War II, the indignities of racism, sexism and colonialism everywhere, and the violation of our environment by modern scientific/technological civilization. What the dangers of our time call for is an interreligious and international strategy for turning around our science and technology, protecting the human dignity of all peoples, and restoring the ecology of our mother earth. The study of comparative religious ethics has an important role to play in addressing these issues through forging a global ethic.

The answers we seek, however, lie not so much in theories as in the life stories of extraordinary persons who have wrestled with questions of justice, non-violence, and ecological well-being in an age of racism, sexism, religious prejudice, nationalism, colonialism, terrorism, and nuclear war. Our story picks out a thread of cross-cultural or global conversation from the human drama of history that begins with the Russian novelist Tolstoy (1828–1910) who in turn influenced Gandhi (1869–1948) who in turn influenced a generation that includes Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929–1968), Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907–1972), Thich Nhat Hanh (1926–), and Malcolm X (1925–1965). King, a Baptist minister, drew on Gandhi's Hinduism to launch the civil rights movement and protest the Vietnam War. Heschel, a Hasidic Jew, marched with King and was himself a leader in the protest against the Vietnam War. King nominated the Buddhist Thich Nhat Hanh for the Nobel Peace Prize for his non-violent struggles against the Vietnam War. And of course, Malcolm X argued with King about the merits of non-violence even as he moved closer to King after his conversion to traditional Islam.

Out of these lives (and the lives of others we cannot explore here), we believe, has emerged an interreligious global ethic of human dignity, human rights and human liberation. Their individual lives of tireless struggle for human dignity and human rights, their common involvement in issues of justice, war, and peace, and their involvement in each other's lives and religions, we contend, demonstrates that not only can a shared ethic emerge, it is emerging among people of different religions and cultures. There is a Jewish tradition that says that God always sees to it that there are 36 righteous persons hidden in the world for whose sake God spares the world, despite rampant evil. This book is not so much about ethical theories as it is about such persons – individuals whose holiness has changed, and continues to change, the world. It is about them and about the religious stories and spiritual practices that sustain them.

There are many ways to study religious ethics comparatively. One approach would be to study moralities empirically through comparative ethnography – an *anthropological*, purely descriptive, study of moral practices in different communities, which would contrast similarities and differences. A related approach would require doing an *historical* study of the changes in moral practices that have evolved in different religions and cultures. Or we could take a *philosophical* approach. This could be descriptive,

comparing ethical theories across cultures, or else prescriptive, attempting to formulate theoretically a universal ethic of what we ought to do, and advocating that it be shared by all religions and cultures. All of these are important to do, and we will, in some modest degree, draw on most of them. However, our main approach will take us in a different direction.

Our approach will be through *comparative storytelling* and *comparative spirituality* in response to some of the defining events of the twentieth century – the struggle against colonialism, racism, sexism, terrorism, and the human capacity to inflict mass death revealed at Auschwitz and Hiroshima. We will not be looking to the philosophers and legal experts for guidance, but to the stories of heroes and saints, both ancient and postmodern; those whose heroism and holiness have shaped and continue to shape each tradition. So we will look to stories of ancient figures like Gilgamesh, Socrates, Moses, Muhammad, Jesus, Arjuna, and Siddhartha (the Buddha) and also to contemporary figures like Abraham Joshua Heschel, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., Gandhi, and Thich Nhat Hanh. And we shall seek to recover the missing voices of women through the lives of Rosemary Ruether and Joanna Macy.

There are several assumptions and historical factors that shape this approach. First, the primary way in which ethical insights occur and are communicated within religious traditions is through story and ritual rather than through theory. Our narrative approach to ethics is founded on the assumption that *our understanding of good and evil is primarily shaped by the kind of story we think we are in and the role we see ourselves playing in that story.* While every religious tradition tends to develop experts on settling complex ethical issues, that kind of ethics is necessarily the activity of a religious and intellectual elite. Their activities do not reflect the way ethics functions for the typical believer. Philosophical and legal expertise do play an important role in every tradition, but not the most important role. It is misleading to try to understand the role of religion in morality by putting the emphasis on experts. For most religious traditions, philosophical and/or legal reason, unaided by story and ritual, is incapable of leading to an understanding of what is good and what we ought to do. The primary and most pervasive ways religious traditions shape ethical behavior are through storytelling and spiritual practices. Storytelling shapes the ethical imagination of its members, especially through stories of heroes and saints. Spirituality shapes the character of its members through ritual activities such as worship, prayer, meditation, fasting, pilgrimage, etc., aimed at bringing about a transformation in individual and communal identity and action. These aspects of religious ethics will be our focus, for the deciding factor in religious ethics is not good arguments (although they are important) but spiritual transformation.

Second, living in a global civilization after Auschwitz and Hiroshima; we live in an interconnected world where people are often deeply shaped not only by the stories of their own traditions but also by those of others – for example, Gandhi's ethical views were shaped not only by his own Hinduism but by Tolstoy's writings on Jesus' *Sermon on the Mount* and King's ethical views were deeply shaped by Gandhi's insights into the Hindu scripture, the *Bhagavad Gita*. Gandhi did not become a Christian and King did not become a Hindu, but in each case their own religious identity was deeply influenced by the other. Martin Luther King, Jr. was a different kind of Christian

because of Gandhi and Gandhi was a different kind of Hindu because of Tolstoy. Gandhi and King provide us with a model for doing comparative religious ethics as a genuine quest to discover wisdom not only in one's own tradition but in that of others. In this book, you are invited to engage in such a quest.

Third, while different religious traditions do sometimes offer unique perspectives on common problems, more often than not the dividing line between people on ethical issues is not between people of different religions but between people within the same religious tradition. A corollary of this is that there is no one Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jewish, or Islamic position on ethical issues and that very often people of different religions find themselves allied with each other against others in their own tradition – this is certainly the case with abortion today, for example. Our goal, then, is not to ask what is the Buddhist or Christian position on this or that (a misleading question) but rather, how might the stories of Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, etc. shape our ethical imagination when dealing with a particular problem and how might the spiritual practices of each help to transform us into better human beings. In this book we will explore the life stories of Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., and other contemporary figures, in order to understand how story and spirituality can inspire lives committed to social justice and the alleviation of suffering in our technologically-oriented global civilization.

Our task will be to pass over through sympathetic imagination into the stories of diverse religions and religious figures, see the world and the problems we face through these stories and their lives, and then return to our starting point with new ethical insight as a consequence of this exercise. We shall seek to do what Martin Luther King, Jr. did when he passed over into Gandhi's Hinduism and the story of the Bhagavad Gita, only to come back to his own Christian Baptist heritage with new insight into the Sermon on the Mount and how it could be used to deal with racism non-violently. In this process of seeing the world through the stories of others, we shall pay attention to certain narrative themes that have deeply influenced more than one religion and culture. We shall explore, for instance, the oldest of all epics, the story of Gilgamesh, as a model for two of the most pervasive themes of religious narrative: (1) wrestling with the stranger and (2) the quest for an answer to the problems of old age, sickness, and death. Out of these two themes a number of key issues for narrative ethics after Auschwitz and Hiroshima will be explored, especially those of obedience vs. audacity in relation to authority, and hostility vs. hospitality in relation to the stranger. We will find these to be organizing themes for many, but not all, of the stories we will encounter in our journey through the world's religions.

This book is an example of the very narrative themes we shall discover and explore. That is, our task is the common human task of wrestling with the stranger as we engage in a quest to find answers to the problems of old age, sickness, and death – answers that enable us to relate to the stranger with justice and compassion. We shall strive to understand how others see life and death and how their stories either encourage or discourage hospitality to the stranger. We shall strive to come to understand the meaning of good and evil through the stories of strangers from other religions and cultures as well as our own (wherever we find ourselves beginning). And we shall look for convergences and divergences that might be used to construct a

global ethic that could encourage peace and justice among religions and cultures in the third millennium.

Finally, our approach will be contemporary, applied, and normative. We shall be reflecting on the ethical challenges presented by science, technology, and human diversity in the contemporary world. And we shall be seeking a normative interreligious and cross-cultural or global ethic that will help us decide what we ought to do about the challenges we face. In this sense, we do not pretend to have written a neutral text. Instead we seek to persuade you of the importance of the "the way of all the earth" and the ethic of interdependence and audacity we see emerging out of the spirituality of passing over and coming back exemplified in the lives of Gandhi, King, and others, especially their feminist critics who may provide the integrating bridge to a postmodern global ethic. Yet we hope to do this not be dictating to you but by challenging you to make your own journey and arrive at your own insights.

We begin this journey by providing a framework in the two chapters of Part I. In this chapter, we will examine what we mean by terms like "religion," "ethics," "morality," and how these terms are related to storytelling as a mode of ethical reflection. In Chapter 2 we shall turn to the stories of Auschwitz and Hiroshima that have shaped the religious and ethical imagination of human beings on a global scale in the twentieth century. And we shall trace the emergence of a global ethic of human dignity, human rights, and human liberation articulated through the lives of Tolstoy, Gandhi, and Martin Luther King, Jr., and others in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

In Part II (Chapters 3 through 9) we will engage in a historical survey that will allow us to pass over into some of the key stories and practices (myths and rituals) of the great world religions that are available to shape and inspire our ethical imaginations. In successive chapters we will look at the world's great religious traditions from three narrative perspectives. We shall look at the classical cosmic story (or stories) that has shaped the worldview of each religious tradition. We will also study a formative narrative, a key story that has deeply shaped each tradition, such as the life of the Buddha or the life of Jesus. And then we examine the life story of a twentieth-century individual who has brought these ancient stories to life in new and ethically transformative ways through his/her own spirituality and actions. In each case we shall be looking at the life story of someone, like Gandhi or Martin Luther King, Jr., whose commitments to justice and compassion have not only made them models of the ethical life but whose lives have typically had a transformative influence on how that tradition interprets the requirements of an ethical life in the world we live in today. Finally, beginning with Chapter 5, each chapter will end with "comparative reflections" which will suggest some of the key ethical issues that emerge from comparing these lives. In our comparative reflections we will be taking sides on some of these issues. We do so not to dictate the conclusions you must come to but to point out to you important areas of creative tension between these religious social activists we are studying and invite you to the debate. Consequently, each chapter will end with some possible questions for further discussion.

In Part III, we shall, in Chapter 10, consider the missing voices of women in the world's religions and how the inclusion of their voices may alter comparative religious ethics by introducing themes of interdependence and ecology. For the ancient history

of the world's religions is dominated by male heroes and saints. These religions seem to downplay the role of women in the religious and ethical life. The contemporary inclusion of women's voices is having a transformative impact on virtually all religious traditions. In Chapter 11, the concluding chapter, we will review our journey and suggest that it is possible to see in contemporary eco-feminism a reconciling bridge between Eastern and Western ethical traditions. Drawing on the lives we have studied – of the men and women who have passed over into other religions and cultures and come back with new insight into their own – we shall suggest the contours of the global ethic of eco-justice we see emerging in our time. Our hope is that the journey we are taking, and the strangers we wrestle with along the way, will help us to discover what they discovered, namely, "the way of all the earth" – an ecological ethic of human dignity and human liberation appropriate for an emerging global civilization.

Religion: the Sacred and the Holy

Human destiny and the sacred

Life, it has been said, is just a bowl full of stories. As far back as we can see into the misty recesses of time and the human adventure, human beings have been not only story-tellers but story dwellers. Their stories coursed through their veins and sinews and came to expression in song and dance. To this very day human beings see and understand the world through the lenses of their stories. And for most of human history the primary stories that have inspired the human imagination and human behavior have been the great religious stories. To understand the nature of religion, the types of religious story and their relation to ethics is our goal in this chapter.

