

Moral Traditions

An Introduction to World Religious Ethics



Mari Rapela Heidt


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Preface

Numerous things inspired me to write this book, including the many questions my students ask. In classes from “Introduction to Theology” to “Medical Ethics,” students are incredibly curious about religious traditions different from their own. Their questions extend beyond matters of religious practice to the motives behind people’s actions. “Why do they act that way? It doesn’t make sense!” Students also think a lot about moral questions, especially controversial questions or those for which there are no simple answers. For answers, students most often turn to the Internet, which offers plenty of information, much of it nonsense. Today’s students have few tools for sifting through the mass of material—true, false, exaggerated, or lacking—available on ethics and morality. There is a great need to satisfy students’ initial curiosity and to give them the tools to find real answers to their questions.

Students need to learn more about their own religious and moral traditions and also to reach beyond them to learn about other religious and moral traditions. In a pluralistic society, knowledge conquers fear of those who are different from us, including different in their religious practices and beliefs. Ignorance of others’ religious and moral traditions inspires a fear in many that may even lead to violence. For example, in the wake of the terrorist attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001, many

Sikhs in the West, especially Sikh men, became the victims of hate crimes that have ranged from name-calling and intimidation to murder. These crimes occur mainly because of the fear that these men, with their turbans and beards, are terrorists, or are somehow in league with or related to terrorists. Fear and hatred this powerful come primarily from ignorance, including ignorance of the beliefs and motivations of our neighbors. Even after the publicity generated by hate crimes against Sikhs, few Americans are aware that the Sikh religious tradition is based on nonviolence, tolerance, and equality. It’s likely that most people, given the chance to learn more about their neighbors, would make a real attempt to understand them, and the ignorance that gives rise to this kind of fear and hatred would be greatly alleviated. Sadly, many students approach the study of religion and religious ethics by simply placing their own faith at the top of a hierarchy, and then deciding how they “feel” about a particular tradition based on how closely it matches their own beliefs. This is not a recipe for success and deep understanding.

Religion is a powerful influence on human behavior. The precepts and teachings of the world’s many religious traditions greatly influence how people act toward others. Although it is certainly possible to act morally without being religious, religious traditions remain among the

most important arenas in which people learn the rules of human interaction. Learning about the history, art, and major beliefs of the world's religious traditions is a good start toward greater understanding but does not go far enough. We need also to understand how those beliefs translate into actions, and how those actions are perceived. Misunderstandings of human actions, not academic misunderstandings about major beliefs, is what breeds division and distrust. For this reason, it is essential that we study the moral underpinnings of different religious traditions. Morality is about human actions toward others, and understanding the background of human actions can help to alleviate fear and distrust.

Some Assumptions in This Text

This text is written for students who genuinely want to learn more about the ethics of the major religious traditions. For that reason, it assumes several things. First, this text assumes a reader with a strong grasp of what constitutes religion. That is, we have set aside questions about the definition of *religion* in favor of looking at specific religious traditions. A philosophical debate over what ideas and beliefs actually constitute a religion, while valuable, is not undertaken here.

I see religion as much more a way of living than a set of beliefs. This way of living translates into a way to relate to other people and see oneself in relationship to them. Thus, another assumption of this text is that religion is one of the most powerful influences on human moral behavior. Even those who are not religiously active are influenced by the values of the dominant religious tradition where they live. These powerful influences, especially when taken with the influence of religion on culture, reach many people and influence even those who profess no religious faith. The values of religious traditions can also become incorporated into cultural norms that in turn affect entire societies.

This text focuses generally on how the various major religions are practiced today. Although the history of a tradition is important, this work explores how religion shapes modern human behavior and how each religious tradition considered is at work in the modern world. Many other works address the histories of religious traditions, including many aspects of their moral history. While this text includes some history, it focuses on the distinctive moral features of each tradition in the world today.

Additionally, this is not a book on world religions. This text assumes that readers either have had a course in world religions or will be using this text alongside another that explains key features of world religious traditions. It is not necessary to know everything about the traditions discussed in this book to study religious ethics, but some knowledge is essential to understand many of the points made here.

Finally, the study of religious ethics should lead to dialogue and greater understanding between people and among faith traditions. Other goals of such study are certainly valid and worthy, and some of them may be discerned as a part of this text. However, the primary goal here is interreligious understanding.

The Structure of This Text

This text begins with a brief discussion of ethics and morality and how values shape human character and behavior. Chapter 1 also includes a short course in comparative moral method. Subsequent chapters focus on the different major world religious traditions. Each of these chapters begins with an overview of the history and general beliefs of a particular tradition and the approach to ethics and morality that exists within that tradition. This overview also explores what is sacred to each tradition, how moral truths are communicated to people, and briefly mentions any important religious texts. This

section is in no way comprehensive; rather, it provides a short refresher course in the tradition. The foundations of moral actions and the major moral principles associated with each tradition are discussed in greater detail in the next section of each chapter.

Each chapter concludes with several discussion questions and suggestions for further study. These suggestions include books, movies, and music that will enhance understanding of each tradition and help the student enter into the thinking and beliefs of the members of that religious tradition.

A Note on Limits

Scholars of ethics or world religions will rightly note that much is missing here. Many traditions

have been omitted, and some voices from within the traditions discussed are not represented. A full and complete analysis of all world religious traditions would fill untold volumes and take more than a lifetime to complete. Thus, although I have attempted to include many perspectives, ultimately the individual teacher will shape the presentation of material and the emphasis given to what is presented here. Many further resources are available, and students and instructors alike are urged to see this text as a beginning in a long conversation on religion and ethics. As such, this text serves as a sort of road map viewed from high above, which shows only the major highways and intersections. Details and smaller roads will have to be added as one delves further into the study of moral traditions.