Let's suppose that we could somehow transport ourselves back to the city of Rome in the first century. Why are we interested in that time and place? Because our word "religion" was invented by the Romans, therefore understanding what they meant by it should help us understand our topic. So imagine yourself now walking down a street in Rome in the first century. Indeed, let us suppose that you are a reporter doing a newspaper article on Roman religious behavior. You approach a small group of Romans on a street corner and you ask them: "What religion are you?" – they look at you a bit oddly, as if you are speaking a foreign language (which of course you are – Latin). They understand the individual words you used but the phrasing is awkward. People don't normally use the words the way you are using them. Some give you blank stares while others just look puzzled. Frustrated, you try rephrasing your question and ask: "Are you religious?" Suddenly their faces light up, they smile and one of them says "Of course, isn't everyone?"

In first-century Rome, with very few exceptions, people didn't belong to a religion as a distinct and exclusive community. Rather, being religious was the same as being part of one's culture. Our first-century respondents would probably continue their answer to your question something like this: "Am I religious? Of course I am. Isn't everyone? It's simply a matter of common sense. I respect all those powers of nature that govern my destiny. Therefore I worship all the gods and goddesses. It would be stupid not to.

If I am going to war I want the god of war on my side. It would be suicide to engage war without him on my side. So I perform the correct ritual sacrifices before going into battle. And if I am intent on pursuing an attractive marriage partner, I certainly want the goddess of love on my side. And needless to say if I am planting my crops I certainly want the goddess of fertility and the gods of the wind and rain on my side. I am not a complete idiot. Anything else would be stupid."

What does this tell us? For the ancient Romans, and nearly all other human beings in all places and all times throughout history, religion has been about what people hold sacred. To say that something is sacred is to say that it matters more than anything else. And what typically matters most to people is their destiny – living meaningful and secure lives, avoiding suffering, and transcending death. Their response is embodied in a way of life meant to address these issues. Everywhere in the world, what people seem to hold most sacred is their way of life and the powers they believe make such a life possible.

Although there are other possibilities, the word "religion" is most likely derived from the Latin *religare* which means, "to tie or bind." It expresses our sense of being "tied and bound" by relations of obligation to whatever powers we believe govern our destiny and secure our way of life – whether these powers be natural or supernatural, personal or impersonal, one or many. For ancient peoples everywhere, the powers they believed governed their destiny were the forces of nature. Why? Because, on the one hand, the forces of nature were experienced as that awesome overwhelming collection of powers that surround human beings, providing them with life and all the good things of life (food, clothing, shelter, etc.) and, on the other hand, these same powers could turn on human beings and destroy them quite capriciously, through earthquakes, storms, and floods, etc. Therefore, the forces of nature evoked in human beings the ambivalent feelings of fascination and dread. Rudolf Otto, the great early-twentieth-century pioneer of comparative religions, argued that the presence of these two ambivalent emotions is a sure sign that you are in the presence of the sacred. Their presence is a defining mark of religious experience across cultures. They are the emotions that are elicited by the uncanny experience of being in the presence of that power or those powers which one believes have the ability to determine one's destiny – whether one lives or dies and beyond that how well one lives and dies.

Myth and ritual

We can say then, that whatever powers people believe govern their destiny will elicit a religious response. That is, it will inspire them "to tie or bind" themselves to these powers in relations of ritual obligation – a way of life that assures that these powers will be on their side. How do we know what our obligations to these powers are? Throughout history this knowledge has been communicated through myth and ritual. Our word "myth" comes from the Greek *mythos* which means "story." Myth, we could say, is a symbolic story about the origins and destiny of human beings and their world which relates them to whatever powers they believe ultimately govern their destiny and explains to them what these powers expect of them. Ritual is the symbolic enactment of these stories whereby they are passed on from one generation to the next.

Myth and ritual are typically tied to the major festivals or holy days of a religious tradition so that by celebrating a cycle of festivals spread throughout the year one comes to dwell in the stories that tell you who you are, where you came from, and where you are going. For example, Passover is one of the most important holy days in Judaism. At Passover, Jewish families gather for a meal at which the story of the Exodus, the liberation of the Jews from slavery in Egypt, is retold. The Passover Seder is not a literal reenactment of the Exodus but a symbolic reenactment. As the story is retold, certain foods are eaten to remind participants of what happened. Nevertheless, this symbolic reenactment is experienced as having the power to make one an actual participant in the original event of the Exodus. The distance between past and present is felt to dissolve and the events of the Exodus are felt to be "happening to me now."

Through participation in the Passover Seder, Jews experience who they are – a chosen people, called by the God of all creation to live justly and be a light (that is, example) to the nations, preparing for the messianic day when death will be overcome, justice will reign, and the heavens and the earth will be made new. In this way each Jew knows that his or her life is not trivial. On the contrary, each life has cosmic significance, helping to bring about the fulfillment of all things. In this way, the myth and ritual perform a religious function – that is, they "tie or bind" the life of the individual into a great cosmic drama that gives life meaning and purpose which is expressed in the Jewish way of life (*halacha*). Our example focused on Judaism, but what we said is true of the myths and rituals of all religions, whether Hinduism or Buddhism, Christianity or Islam, etc.

The dialectical tension between morality and ethics

If twentieth-century historian Rudolf Otto focused on the psychological aspects of religious experience (i.e. fascination and dread), another great historian of religion in the twentieth century Mircea Eliade showed that the experience of the sacred is always accompanied by a sense of sacred space articulated in myths and rituals about the origin of the sacred order of the cosmos. In his comparative studies of primal (tribal) and archaic (early urban) societies, Eliade noted that invariably their stories and rituals of creation functioned to explain how divine beings and/or sacred ancestors overcame the forces of chaos and created a sacred cosmic social order within which humans could safely dwell. These myths and rituals divided the world into two realms, the sacred and the profane – the sacred order of the cosmos in which one's people live and the profane realm of chaos which lurks beyond the boundaries of one's world and constantly threatens its sacred order.

Anthropologists tell us that the inhabitants of such sacred worlds tend to have names for themselves which mean "the human beings" while the identity of others remains a puzzle. All who live in "our" sacred order are human, the identity of all others (those who live on the other side of the mountain, for example) is open to question, for the stranger comes from the realm of chaos – their ritual patterns are different and these differences threaten the life-sustaining stability of "our" sacred order.

Eliade showed that around the world, ancient, pre-literate, or tribal societies imagined themselves to be living at the center of the cosmos. In such societies, to enter certain sacred places was to stand at the center of the world, the very place where,

at the beginning of time, the gods and ancestors brought things into being. Thus to stand in such a sacred place was to draw close the awesome power or powers that determine life, death, and human destiny. In such societies ritual and ethics are the same thing – the "right" way is the "rite" way – the way of ritual. The answer to the question – "Why do we do things the way we do?" is "Because in the beginning the gods and the ancestors did it this way, thus showing us the right (rite) way to be human." Therefore, for every activity in such a society – whether laying out a new village, building a hut or a canoe, or recognizing the transformation of a child into an adult – there is a ritual accompanied by a myth or story about how the sacred powers and ancestors established this practice in the beginning.

In such a world, society is not an arbitrarily-created human order, but a part of the divinely-created cosmic order. Society reflects the sacred order of the cosmos in miniature – it is the cosmos writ small. In such societies: "Is" = "Ought." The way things are done (as established by sacred powers and ancestors) is the way they ought to be done. The Latin root (*mos*, *mores*) from which we get our word "morality" means the "customs" of the people. In such societies the customs or mores are sacred and unchangeable: they are beyond question. To violate them is sacrilegious.

Morality is an inherent dimension of the sacred order of society. In large part, what gives a society social stability is the sense that its way of life is sacred and unchangeable. Moreover, every society seems to be ordered by some sense of the sacred, so that even modern "secular" or "non-religious" societies that do not explicitly appeal to established religious stories tend to exhibit a sacred morality. For the secular to be sacred seems like a contradiction in terms, but if we remember that we are talking about "ways of life" and that all "ways of life" are held sacred by their participants, then a "secular way of life" will also qualify as a way of life that is held sacred by those who live it. Sometimes, in order to recognize the presence of religion, we have to begin with the sense of sacred order expressed in a society's customs, even if, at first glance, the stories told to justify these customs seem quite non-religious or "secular." In this sense, there is a religious dimension to every morality no matter how secular or non-religious it appears.

For most Americans, to observe someone burning the American flag would be deeply offensive. An attack on the flag is an attack on what is sacred – what matters most to them. It is experienced as an attack on their way of life and the lives of those lost protecting the American way of life. To desecrate a cross would be equally offensive to most Christians. They would view it as impugning the saving power of Jesus Christ and the Christian way of life. Both of these are examples of things held to be sacred, even though on the face of it, one is "purely political" and the other is more obviously "religious" in the eyes of most. Things become even more complicated when we realize that different embodiments of a sense of the sacred can coalesce. Thus, for example, for many citizens America is sacred because they view it is a "Christian nation." But the two need not be mixed, for even Americans who do not think of themselves as "religious" are still likely to hold the American way of life as sacred, and therefore worthy of both living for and dying for. So we see that religion is about more than "the gods" – it is about whatever people hold sacred, especially their way of life. For them what is truly sacred is the highest good – that which provides them with

meaning even in the face of suffering and death so that they are willing to die for it and even to kill for it. Consequently, going to war to protect one's people's way of life is typically understood to be a sacred duty.

Everything we have said up to this point suggests that religion, morality, and society are different faces of a single reality – a society's way of life expressed in sacred customs. Indeed for one of the great founders of sociology, Emile Durkheim, religion is to be understood as a human response to the overwhelming (and therefore sacred) power of society upon which we depend for our existence. Without being fully conscious of the reason for their actions, he would say, tribal peoples revere their sacred ancestors or *totems* (both human and non-human) as symbols of the sacred order of their society. For Durkheim the singular purpose of religious myth is to sacralize society so that its customs can be considered sacred and bring social stability to human life.

Yet another of the great founders of sociology, Max Weber, argued that this is not the only social function of religion. Weber argued that while religion functioned much of the time to sanction the "routine order" of society (i.e. the sacred customs) as Durkheim claimed, still sometimes religion manifested the dramatic power to desacralize and disenchant society, and in so doing bring about dramatic social change. It does this by calling into question the supposed sacredness of the old order. Indeed the same religious tradition can at different times do both. Sometimes religion sacralizes society and sometimes it secularizes it. Thus Weber argued that Roman Catholic Christianity functioned to sacralize the social order of the Middle Ages while Protestant Christianity functioned to secularize that social order, contributing to the emergence of the modern secular society. Sometimes, says Weber, "charismatic" figures emerge in the history of religion, like Martin Luther, who began the Protestant Reformation in Christianity, who serve to destabilize and transform society. The term *secular* comes from the Latin, *saeculum* meaning "worldly". For Luther, it did not suggest "non-religious" but being religious in the world rather than in withdrawal from the world. Luther, who was once a monk living in a monastery apart from "the world," came to understand that he could leave the monastery and still be religious. One could have a "secular" vocation or calling from God. A baker or a blacksmith's work could be just a religious as that of a monk. In this sense, Luther gives a religious sense to the term secular.

Only with the emergence of modern sociology did the term secular become "secularized" and defined as meaning "non-religious." From our perspective, "secular" is a term that is always defined by either the sacred or the holy and is never strictly "non-religious." When "secular" defines a way of life that excludes religion and diminishes those who are religious we understand it to be expressing a sacred way of life that excludes or demeans the religious stranger. When the "secular" defines a way of life that is hospitable to all strangers (whether religious or non-religious) we understand the secular realm to be an expression of the experience of the holy. The French sociologist, Jacques Ellul, agrees with sociologists like Weber who see some forms of religion as secularizing, but argues that such sociologists are wrong to see secularization as permanently replacing the sacred and religion. Rather, the sacred is a permanent feature of all societies (even modern secular ones) and so must continually be desacralized or secularized in the name of the holy. In this text, we shall be using

the term "secular" in the religious sense of an expression of the holy unless we explicitly indicate its popular sociological meaning as "non-religious."

As we shall see in the chapters ahead, when Gandhi practices "soul force" or non-violent civil disobedience, he exemplifies the power of religion to secularize the sacred order of society in order to defend the dignity of the stranger; likewise, Martin Luther King, Jr. and the others we shall study. The Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh calls his Buddhist form of secularizaton "socially engaged Buddhism." For these figures, religion and the secular are two sides of the same coin – the holy desacralizes and so secularizes the sacred. For them secularizing society is a process of opening society to religious and cultural pluralism in order to protect the dignity of strangers.

While Ellul's view that the experience of the holy has the power to desacralize or secularize the sacred is shaped by his understanding of the biblical traditions, nevertheless his insight can be applied to other experiences of the holy across religions and cultures. He argues that in the ancient world people believed that they depended on the forces of nature for their existences and therefore treated these forces as sacred powers (i.e. as gods and goddesses) which governed the sacred order of society. Then ancient Judaism came along and began to desacralize the world, insisting that God alone (the creator of the universe) is holy. The prophets of Israel, such as Jeremiah in the sixth century BCE, insisted that this God demanded a life of holiness which called into question the sacred order of society in the name of justice for the widow, the orphan, and the stranger (those neglected by the sacred order of society). Ellul proposed, therefore, that we need to understand that the requirements of sacred morality are different than those of an ethic of the holy.

In a parallel fashion, we argue, (as we shall see in Chapter 6), that the Buddha (who lived in India about the same time as Jeremiah lived in ancient Israel), called into question the sacred order of the caste system and welcomed lower castes and the outcaste into his holy community (the *sangha*) as equal with persons from all higher castes. Some three centuries later, in ancient Greece, Socrates repeated this pattern with his "invention" of ethics as a category in Western philosophy. The Greek roots of our term "ethics" (*ethos, ethike*) like their Latin parallels (*mos, mores*) "morality" once meant the "customs" of the people – the sacred customs. However, after Socrates, ethics came to mean "the questioning of the sacred customs" by asking: *Is what people call "good" really good?* As we shall see (in Chapter 4), this is a dangerous question. Socrates was put on trial and executed for "impiety towards the gods" and "corrupting the youth" because he dared to question the sacred way of life of Athenian society.

The paradox of Socrates' criticism of the sacred morality of Athenian society was that it was rooted in religious experience – an alternative form of religious experience. Socrates insisted that he was neither irreligious nor an atheist. On the contrary he said he was commanded to doubt and to question by his own "daimon" or god-sent spirit. His daimon, he said, sent him as a "gadfly" to the citizens of Athens, to teach them to lead virtuous lives and seek justice. His goal was not to demean the Athenian way of life but to raise it to a higher level. As we shall see in Chapter 4, Socrates insisted that a good society can never be one which is only the "cosmos writ small" (mirroring its sacred order). It must also be the "human writ large" – where the measure of the human is an "Unseen Measure" – the Good.

The life and death of Socrates illustrates the tension between the sacred and the holy. Every society needs the stability provided by a sense of sacred order. But sometimes order is achieved in society at the expense of virtues such as justice. No society can be a good society which sacrifices justice for human beings in the name of sacred order. Morality need not simply be a mirror of sacred order. It can be transformed to meet the demands of the holy. The goal of an ethic shaped by the experience of the holy is not to destroy the morality of a society but to criticize and transform it, raising it to a new level, one that includes justice for even the least of its members. A society's customs, its morality, needs to reflect *both* a sense of order *and* of justice.

Socrates opposed "the way things are" (Is = Ought) with an understanding of the Good that transcends the sacred order of things and calls it into question (Is vs. Ought). His death in protest against unjust laws while respecting the need for law, as we shall see, became a model of civil disobedience for both Eastern and Western exemplars of the ethical life, like Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. It was both an act of respect for morality (the laws) and at the same time an ethical call to transform that morality in the name of justice. These three examples (Jeremiah, Buddha, and Socrates) offer us examples of a form of religious life that give rise to "ethics" as the questioning of sacred morality in the name of what we shall call "the holy" as opposed to the sacred – a holy reality (e.g. God, Buddhist Emptiness, the Unseen Measure) which in all three cases can neither be seen nor imaged.

Why do we wish to separate sacred moralities from various ethics of holiness? After all "sacred" and "holy," as well as "morality" and "ethics" are terms that generally have been used interchangeably as synonyms rather than as we are proposing (following the suggestion of Jacques Ellul) as opposites or antonyms. We do so to clarify the ambiguity surrounding the influence of religion on human behavior. How is it that most Christians in Nazi Germany, either actively or passively, supported Hitler's attempted annihilation of the Jews, while some felt their faith required them to oppose Hitler and rescue Jews? Or how is it that, in the southern United States in the middle of the twentieth century, both the proponents of segregation and the opponents of segregation (in the civil rights movement lead by Martin Luther King, Jr.) could each think of themselves as following the Christian way of life. The proponents of segregation interpreted the Christian story in such a way as to divide the world into sacred and profane spaces. Only whites were permitted full access to the sacred order of society, blacks were profane and permitted only in certain controlled areas (separate water fountains, separate bathrooms, separate entrances to buildings, etc.) The opponents of segregation interpreted the Christian story in exactly the opposite direction, as one that demanded the desacralization of sacred order in the name of all that is holy so as to bring about equality and justice. The histories of religions and cultures offer many such examples.

The distinction between the sacred and the holy is meant to express the idea that religious experiences are not all the same – the "sacred" and the "holy" name two categories of types of experiences (in each category the experiences are not necessarily all the same either but can be grouped together because they have similar functional impacts on society) that shape the narrative imagination in opposing directions, so that

the very same tradition and the very same stories can be interpreted very differently, encouraging opposing patterns of behavior. By separating the uses of "sacred" and "holy" (and, in a parallel manner, "morality" and "ethics") in this way we are saying that the collection of social behaviors that are generally labeled "religious" are not all religious in the same way. So we are arguing that it is very helpful to give separate meanings to terms that have been used interchangeably in order help us see and understand these differences.

Figure 1.1, the Characteristics of the Sacred and the Holy, outlines some of the key features of these opposing patterns of religious ways of life. In a sacred society all who are alike (for example, share a common ethnic identity) are the same – sacred and human. All strangers – that is, all who are different – are profane and less (or less than) human. The experience of the sacred sacralizes the finite order of the society, seeing a society's way of life as an expression of the sacred cosmic order of things. And what is sacred is held to be beyond question. The way things are in this sacred order is the way they ought to be (Is = Ought). A very different form of religious experience gives rise to the holy community. For the experience of the holy generates a human response to the sacred which calls it into question by insisting that ultimate truth and reality are radically different than this world and its sacred powers and sacred orders. Consequently, the holy encourages doubt and questioning. The way things are is not the way they ought to be and so the way things are must be called into question by the way things ought to be (Is vs. Ought).

The experience of the holy desacralizes and calls into question the sacredness of a way of life in three distinct ways – what Paul Tillich calls the mystical, prophetic, and secular-rational criticisms of the sacramental ("sacramental" is Tillich's term for what we are calling "the sacred"). There is a type of mysticism that criticizes the sacred metaphysically or ontologically, declaring that the holy is radically different or "wholly other" than this world and therefore cannot be identified with any finite thing. This occurs for instance when Buddhists declare that the highest spiritual realization, *nirvana*, is beyond description and is therefore best described in negative terms, as emptiness, nothingness and no-self. The prophetic criticizes the ethical danger of identifying the finite (e.g. one's particular way of life) as ultimate in being and value, for to do that is to reduce what "Ought" to be to what "Is." Such an identification leads to treating one's sacred way of life as beyond all criticism.

The power of the sacred lies, in great part, in its ability to surround itself with a sense of "taboo" that forbids all doubt and questioning, seeing such criticism as a sacrilege. Yet the experience of the holy, seems to have the capacity to evoke the audacity to doubt and question precisely what is "beyond question." Indeed, as Paul Tillich has argued, both mystical and prophetic criticism function this way. Moreover, by desacralizing the sacred, they also prepare the way for the secular-ethical critique of the irrationality of the sacred. This is the kind of critique the Greek philosopher, Socrates, engaged in when he asked if what people called the "good" or "virtue" really was good or virtuous or just. The seeming secularity of Socrates rational critique, we have suggested, is really rooted in an alternative kind of religious experience that demands doubt and questioning (we will explore this in more detail in Chapter 4). This kind of critique calls into question the demonic irrationality that allows religions and

Sacred Society	*Holy Community*
Center (ideal of identity) within itself	Center outside of itself in the stranger
Sameness = measure of the human	Difference = measure of the human
Hostility to the stranger	Hospitality to the stranger
Sacred is opposed to profane	Holy and secular are complementary
Sacralization of the finite cosmos/society, expressed in a sacred way of life	Desacralization or secularization of the finite in the name of the infinite – only the holy is holy: the world is not profane but secular
Cosmos writ small (sacred order)	Human writ large (dignity and justice)
Answers are absolute: answers imprison us in the finite	Questioning and doubt as measure of faith: we always have more questions than answers, and this keeps us open to the infinite
God/the holy in the image of self/in-group	Created in the image of a God/the Holy without image
Honor (morality defined by social status)	Dignity (ethics of equality and interdependence)
Hierarchical	Equality and interdependence
Morality	Ethics
Is = Ought The way things are is the way they ought to be	Is vs. Ought The way things ought to be calls into question the way things are
This-worldly	Other-worldly

"The sacred" and "the holy" name two tendencies at war in every person and in every community. The experience of the sacred encourages us to divide the world into sacred and profane, such that we see ourselves as human and all strangers as profane and less (or less than) human. The experience of the holy encourages us to break down that division and discover the humanity of the stranger. The first creates sacred societies, the second holy communities. The first tends to ethnocentricity; the second is anti-ethno centric. A sacred society sees the Ultimate (God, or Brahman, or however the Ultimate is named) in its own image and rejects all others (strangers) as less than human. A holy community, by contrast, sees all persons as created in the image of a holy that is without image (God, or Emptiness, or however named) and believes that to welcome the stranger or the outcast is to welcome the holy. The task of an ethic of the holy is not to eliminate the morality of a society, but to transform it by breaking down the divisions between the sacred and profane through narratives of hospitality to the stranger, which affirm the human dignity of precisely those who do not share one's identity and one's stories.

Figure 1.1 Characteristics of the sacred and the holy

cultures to teach hatred and prejudice toward others (strangers) and call it good because doing so preserves what is sacred, or because "God commands it."

These three critical expressions of the holy oppose the way things are with the way things ought to be. They call the sacredness of a particular way of life into question on the

basis of an experience of openness to an infinite that can neither be named nor measured because it is beyond all measures a finite mind can apply to it. In each case a sacred way of life is called into question as not doing justice to the infinite mystery of being human. In each case, an experience of an infinite or "wholly other" dimension which was beyond measure and imagination was thought to provide a true measure of the human, calling for a transformed way of life. Each of these is a precursor for what today we call human dignity. Like the holy, human dignity can neither be named or imaged. We cannot say what it is, only what it is not. It does not reside in our race, in our gender or even our religion. Human dignity, we say, is what we have in common despite all our differences of race, gender, social class, religion, etc. Our dignity ought to be respected in spite of our differences and so we criticize "the way things are" – the way that sacralizes our differences so as to make some seem more worthy of respect than others.

While a sacred society is founded on a shared set of answers which belong to the finite world of "the way things are," a holy community is founded on experiences of openness to the infinite. The experience of the infinite is not an experience "of" some "thing" but of "lack" or "absence" that opens us up to seeing and acting on new possibilities. This type of experience is expressed in our capacity for doubt. To be seized by doubt, we are suggesting, is to be seized by the holy, that is, by the infinite. Indeed, doubt is probably the most common human experience of the infinite. While doubt tends to negate and undermine the way things are, it is not a purely negative force. For the experience of doubt separates us from the world as it is in order to make it possible to imagine infinite possibilities for the world as it *might be* and/or *ought to be*. To the degree that we are willing to make a leap of faith and learn to trust our doubts, and follow the trail of questions they generate, we become open to the possible rather than remain a prisoner of the actual. We ask "why must things remain the way they are?" or "why couldn't things be different?" Once we experience doubt and its questions we are, like Socrates, freed from the tyranny of the finite, the tyranny of "the way things are." Our experience of doubt sends us on a quest to discover how we "ought" to be human.

While the center of a sacred society is within its boundaries and measured by all who share the same identity, in a holy community the center is to be found, paradoxically, outside its boundaries, in the stranger who is radically other. Doubt and the stranger are two sides of the same coin. What makes people uncomfortable about strangers is that by their very presence they provoke doubt. For strangers represent other ways of life and other understandings of how to be human. Strangers are outsiders whose identity does not fit within the sacred order of society and consequently cannot be named or measured in its categories. Openness or hospitality to questions and to the stranger are two sides of the same coin – wherever strangers are not welcome, neither are doubt and the questions that doubt compels. For those who have the courage to follow the questions wherever they lead, it is doubt and the stranger that keep both self and society open to the infinite. Where such courage is lacking, our fear of other (infinite) possibilities sends both doubt (and the questions it compels) and the stranger into exile.

A holy community is typically a subculture which functions as a "counter-culture," (or alternative community) within a sacred society whose way of life calls that society's sacred order into question. In the traditional caste system of ancient Hindu society, for example, there was a sacred hierarchy of selves, from the highest *Brahman* priest to the

lowly *shudra*, and beyond that sacred circle were the outcasts. However, in the Buddhist *sangha* (i.e. holy community) all, even outcasts, were welcomed as equal because all selves were seen as equal in their "emptiness" (*sunyata)*. The interdependence and equality of all within the *sangha* was a consequence of the indefinability of the self. Since all selves were empty, no self could be more valuable than another. The experience of the holy desacralizes and deconstructs all societal hierarchies and sets in motion the development of an ethic of hospitality to the stranger.

Unlike the sacred and the profane, the holy and the secular are not opposites but complementary. The world is experienced as secular for it is not the holy (the infinite) which is always wholly other (immeasurable and indefinable) than the finite world. The stranger's "differentness" is a reminder of this wholly-otherness.

The Deep Structures of the Sacred and the Holy and Their Mediations

Myth, ritual, spirituality, and reason

The distinction we are making between the sacred and the holy is typological. That is, it is a model to be used to help us sort out human experiences and behaviors (religious and non-religious) across cultures. If taken too literally, however, it may become a stereotype. Although we have chosen vivid examples from certain religious traditions to illustrate our distinctions, the difference between the sacred and the holy is not a difference to be found between religions, as if some were pure models of one and some pure models of the other. Rather, the sacred and the holy should be seen as opposing tendencies, or ways of experiencing life, to be found in all persons and all communities (whether they appear to be religious or not). Every actual culture and religion (indeed every person's identity) is likely to embody tendencies of both models – the sacred and the holy – in a complex and sometimes self-contradictory way of life. Thus, for instance, to cite the Buddhist *sangha* as an example of a holy community does not mean that it has not also functioned much of the time as a sacred society. Likewise for Christianity or any other tradition.

The contrasting structures of the sacred and the holy represent the deep structures of human experience and imagination, the places where religious stories and religious traditions converge and diverge. Deep structures here suggests unconscious filters which shape how we experience and interpret the world. Because of these deep dispositions, two people can have experiences of the same world but totally contrasting interpretations: for one "the glass is half full," for the other it is "half empty." So two persons can read the same scriptures and discover totally opposing messages – one urging hostility to the stranger, the other urging hospitality to the stranger.

On the surface, religious traditions seem wildly diverse. Some religious stories tell us there are many gods, others one god, still others an ultimate reality that is non-theistic (as for instance Buddhist "emptiness"). Diverse stories tell us that either the cosmos had one beginning and will have one end or that the cosmos goes through infinite cycles of death and rebirth, and so on. On the surface, religions show great diversity of stories and world views and yet their stories all express the fundamental deep structure of the dialectic of

the sacred and the holy as it plays out in each tradition. This is true even for non-religious philosophies and ideological interpretations of human existence.

How do we tell the difference between divine and demonic stories? Speaking poetically, we can ask: How do we tell the difference between "God" and the "Devil?" If it is true that our understanding of good and evil is dependent on the story we think we are in and the role we see ourselves playing in that story this does not mean "good" and "evil" are purely relative to the story we dwell in. The answer put in Socratic terms is that only the stories shaped by the experience of the holy are ethical stories, that is, stories that ask whether the sacred customs (and stories) that everyone takes for granted as "good" are really good. Only such stories question not only the traditions of others but more importantly their own traditions. It is the narrative imagination shaped by the holy that sets human beings on the path that subverts evil and promotes justice and what is good – by welcoming strangers and the doubts and questions they raise. This is done in order to bring justice to the stranger and the outcast so that all, not just those who are "the same," may share in the goods of the human community.

The dialectic of the sacred and the holy represents the cross-cultural dialectic that goes on in all persons and cultures, religious and non-religious, between morality and ethics. The primary mediations of this dialectic in every culture are story (myth), ritual, spirituality, and reason, as we shall see in the chapters to come. The stories and rituals mediate either a sacral hostility to the stranger and a rejection of doubt and questioning or else the experience of the holy, expressed in hospitality to the stranger and openness to doubt and questioning. That openness inaugurates the spiritual quest for wisdom.

Those persons who become "possessed" by doubt and the questions doubt raises can be understood to have been seized by the infinite. Such persons are awakened to the Socratic compulsion to question. They know they have no choice. In order to maintain their integrity they feel compelled to surrender to the infinite by following the questions wherever they lead. The alternative would be to flee from the questions into an irrational wallowing in their own personal and cultural biases and prejudices. The surrender to doubt and its questions is the beginning of a spiritual quest, a spiritual journey that leads one beyond one's ego-centered and ethnocentric interpretations. Spirituality furthers this quest through practices of asceticism, meditation, prayer, pilgrimage, etc.; and so awakens and continues to transform and deepen the awakening or opening of the self to the infinite and the stranger on its journey through life. In so doing, our reasoning (i.e. our seeking satisfying answers to our questions) is not only compelled to extend compassion to include the stranger but also to have the audacity to question "the way things are" in order to bring justice to the stranger.

The Awakening of Ethical Consciousness: the Power of Religious Stories, East and West

The story of David and Nathan

Having suggested that the experience of the sacred expresses itself in stories that encourage an ethnocentric morality while experiences of the holy call such stories into

question in such a way as to recognize the humanity of the stranger, we are in a position to better understand the role that storytelling plays in awakening ethical consciousness. While morality in the various cultures of the premodern world was governed by a sense of sacred cosmic order, the social sciences, which emerged in the nineteenth century, compared the differences in belief about cosmic order and morality across religions and cultures and concluded that all cultural/moral orders are relative. Such comparisons gave rise to cultural and ethical relativism because the differences among cultures made it clear that each culture was not a mirror of a universal and unchangeable sacred cosmic order but the product of human imagination and interpretation. As a result, beginning with the Enlightenment philosophers, especially Immanuel Kant, Western philosophy sought to ground ethics not in cosmic order but in reason – reasoning about the right application of rules and principles.

Modern philosophical forms of ethics have sought to achieve the "ethical point of view" by adhering to "rational objectivity." The ethical point of view which every person must strive to achieve is interpreted as the point of view which "any disinterested observer" could supply. This "observer" is thought to be objective because he or she has no stake in the outcome of the ethical decision that has to be made in a given situation and therefore is not biased for or against any individual involved. This disinterested observer is imagined to proceed as an objective outsider who can apply rationally-derived universal rules or norms to a specific case. These rules are thought, by those influenced by Kant, to be "deontological" – a matter of rationally-derived duties or obligations (i.e. some things are right or wrong no matter what the consequences of our actions) and by others in the Utilitarian tradition, such as J. S. Mill, to be consequentialist in nature (i.e. right and wrong are determined by the good and bad consequences of our actions as measured by the sum total of pleasure or pain they produce).

However, while rules and principles can be useful summaries of some of our best ethical insights they are no substitute for genuine ethical insight itself. In fact, apart from genuine ethical insights, which are derived from achieving an ethical point of view, rules and principles will likely seem to be arbitrary and capricious. When it comes to communicating what genuine ethical consciousness is, however, it is much easier to tell a story than to explain it abstractly. In fact, without the story, the abstract explanation will itself seem unconvincing. Since the view of ethics defined in terms of the "disinterested observer" who applies rules and principles arose in the West, we begin our consideration of a narrative approach to comparative religious ethics with a story found in the Torah of Judaism. We turn to the story of David and Nathan – a story about a story that illustrates the way in which narrative can enable us to achieve an ethical point of view. It has been told and retold through countless generations. It is about David, the greatest King of ancient Israel (c. 1000 BCE):

> It happened toward evening when David. . .was strolling on the palace roof, that he saw. . .a woman bathing; the woman was very beautiful. David made inquiries about this woman and was told ". . .that is Bathsheba,. . .the wife of Uriah the Hittite." Then David sent messengers. . ..She came to him, and he slept with her. . ..The woman conceived and sent word to David, "I am with child."... [David then called Uriah home from the

> battlefield and tried to persuade him to sleep with his wife, but he refused all such pleasure while his comrades were still on the field of battle.]
>
> Next morning, David wrote a letter to Joab and sent it by Uriah. In the letter he wrote, "Station Uriah in the thick of the fight and then fall back behind him so that he may be struck down and die.". . .And Uriah the Hittite was killed. . ..When Uriah's wife heard that her husband Uriah was dead, she mourned for her husband. When the period of mourning was over, David sent to have her brought to his house; she became his wife and bore him a son. But what David had done displeased Yahweh [God]. . ..
>
> [SoYahweh, the God of Israel, sent the Prophet Nathan to tell David a story.] He came to him and said: In the same town were two men, one rich, the other poor. The rich man had flocks and herds in great abundance; the poor man had nothing but a ewe lamb, one only, a small one he had bought. This he fed, and it grew up with him and his children, eating his bread, drinking from his cup, sleeping on his breast; it was like a daughter to him. When there came a traveler to stay, the rich man refused to take one of his own flock. . .to provide for the wayfarer. . ..Instead, he took the poor man's lamb and prepared it for his guest.
>
> David's anger flared up against the man. "As Yahweh lives," he said to Nathan "the man who did this deserves to die! He must make fourfold restitution for the lamb, for doing such a thing and showing no compassion." Then Nathan said to David, "You are the man." (New Jerusalem Bible, 2 Samuel 12: 1–12: 7).

The logic of this story carries us beyond the typical approach of "modern" philosophical forms of ethics which have sought to achieve the "ethical point of view" by adhering to "rational objectivity." It is doubtful, that such abstract modes of reflection are really able to function effectively in the actual complexities of our everyday life. One could imagine the great philosopher Immanuel Kant, for example, advising David: "always act so as to be able to universalize your action without contradiction." (That is: "Don't do it if you are not willing to accept the consequences of letting everyone else do it as well.")

A narrative ethic differs from a rationalistic ethic of principles and reasons by insisting that it is not enough to know the good in order to do it. We seldom feel ourselves compelled to act on the basis of a logical conclusion. In ethics reason must follow, not precede, emotion. Not just any emotion, of course, but emotions of empathy which lead one to identify with the one who will be affected by our actions. In fact, what separates religious ethics from purely philosophical ethics is the notion that our ordinary state of consciousness is distorted and disoriented by deeply (unconscious) selfish emotions. Therefore, until the self has undergone a profound spiritual transformation of personality, it is not capable of seeing, understanding, and reasoning correctly.

Thus unlike philosophical ethics, religious ethics usually entails engagement in rituals and spiritual practices in combination with powerful orienting stories (cosmic stories, stories of saints and heroes, etc.) intended to bring about such a reorienting transformation through which the individual, like David, comes to identify with the pain and suffering of the "victim". Such transformations have typically been called experiences of "conversion" in Western religions and experiences of "enlightenment" in Eastern religions. Stories play an important role in such reorientations precisely

because, unlike reason alone, stories are often able to reach down and touch the deepest unconscious levels of someone's personality, releasing emotions, insights, and actions that reason alone could never touch.

If reason, as Kant thought, demands that our ethical norms require universalization so that everyone is included, still diverse religious perspectives based on experiences of religious awakening would hold that it is only when we have been awakened to compassion through conversion or enlightenment experiences that we are prepared to exercise reason to promote universalization precisely through the practice of hospitality to the stranger. If, for Kant, reason must test emotions to assure their ethical legitimacy rationally, from the perspective of religious awakening it is the awakening of universal empathy that tests and legitimates our reasoning. Perhaps we could say that each serves as a check and balance to the other, demonstrating the uniting of reason and emotion in experiences of religious awakening.

In the story of David and Nathan, for instance, while the story does create a moment of philosophical disinterestedness or detachment, that is only the first step. It does not allow David to remain in that state of mind. Because it is a "story" – either fictive or at least about someone else – it disarms David. It does place David in the situation of the disinterested observer who sees immediately that an injustice has been done and needs to be redressed. But then, in a second step, the story quickly moves David emotionally from disinterestedness to empathy. That is, it creates in him a sense of identification with the victim that outrages him and compels him to act. Only then is David prepared to reason objectively about what is good and what is evil and unwittingly stand in judgment of himself. For Nathan's abrupt turning of the story into an allegory for David's own situation forces David to confront his own actions. The story has managed to capture the complexities of his own particular situation and offers him no place to hide. Ethical insight is about our relationships to other human beings and about the obligation we experience when another person's life makes a claim on our own. Genuine ethical insight occurs when we see and judge our own actions through the eyes of the one who will be affected by our actions. This is what Nathan's story enables David to do.

In coming to his realization, David is not the victim of authoritarian values and rules imposed by others. No one (not the religious community, nor the state, nor even God), tells David he has broken a rule or violated a principle. And yet there is nothing subjective or arbitrary about David's final ethical judgment. He is unable to excuse his own actions with the libertarian claim that he has a right to make his own rules, deciding for himself what is right and what is wrong. He tried that and failed. He failed because the story seduced him into identifying with the victim of his actions. This enabled him to see the injustice of his actions by enabling him to empathically identify with the victim's experience of injustice – of being wrongfully violated. The ethical point of view induced in David by Nathan's story transcends both authoritarianism and libertarianism and leads David to condemn himself in spite of himself. When David identifies with the victim, he realizes that what he has violated is not a rule or a principle but another person like himself. He recognizes the humanity of the stranger and the claim that humanity makes on his own conscience.

What troubled the great Enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant about emotion is that it is unreliable, sometimes we may feel empathic and other times we may not.

Being ethical should not depend on our unreliable moods. Rational law and duty seemed to him more reliable. Reason does not let us off the hook just because we don't feel empathic. But the religious experience of awakening to universal compassion for all beings contains an "inner law" and an "inner logic" that David, for instance, experiences and cannot forget. Even when the experience fades he remembers and knows that the humanity of even the humblest member of society makes a claim upon him. He experiences his obligation toward the other as a claim the humanity of the other makes on his awareness. He experiences the logic at the core of universal compassion, the law of universal obligation. The story acts on David emotionally, but not irrationally. Rather, reason coincides with emotional identification with the victim. A proposal made by one of the leading contemporary philosophers of ethics, John Rawls, can help us understand why this is true. The story is our own but it is inspired by Rawl's theory of "the veil of ignorance" (Rawls, 1971).

The parable of the veil of ignorance

> Once upon a time, there was a community in which everyone argued and fought with each other all the time. Many persons in this community simply looked after their own interests and did not care what happened to others. They said that everyone had a right to choose their own values as long as they didn't interfere with the rights of others. A small group of concerned citizens, fearful that this would lead to chaos, got so angry that they wanted to take over and force everybody to live by a set of rules they would devise under threat of severe punishment. What was clear was that everybody, on all sides, felt they knew best what was right and what was wrong, although, of course, they violently disagreed on actual cases. The disagreements were so heated that everyone recognized that something needed to be done if they were to save their community from violence. So they all agreed to consult the wisest and oldest person in the city, a person whom everyone admired and respected. They asked: "Are justice and goodness merely subjective (i.e. in the eyes of the beholder only) or is there some way we can understand what a just society really is?" And the wise one responded by saying: "If you want to know what justice is, each of you must imagine that you have been granted the opportunity to remake the world in any way you see fit. There are only two restrictions on your freedom. First, that you yourself must live in the world you create. Second, that you will not be able to determine or know in advance what position you will occupy in this world you create. The society you imagine under these conditions will be as just as it is humanly possible for a society to be."

This contemporary parable helps us to understand the logic of David's emotions. For David arrives at his ethical insight behind what Rawls calls a "veil of ignorance." This veil leads David to stand unknowingly in judgment of himself. Unlike most philosophers, Rawls defines the ethical point of view not as that of the disinterested observer in the conventional sense but rather as that point of view a person would be forced to assume if he or she were to imagine and plan a society behind a "veil of ignorance" – without knowing what particular role he or she would be asked to play in that society. Rawls' theory forces one to identify, not with everyone equally (the conventional

"disinterested observer") but rather with the alien, the stranger, and the outcast – since you can never be sure that you will not be placed in their position. Or, to put it in the terms of modern liberation theologies and philosophies, justice requires a "preferential option" for the poor and the oppressed. While the logic of this position is obvious its conclusion is controversial, for it seems to imply that justice is biased rather than impartial. We think this objection is mistaken in so far as it misses the paradox that identification with the least privileged in society really insures that all – not just some – will receive fair treatment. The controversy concerning this view of justice is one which we will have occasion to review from diverse religious perspectives throughout this book.

None of us, of course, is ever likely to be in the position to create a whole society. And yet our parable of the "veil of ignorance" is not without real life applications. Perhaps we could say that it is a secular parable, a parable about life in the world of diversity and conflict. In the "real world" it is narrative which has the power to create the required *veil of ignorance*. It is precisely the aesthetic distance of the narrative, its disarming quality as a *story*, which puts David behind this "veil," seducing him into identifying with the one most vulnerable to injustice in this particular situation. Then when the veil is lifted, as Nathan draws the analogy, *David stands condemned by his own judgment*.

The power of Nathan's story, however, cannot be understood in isolation. Nathan and David are not isolated individuals but members of a community with a tradition. Nathan is able to tell this story and David is able to arrive at the judgment he does because both of them have been formed by a shared tradition of stories which we will call "the myth of history" (which began with Judaism and was embraced and added to by Christianity and Islam): stories of origin and destiny, of creation and exodus, of exile and return, of promise and fulfillment, and of prophetic demands for justice, mercy, and hospitality to the stranger. Indeed, in the biblical tradition, the command to welcome the stranger occurs more often than any other command (some 36 times) in the Torah (holy scripture) of Judaism. In fact this narrative tradition insists that to welcome the stranger is to welcome God, God's Messiah, or, at the very least, a messenger (angel) of God.

The important test for any ethic is how to treat the stranger who will be affected by our actions. We are all willing to treat well those with whom we identify – those like ourselves. The test of justice is whether or not we are willing to recognize the humanity of the stranger, treating equally well those who are different. It is the test of universal logic and universal compassion. Not all stories are ethical. Many reflect a sacred orientation which denies the humanity of the stranger and so restricts the circle of compassion and the logical range of its application. Ethnocentrism is the most common bias of every culture. Ethnocentrism is just one of many forms of "centrism" (e.g. religious bias, racism, sexism, etc.) which focus on one's self and one's group identity without due consideration for the well-being of others and so fall short of the universal demand of justice for even the least. An ethical story is one that runs counter to this bias, a story that encourages us to welcome and protect the stranger and the outcast – those most likely to be the victims of our own egocentric, ethnocentric and even religio-centric actions.

Every religious community has an ongoing tradition that nests stories within stories. The story of David and Nathan belongs to such a great narrative tradition – the myth of history (originating in the Middle East – it is found in the Torah of Judaism which was later adopted by Christianity as well), which sees both individual lives and the life of the whole cosmos as an unfolding story that has a beginning and end – the world was created and the world will come to an end in a final judgment and final fulfillment.

Other stories, belonging to other traditions, in their own way also exemplify the narrative power of the veil of ignorance: for example, the narrative tradition of the myth of liberation (originating in India) which is shared by Hinduism and Buddhism and sees both individual lives and the cosmos as a whole as going through endless cycles of death and rebirth. According to the myths of liberation, each of us has lived many lives before, and will probably live many future lives. In each of these lives, or "incarnations," our task is to learn certain ethical lessons that we failed to learn in our past lives, until we finally achieve total selflessness in some future incarnation and are liberated from the "wheel of death and rebirth" into a final state of bliss or transcendence beyond all rebirths.

In this great cosmic story, it is thought that every human being has been one or more animals in previous births and then gradually, through unselfish acts, earned the right to be reborn a human being – one step closer to final liberation. However, it is also thought that if one lives a particularly selfish life, one can find oneself moving backward into an incarnation as an animal again. Thus, for Hindus and Buddhists, the story of the cosmos as a wheel of death and rebirth functions as a kind of veil of ignorance. It is a story that encourages you to identify with the pain and the suffering of even the least creature in the universe, for you never know when you might be reborn as such a creature. The danger, of course, is that even a such a view can be sacralized and subverted – a fortunate rebirth can lead to pride, thinking oneself better than others who are seen as "less human." The cure, within in this view is that such pride will lead to a less fortunate incarnation in one's next life so that one can re-learn humility.

The Doe, the Hunter, and the Great Stag: a Buddhist parable of reincarnation

According to the Jataka tales, which recount the past lives of Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha, in one of his early reincarnations Siddhartha was a great stag, the leader of a herd of deer who lived in the forest. This tale is retold in *The Hungry Tigress* by Rafe Martin (1990). The stag and a doe, his wife, shared a great love and respect for each other, and the whole herd lived peacefully, at least until the day a human hunter showed up and set a snare in which the stag became entangled and fell injured. The herd fled in fear but his wife remained, refusing to abandon him. She encouraged him to try to get up, but he was not able. The stag urged her to flee but she would not. Soon the hunter appeared on the scene. Although terrified, the doe held her ground, as the hunter, spear in hand, confronted them both and expressed his surprise and good fortune to find two deer when the snare could hold only one.

The doe approached the hunter bravely and offered herself in exchange for the life of the stag.

> The hunter was amazed. He looked from the doe to the helpless stag and back again. His face softened. He stabbed his spear point down into the earth. "Lady," he said, "your words have touched my heart. I have never released a single creature from my snares before. But this day, you and your mate shall go free. I am a hunter. It is true. But I'm also a man. And here I exercise my choice and say you both shall live."
>
> With this statement the hunter knelt down and released the stag from his snare. As the stag rose painfully, he spoke to the hunter: "Friend, virtue is a priceless jewel and, man or beast, it remains our only refuge in times of danger. You have done a noble deed this day. Let me repay you." And the stag dug his antlers into the dirt and revealed a priceless gem. "Use it to support your family," the stag commanded, "so that from this day forward you shall never need to kill again."

This tale is one which reveals great courage and compassion on the part of all the major figures – the hunter, the stag, and the doe. Any one of them could have been the Buddha in a past incarnation, and indeed every one of them, the Buddhist tradition would say, was on his or her way to becoming a buddha – that is, one who has become spiritually enlightened and ethically compassionate. But in this particular story the Jataka tale identifies the stag as the Buddha (*Suvannamiga-Jataka #359*). This identification of the Buddha with the victim is particularly powerful because it suggests that, from the ethical perspective created by the veil of ignorance of the wheel of death and rebirth (known as the wheel of *samsara*), violence against another is doing violence both against the Buddha and against oneself. For every animal is a potential future buddha and in some incarnation I might be, or have been, such a creature.

The Buddhist tale makes an ethical point that brings to mind yet another story, this one from the Gospel of Matthew, which presents a Christian version of the myth of history. In the cosmic story of Christianity no rebirths are envisioned. On the contrary, you only get one chance in this life, here and now, and at the end of it you will have to face a final judgment and then either reward or punishment. According to the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus (revered by Christians as "the Son of God") tells the following parable:

The sheep and the goats: a Christian parable of final judgment

> When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. And all the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it

> that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?" And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." Then he will say to those at his left hand, "You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me." Then they also will answer, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?" Then he will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me." And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life. (NRSV: 25: 31–46)

This story from the Christian tradition, like those we have cited from Judaism (David and Nathan) and Buddhism (The Parable of the Stag, the Doe, and the Hunter), reveals the power of religious narrative to create a veil of ignorance in which it becomes true that the good or evil we do to another we do both to ourselves and to the "holy one" – however the "holy" is interpreted in each tradition, whether it be God, Christ, or Buddha, nature, etc.

Having said this, we should note that there is a significant difference in the two stories from religions of the West (Judaism and Christianity) that we have cited and the one from the East (Buddhism). While all three reveal the power of narrative to create a "veil of ignorance" in order to evoke ethical consciousness by bringing the agent to identify with the one affected by his or her actions (who is in turn identified with the "holy"), yet each focuses the ethical imagination differently. In the Jewish and Christian parables, the focus is on the human realm and justice for the stranger. These traditions (as well as Islam) tend to emphasize the discontinuity between humanity and nature. In the Buddhist parable (and others we could have cited from Hinduism or the religions of China) the focus is on the continuity between humans and nature.

The strength of the biblical traditions has been in affirming the importance of human dignity and social justice. Consequently, these traditions have a strong orientation to the problems of human justice and injustice but a weaker sense of ecological justice due to an inability to identify as readily with the pain and injury caused to animals and the environment. In contrast, Hinduism and Buddhism, as Eastern traditions, shaped by the myths of rebirth, encourage the ethical imagination to identify with the suffering of nature. And yet the strength of the karmic view is also its weakness. This is in large part due to the fact that the stories of rebirth emphasize that whatever misfortune happens to you in this lifetime (whether as an animal or a human) is the result of your past misdeeds. Therefore, while beings suffer in this life they never suffer unjustly (this, as we shall see, is known as the moral law of *karma* in these religious traditions). From this perspective, stories of karma tend to blunt rather than sensitize the ethical imagination. In contrast, while the biblical religions are perhaps less sensitive to the natural order, they tend to experience the problem of human injustice more acutely since there are no past lifetimes to explain away the suffering of others as justly deserved. What this should suggest to us is that the narrative traditions and their accompanying spiritual disciplines may, in at least some important respects, have something to teach each other, and each

one of us (in terms of both strengths and weaknesses) no matter what part of the globe we come from. Like Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. we may discover that we can be deeply influenced by other traditions in a way that does not dilute, but rather complement and deepen our own tradition.

The paradox of conflicting stories

No religion tells just one story. Religious communities present us with a complex of often seemingly-contradictory moral and ethical injunctions. On the one hand, religious traditions tell stories which suggest that it is in the self-interest of human beings to be good, because if they are they will be rewarded and if they are not, they will be punished. Philosophers call this an appeal to "prudential reason." That is, it is in our own self-interest to be good. On the other hand, religious traditions also typically tell stories that suggest that human beings ought to act selflessly for the good of others, indeed for the good of the whole community, without any regard to the advantages or disadvantages to themselves. Philosophers call this an appeal to "moral reason." Thus religions like Judaism, Christianity, and Islam say that individuals will be judged by God and rewarded or punished with heaven or hell. Religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism say that there is a law of karma at work in the universe according to which those who do evil will be punished by a lower rebirth in their next life while those who do good will be rewarded with a higher rebirth. And yet all of these traditions say that the ethical ideal is selfless care for the well-being of others.

If ethics is about acting selflessly, clearly there is a contradictory tension between these two approaches to the ethical life. Prudential reason seems to encourage persons to act ethically for unethical reasons of self-interest, while moral reason seems to ask persons to reject just such motivations as inconsistent with the moral life. The philosopher Ronald Green, in his book *Religion and Moral Reason* (1988), suggests that the key to resolving the paradox is to understand that ethical consciousness is a developmental achievement. Following the Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard, he suggests that (1) prudential, (2) moral, and (3) religious reason mark the three stages of a journey on life's way – a spiritual and moral journey. On this journey we move from selfish motivations to selfless ones as we grow spiritually. We begin in a pre-moral state of consciousness, move through the moral, and finally into the spiritual or religious. This third level enables one to live the ethical life with selfless compassion.

A religious tradition must provide a comprehensive set of stories, rituals and spiritual practices that will meet the needs of each individual at each of his or her stages in the process of spiritual growth. And of course, at any given time, different individuals will be at different stages in their life. Consequently, the seemingly contradictory advice offered by a religious community is really contradictory only if all of it is meant to be applied to every individual at all stages of life. But of course that is not the case, for the stories of punishment and reward are meant for beginners in the moral and spiritual life while the stories of selfless love and compassion are meant for those more advanced in holiness.

It is the task of myth and ritual performed in every religious tradition to keep the entire complex of stories and practices in existence so that that which is needed by each individual at each stage of his or her spiritual journey will be there when needed. This is

one reason why ritual plays such an important role in religion. Ritual places the spiritual and ethical teachings of the tradition before all its adherents by constantly repeating those stories and practices needed for growth in the ethical and spiritual life, even though no one individual either needs or is ready to embrace all aspects of the wisdom of the tradition at any one time. Rather, the vast array of stories, practices, and beliefs of a given tradition offers the possibility of a pilgrimage whose goal is spiritual and ethical maturity – the kind of spiritual maturity we think is exemplified in the lives of people like Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr.

The Great Religious Stories of the World – an Overview

What we should expect then is both strengths and weaknesses in every religious tradition, concerning the ability of each to promote the ethical transformation of consciousness. There are powerful ethical narratives to be found in all religions and cultures. And there are flaws in each of these narrative traditions. Comparing religious ethics then should help us gain the wisdom to appropriate the ethical guidance each can offer us without necessarily affirming the flaws in each. Our final task in this chapter is to survey, with a little more comparative detail, the major types of cosmic story (stories about what kind of world we live in) that have shaped the ethical imaginations of human beings around the world.

A casual survey of the history of religions leaves one with the impression of a chaotic diversity of religious stories which have emerged at different times and in different cultures throughout history. But while specific religious stories are indeed unique and diverse, we can group religious stories into four main types: the myths of nature, the myths of harmony, the myths of liberation, and the myths of history. Refer to the Figure 1.2, *World Religions in Perspective*, as you read the remainder of this section on the types of religious expression. The chart compares the four types of religious symbolic stories or "myths" in their main varieties with respect to three things: (1) the fundamental *problem* of human existence as it is understood in that tradition (designated by a "P" on the left-hand side of the chart); (2) the fundamental *ideal* that the tradition holds up as the goal and fulfillment of life (designated by "I"); (3) the *means* (practices, experiences, etc., designated by "M") by which humans are said to be able to overcome the problem and realize the ideal.

The myths of nature

If one goes back far enough into the history of any culture, the earliest religious stories you will find are versions of the myths of nature. These are stories about the forces of nature that govern human destiny, which portray them as either personal forces (gods, spirits, and ancestors) or impersonal magical forces (what anthropologists call "mana" types of religion). Such religions tend to see time as cyclical, like the seasons of the year, and myth and ritual as the means by which to erase the distance between "now" and the past, so that it is possible to return to the time of origins "in the beginning" when the gods and ancestors first created the world fresh and new. In such stories the problem of

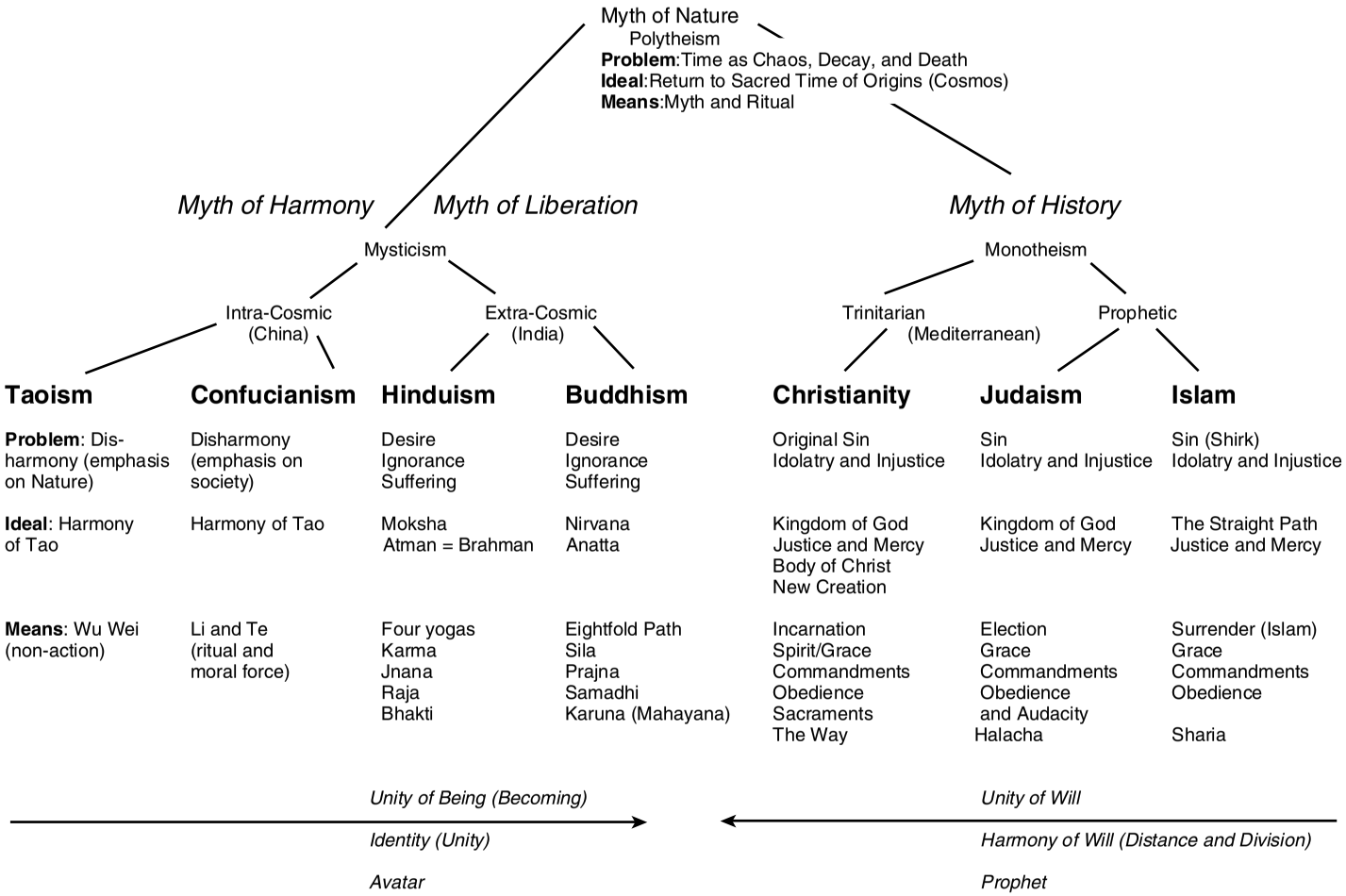

Figure 1.2 World religions in perspective

life is time. Time is the enemy. Time brings decay. It brings old age, sickness and death. The ideal of life is to return to the newness of life, at the beginning of creation before time began, through the power of ritual. A return to the beginning renews the earth, erasing time and making all things new. The means for bringing about this return is to follow the way of the ancestors. For it is the ancestors who pass on the sacred wisdom that goes back to the time of origins. The performance of their sacred myths and rituals – retelling and reenacting the sacred stories of creation – leads to the ritual renewal of life, bringing it into harmony with the sacred rhythms of the cosmos manifested in the seasons of nature.

One of the most striking things about tribal cultures is that the living and the dead form a single, ongoing community. Death is not the end of one's participation in a community but rather a change in status. One's influence increases rather than decreases at death. One becomes a sacred ancestor. One becomes the newest link in the ancient chain of those who mediate the sacred powers necessary to the health and well-being of the community. The ancestors embody the wisdom of the ages which sustains the well-being of the community. Morality is sustained through reverence for the sacred ways of the ancestors. As long as the community shows reverence for the ancestors and maintains their sacred ways, the community will thrive. But if the community shows disrespect for the ancestors and neglects to remember them in ritual and moral observance, then one can expect misfortune to come upon the community, for it will have lost contact with the sacred forces and sacred ways that give it life. Indeed, misfortune and disharmony in the community will typically be interpreted as being due to someone neglecting the ancestors and making them angry so that they bring these punishments upon the community. The injury done to the community will need to be repaired by appropriate rituals that will reestablish harmony with the ancestors and heal the tensions in the community, permitting a return to a faithful observance of the ways of the ancestors.

The great transition from the myths of nature to the myths of the great world religions

From about 10 000 BCE the domestication of plants and animals made village life possible. Dating from approximately 3000 BCE this agricultural skill made possible the emergence of cities and this brought about a great transformation in human experience. Urban life drew human beings together out of different tribal cultures. In the tribe, everyone lived in close harmony with the rhythms of nature, in extended families or clans which shared a common set of stories and rituals. Now in the cities human beings came together from different tribes, bringing with them different stories, different rituals and different family identities.

Urban life also brought with it the specialization of labor. Whereas in tribal societies everyone shared the same tasks of hunting and gathering, in the cities the agricultural surplus created by the peasant farmers made it possible for others to engage in such diverse occupations as carpenters, black smiths, scribes and priests, etc. Society became more complex and differentiated into classes (e.g. peasants, craftsmen, noblemen, priests, etc.). Also, while in tribal oral cultures all knowledge was limited to the simple formulaic patterns of thought that people could hold in their memory, the emergence of writing in the new urban centers made it possible to store and retrieve information in great detail. All of this

fundamentally transformed human identity. In the tribe, identity was collective because everybody shared the same stories and actions. The cities, by contrast, were communities of strangers. The tribe emphasized sameness but in the cities tribal persons were confronted with differences that forced people to individuate their identities. In the cities, everything reinforced awareness of how one was different from another.

The loss of tribal collective life with the emergence of large impersonal and often brutal urban city-states in Egypt, India, China, and Mesopotamia, ruled by ancient kings, who were considered to be either gods or representatives of the gods, was like being expelled from the garden of paradise into a world of suffering and cruelty. Life in these new urban city-states, where every person was a stranger, led to a threefold crisis of mortality, morality, and meaning. In the tribe identity was collective. The dead were the sacred ancestors who continued to dwell with the living in a single community. However, once persons under the impact of urban individuation began to be aware of themselves as individuals, death suddenly emerged as a personal problem, so that life seemed even more cruel and uncertain. For once one has an individual self or identity, death becomes a problem that it never was before, namely the loss of one's "self."

Urban individuation also created the new problems of law and morality. In the tribe the "right" thing to do was the "rite" thing – the ritual way of the ancestors. In the city, people no longer experienced themselves as members of the same clan but rather as strangers, each looking out for his or her own good at the expense of others. Thus, in the cities, laws emerged to set the minimum order necessary for human life and a need for ethics emerged to raise up the highest ideals of what human life could be. In the cities, once human identity was individuated, individuals experienced themselves as living in a world without morality, where death (as the loss of self) was their destiny. This sense of mortality was only heightened by wars of conquest and the arbitrary rule of "divine" kings. Such a situation brings with it a crisis of meaning. Can life really have any meaning if it is filled with suffering and injustice, and ends in death? These are the great questions that are asked by the Epic of Gilgamesh (as we shall see in Chapter 3) in the Ancient Near East at the beginning of the Urban period (3000–1500 BCE) – an epic which expresses the anguish of the new urban individual.

It is to answer those questions raised by urbanization that the great world religions emerged. Once city dwellers were individuated in their identities the old answer to the problems of mortality, morality, and meaning no longer worked. Individuation is a kind of loss of innocence. Once you have become an individual you cannot deliberately return to a collective sense of identity again. Once death is experienced as the loss of the individual self, it is not possible to return to a collective sense of tribal identity as an eternal community in order to escape the burden of mortality. The only possible answer was to move forward and discover deeper wells of religious experience that could provide a new sense of human identity – one able to answer the new urban problems of mortality, morality, and meaning. That is the challenge which the great world religions tried to address as they emerged in three of the great centers of civilization in the ancient world – China, India, and the Middle East – after 3000 BCE.

The world religions emerged in conjunction with the formation of great empires that united peoples of various tribes and city-states in a larger political unity. Such new

political orders created a need for a new understanding of what it means to be human. In the tribe, to be human was to be a member of the tribal family who shared the same ancestral spirits. In the city-state, to be human was to serve the gods of the city. In both cases the ancestral spirits and deities were local, leaving problematic the human identity of those who lived elsewhere and served different spirits and deities. The great world religions attempt to redefine the meaning of being human in more universal terms, beyond the boundaries of the tribe and the city-state, seeking a higher unity to reality beyond the many gods and spirits that had been believed to govern human destiny in these smaller worlds. So, in China, all humans were said to share in common the *Dao* (also sometimes spelled "Tao") – the hidden power of harmony that governs the universe); in India, for Hindus, it was the *Brahman* reality (the universal eternal self that underlies all things), or for Buddhists the emptiness of the Buddha nature (understood as the interdependent becoming of all things); and in the Middle East it was the realization that all were children of the one God (the source and creator of all things).

In these three centers of civilization, three great types of myth or story emerged, each of which sought to expand the meaning of human existence and at the same time respond to the three fundamental problems raised by urban life (mortality, morality, and meaning). And each of these great stories broke down into a variety of alternative versions that gave rise to different religious traditions under the umbrella of a common story (see Figure 1.2). In China, the great story was the myth of Harmony of which there were two major versions, the Daoist and the Confucian. In India the great story was the myth of Liberation of which there were two major versions, Hindu and Buddhist. And in the Middle East, there was the myth of History, which generated three major versions, Judaic, Christian, and Muslim.

China and the myths of harmony In China there emerged the great cosmic story of the *Dao*. One's true self is the universal Dao. This Dao is the hidden harmony of the universe at work in the rhythms of nature. All of nature is made up of the opposites of Yin and Yang, of dark and light, of earth and heaven, of female and male (see Figure 6.1) These opposites are never polar opposites but rather each flows into the other with no absolute division, the way day flows into night and night into day, so that nothing is ever the total opposite of anything else. There is always a little day in every night, a little male in every female (and vice versa), etc. The ideal of life then is balance and harmony. The great problem of existence is the disharmony which occurs when things are out of balance. To restore balance, two different religions emerged in China: Daoism and Confucianism. These two traditions offered different means to overcome the problem and realize the ideal. Daoism urged humans to seek harmony with the rhythms of nature through meditative simplicity (*wu wei*) first, and out of that harmony the harmony of society would flow spontaneously. Confucianism urged humans to seek to establish harmony in society through the practice of ritual (*li*) and when social harmony is achieved, people will spontaneously be in harmony with the rhythms of nature.

India and the myths of liberation In India, as in China, life was seen through the metaphor of the cycles and rhythms of nature, but, unlike China, in India the rhythms were negated rather than affirmed. That is, human lives were thought to recapitulate

the seasons and cycles of nature in an endless round of death and rebirth. Life was seen as suffering not because there is nothing good about life but because no matter how good it is, it always ends in old age, sickness, and death. The problem of life is that we humans are caught in an endless cycle of suffering, death, and rebirth because of an ignorance of our true identity. We suffer from the illusion that our self is identical with consciousness and bodily form. The ideal goal of life is to destroy the illusion of having a separate self which is fostered by our selfish desires, for only when all desire is eliminated will we be liberated from the wheel of death and rebirth. In that moment of liberation or enlightenment we will come to realize our true selves. For Hinduism this true self is the eternal impersonal *Brahman* self (or alternatively a cosmic *purusa* or personal self) which all beings share. For Buddhism it is the mysterious emptiness of the Buddha nature, understood as the interdependent becoming of all beings. Hinduism and Buddhism as two versions of the myth of liberation, offer a variety of means for achieving this liberation, including meditation, the selfless performance of one's duties, spiritual knowledge and insight, and selfless love or devotion, leading to compassion for all beings.

The middle east and the myths of history What the myths of nature, of harmony, and of liberation share in common is the use of the human experience of the rhythms and cycles of nature as the basis for the religious metaphors expressed in their sacred stories. What separated the myth of history from all these traditions is a shift from nature to history as the realm of human experience from which the primary metaphors for religious experience were drawn. While all religions communicate their traditions by telling stories, only the religions of the Middle East, beginning with Judaism, made "story" itself the central metaphor of religious expression. Unlike the rhythms of nature, which are eternally cyclical, stories have beginnings and endings. Ancient Judaism conceived of the cosmos as a great unfolding story told by a great divine story teller (God). Therefore, to make a play on words, the story of the cosmos is "his-story" (or today we would also say "her-story"). In the beginning God spoke, the world was created, and the story began. The story is the story of history – of the God who acts in time and leads his people through time toward a final fulfillment. The story begins with an initial harmony between God and humans, proceeds through a long period in which that harmony is disrupted by human idolatry and selfishness or sin, and looks toward a hopeful end of time in the future when all injustice, suffering and death will be overcome and those wronged will be compensated – a time when the dead shall be raised and the whole of creation transformed.

There emerged three versions of this story in the Middle East – first the Judaic, then the Christian, and finally the Islamic. For each of these, we are all human by virtue of being children of the one God who created all things. All three traditions trace themselves back to the Patriarch Abraham, whom each considers to be the true model of faith, and to Adam and Eve as the first human beings. In all three, the problem of life is viewed as a combination of idolatry and human selfishness (sin) which leads to injustice. The ideal goal of life is the restoration of the rule of God, for when human wills are once more brought into harmony with the will of God, peace and justice will reign and death will be overcome. The means for bringing this about vary but include

obedience to the will of God (and even debate with God in the case of Judaism) the acceptance of divine grace or aid, and, in the case of Christianity, the incarnation of God – and in Islam, submission to the will of God. Thus, although the story of the cosmos has many ups and downs, many triumphs and tragedies, it is seen basically as a comedy (All's well that ends well) – as the story of a journey which is headed for a happy ending. Time is promising and the future ultimately hopeful.

Conclusion

Each of the great narrative traditions sought to answer the problem of mortality by going beyond the answer of collective eternal identity provided by tribal life. In China and India the answer was essentially mystical, all selves in their true identity are either one eternal reality (the Brahman of Hinduism, the Dao of the cosmos in Chinese religion) or all selves are completely interdependent in their emptiness which transcends death (Buddhism). In the Middle East the answer was millennial (a millennium is a period of a thousand years of peace which precedes the end of time and the resurrection of the dead in the biblical tradition) rather than mystical; that is, all selves will be resurrected at the end of time. Each of these narrative traditions sought to answer the problem of morality as well by helping the urban individual to get beyond self-centeredness and grasp the essential unity and interdependence of all human beings. Finally, each sought to provide human life with meaning by seeing individuals and communities as participating in a great cosmic story that gave drama and purpose to life. These were stories that were not interrupted and made absurd by death but rather stories that transcended death.

We need to make a qualifying statement about the unity and diversity of religions: When we stand back at a great distance we can see the grouping together of religions under the four types of story outlined above. As we get closer we discover that each of these stories has diverse versions which express the differences of different religions (the major ones which we identified above). And as we draw even closer to any one of these religions we will discover even more diversity. In fact, there is so much diversity in each tradition that it often overwhelms the unity. Those familiar with Christianity need only recall how many different kinds of Christianity there are. There is such a great difference between a simple Quaker service, an enthusiastic Southern Baptist service, and a formal high-church Episcopalian service, that it is sometimes hard to believe they are all examples of the same religion. That kind of range of diversity is true of every religious tradition. So by discovering some forms of unity in the diversity of religions we must not be fooled into thinking that we have gotten rid of the diversity. The diversity is as important as the unity, and no form of human religiousness can be understood unless we take both into account.

A Postscript on Religious Language

One of the most challenging tasks facing anyone trying to understand the diversity of religious experience as expressed in myth and ritual is to grasp the nature of religious

language. For, to understand religious language literally, is to misunderstand it. Religious language is inherently symbolic. For example, in Western religious experience, especially in the biblical tradition of the Psalms, adherents often say things like "God is my shepherd" or "God is my rock." We know this is not meant literally. God is literally neither a rock nor a shepherd. When we human beings use terms like this we are speaking metaphorically. A metaphor uses things that are more familiar to help us understand what is less familiar. Shepherds and rocks are something we know something about, God is a little more mysterious. So we use the familiar to help us understand the mysterious. When we say "God is our shepherd" we simply mean that God is like a shepherd, in the sense that God watches over us and cares for us in the same way that a shepherd does his sheep. Or when we say "God is our rock," we simply mean to say God is a reality as firm, solid, real and as dependable as a rock – a reality we can always rely on to be there to support us. We should not assume, however, that religion is only about overwhelming power. It can also be about paradoxical power, for some suggest that the ultimate reality operates not through coercion but through a gentler influence of universal love and compassion which will prove greater than any resort to power.

Where do these metaphors and symbolic expressions come from? To answer this question requires a little imagination. Suppose that it is a beautiful warm summer evening, the sky is clear as a bell and there are millions of stars shining brightly in the sky. It is so breathtaking that you decide to go for a walk in the rolling hills just outside the city. While you are on this walk you are suddenly overcome by an overwhelming experience. It is so overwhelming that it defies being put into words. After a short time, which seems like an eternity (and may have been), you return to your normal consciousness and wander back to the city where you run into a few friends at the local pub. You order a drink and then you say to them: "You will never guess what happened to me tonight. I had the most incredible experience, so incredible it defies description." Well, as you can imagine, the very first question you will be asked is: "What was it like?" As soon as that question is asked we have entered the realm of metaphor and symbolic language. The answer is metaphorical because it uses the familiar to illuminate the mysterious. It is symbolic because the metaphor that comes to mind is not purely arbitrary but seems to be evoked by the experience itself in such a way that just this metaphor is the only adequate one. That is to say, unlike metaphors, symbols seem to have a life of their own. We do not choose them, they choose us. Symbols seem to emerge from and speak to levels deeper than our conscious awareness.

Religious symbols conveyed in mythic stories take a great variety of forms, and not all are theistic. For example, Theravada Buddhists in ancient India refused to use the word God to describe their religious experiences. Instead they spoke of "emptiness" and "the void" and the inadequacy of all metaphors to explain their experience which they called "nirvana." The word "God" which is so familiar to Western religious experience is just one of a class of diverse terms used in different religions and cultures to express that which is ultimate in power, importance and meaning. This class of terms includes not only the "God" of Western theism but also the impersonal Brahman reality of Hinduism, the mysterious *Emptiness* of Buddhism, and the impersonal nameless power of harmony at work in all things called the Dao in Chinese religions. And these terms

are quite paradoxical. Some suggest the ultimate is personal and others that it is impersonal. While Brahman, Emptiness and Dao seem impersonal, other types of religious experience reflect a personalism similar to that of Western theism, such as the all-highest cosmic *Purusa* (Person) revered in some forms of Hinduism and the heavenly *Bodhisattvas* to which some Mahayana Buddhists pray. Indeed the earliest forms of religious expression among tribal cultures also reflect this division into personal and non-personal by seeing in the forces of nature both personal spirits and impersonal forms of power. Anthropologists call these two, *animism* and *mana* types of religion, respectively.

All these expressions for what is truly ultimate and meaningful may in fact express diverse forms of religious experience or they may be differing expressions for the same experience. The diversity may simply express the fact that people use the metaphors of their own cultural time and place to describe the indescribable. Since the times and places of such experiences are different so are the metaphors. Therefore, it is not an easy task to discern whether differences of religious languages reflect experiences of different realities or different expressions of the same reality.

All of this is further complicated by the fact that religious language can take one of two forms: the way of analogy or the way of negation. The examples used above (e.g. "God is my shepherd" or "God is my rock") were examples of the way of analogy (*via analogia*). We used something familiar to create an analogy to something less familiar. However, there is another form of religious language, the way of negation (*via negativa*). This way of speaking religiously proceeds not by saying what God, or Brahman, or Dao (or whatever name we use for the ultimate in power, meaning, and value) is like but by saying what it is not. This approach is very typical of the mystical traditions. The mystic declares that God is "nothing." God is not this thing and not that thing. God is in fact no "thing" at all. God is beyond all finite things and hence nothing. In general, Western theism has emphasized the way of analogy by saying God is like us able to "know" and to "love," but in a superior fashion. By contrast, Buddhism, of all the religions, has emphasized most strongly the way of negation, insisting that what is most valuable cannot be either named or imaged and is best expressed by terms like "emptiness." However, we should note that these two ways are not really in conflict, for the way of analogy includes the way of negation and vice versa. For example, every time we say God is *like* something, we are at the same time saying God is *not* literally that thing. Every analogy implies a negation. And every negation must be a negation of something expressed in an analogy.

Our discussion of religious language should help us to appreciate just how challenging it can be to study and compare various religious traditions. Religious communities and religious traditions from different parts of the world use different metaphors and symbols, and they also mix the way of analogy and the way of negation in varying degrees. Therefore, it is possible that two different traditions may sometimes talk about the same human experience in two different ways – ways that seem to be total contradictions of each other. For example, it may seem that a Jewish theist and a Theravada Buddhist hold diametrically opposed religious beliefs. For Jews believe in a personal God and Theravada Buddhists do not. Theravada Buddhists say that the ultimate truth revealed in religious experience is "empty" or "void" – beyond

imagination and naming. Yet, when we look more closely at Jewish beliefs we discover that Jews believe that God can neither be named or imaged. Perhaps theistic and non-theistic religious experiences are really not that far apart. However, it is also possible that they are really talking about truly different experiences.

How to resolve this type of question is a problem that has not yet been fully solved by scholars of comparative religions. In general, we should begin by withholding judgment and simply try to understand how stories and rituals shape people's lives, their character and behavior. From an ethical perspective, perhaps the real measure of comparison should be how people are encouraged to live their lives rather than in the apparently diverse images and concepts they hold. If both Jews and Buddhists, for example, are led by their religious experiences and beliefs to express compassion for the stranger, especially those who suffer or are in need, then perhaps there is more similarity than difference between them.

Questions for Discussion

1 What do we mean by the terms "religion," "myth," and "ritual" and how are they related?

2 In what sense can even seemingly secular moralities be said to have a religious dimension?

3 What is the significance of the terms "sacred" and "holy" as used by the authors of this text and what is the significance of the distinction between them for ethics?

4 Why are experiences of the "sacred" and the "holy" referred to as "deep structures" and how do they affect the role of story (myth) and ritual, spirituality and reason in ethics.

5 Why is narrative an especially appropriate form of expression for religious ethics?

6 How does the story of David and Nathan illustrate the nature of ethical consciousness, according to the authors?

7 In what ways can the religious stories serve to create a "veil of ignorance" and why is this important for religious ethics? Give examples.

8 Compare and contrast the major types of religious stories displayed in the Figure 1.2.

9 Why is the transition from tribal to urban life important for understanding the world's religions and their ethics?

10 What is the difference between the way of analogy and the way of negation as languages of religious experience, and how are they related to each other?

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