Introduction

World religious ethics, the subject of this text, focuses on why people act as they do and how religion influences their behavioral choices. One fruitful way to study the ethics of world religious traditions is to employ methods from comparative ethics, a subdiscipline of the broader academic study of ethics. Comparative ethics approaches the ethics of world religions in a multidisciplinary manner, combining insights from theology and philosophy with those from social science, anthropology, and even politics to better understand human behavior toward others. Ethics and morality are strongly focused on how people can live together and create societies that promote human well-being and the common good. Creating those societies is an ongoing, collective process of discerning what people value and which actions people agree are best. Voices from different perspectives invigorate this process.

Beginning students in religious ethics often have trouble with the comparative aspect of this field. *Comparative* does not mean “a search for the best” or “a search for the tradition that fits best with my own beliefs about human behavior.” Comparative ethics is not at all like comparing

prices on the same product in different stores. Instead, the comparative aspect of this discipline is a method for understanding similarities and differences between belief systems and how these beliefs influence the behavior of individuals; the comparative method involves looking at the roots of a tradition and the moral or ethical norms within that tradition. Comparing concepts and values between different religious traditions allows scholars and students to gain a real and deep understanding of the motivations behind human behaviors toward others.

The terms *religious* and *ethics* are fairly self-explanatory. *Religious* refers to religious traditions, which are a powerful force for shaping human behavior. There are many definitions of *religion* from psychology, sociology, theology, and philosophy, but the most common definitions center on belief in a supernatural system or supernatural beings that exist parallel to human beings and interact with them. Religions each have a particular view of the world and how human beings fit into the larger scheme of all life, the cosmos, and the actions and purposes of divine beings. Most religions also involve specific practices and rituals, with many of these open only to those

who express some belief in the truths offered by that religious group. Religions are also referred to as *religious traditions*, a term that indicates a long history of adherence to a faith. From their interactions with others, many students are familiar with several religious traditions, including those most common in the United States—the many different denominations of Christianity, Judaism, and to some extent, Islam.¹ Many students also will recognize Buddhism, Hinduism, and numerous other traditions as distinct belief systems and religious traditions.

The terms *ethics* and *morality* are dealt with in detail in chapter 1, but in general they both refer to human behavior toward others. How people treat other people and how they view their own obligations toward others are deeply influenced by the belief systems of their religious traditions.

Although in some senses comparative ethics has existed since independent cultures first came into contact with each other, the academic study of comparative ethics is fairly new. The organized academic study of comparative ethics originated only within the last four decades or so. Several major texts on comparative religious ethics appeared in the late 1970s, although interest in this field has grown considerably since 1991.

The growth of interest in studying religious ethics has roughly mirrored the growth of what is today called globalization, especially the rise of technology that allows information to be transmitted around the world within seconds. The rise of cable television and its 24-hour news networks, along with the instant access of the Internet, have run parallel to the interest in religious ethics. It is one thing to read about Buddhism in a book, and another thing entirely to see Buddhist monks protesting live on television from Burma, Thailand, or Tibet. The study of religious ethics has also grown as international travel has become more convenient and less expensive. Today a person can experience firsthand the moral norms at

work in the countries and cultures where they are dominant.

The study of religious ethics has also mirrored the many cultural changes that have occurred around the world as a result of globalization, including changes in the United States, Canada, and Western Europe, often collectively referred to as “the West.”² Most countries in the West have long relied on trade for certain foods, oil, fabrics, manufactured goods, and other things, but in the 1990s the opportunities for more open and expansive trading between countries grew exponentially. Particularly after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the creation of more open, freer societies in Eastern Europe, the movement of goods between nations became much easier and more likely. As economies around the world grew increasingly interdependent, the movement of human beings around the globe also increased, with many people now living and working outside their countries of origin. For example, prior to the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, very few Eastern Europeans who lived behind the iron curtain could leave their own countries, and those who were able to leave often endured serious hardships to escape totalitarian regimes. Today, Germany is a united nation again, and its citizens are also a part of the larger European Union, which allows for free travel and free trade throughout the European-member countries. Similarly, from the 1950s and into the 1980s it would have been almost unthinkable for any person in China to leave that country to live and work in a capitalist society while remaining Chinese. Today many Chinese business people live and work in the West and travel frequently between their Western and Chinese homes.

This expansion in contact across cultures and religious traditions worldwide has been both good and bad economically (just watch the reaction in one stock market when another across the world rises or falls dramatically). However, it has been undeniably good for the study of religious

ethics as it has brought people of diverse backgrounds and religious traditions into close daily contact. The moral traditions and understandings of Buddhism, for example, are no longer confined to countries in Asia, but are found on the main streets of Toronto, Seattle, and Paducah, Kentucky. Hindu temples and Methodist churches share the same block in the American Midwest, and people of nearly any religious tradition can find a place to pray or worship in even the smallest towns.

As noted above, the comparative study of religious ethics is a multidisciplinary undertaking, and culture is an important part of the equation. Like religion, culture has many definitions, but most center on the practices and beliefs of a particular group of people that are passed on from one generation to the next. Culture includes general social beliefs and practices, as well as art, music, and other aspects of life that are unique to particular groups of people.

Religion is powerful—it shapes human behavior, which in turn shapes the culture in which people live. It also adds many other aspects to the culture in general. Who can envision India, for example, without the gods of Hinduism and the festivals, such as Diwali and Holi, associated with them, or Japan without the many Shinto shrines that blanket even the smallest cities? Some of the symbols of traditional Russian culture incorporate the architectural shapes of its Eastern Orthodox churches, just as Italy is typified by the spires of its many Catholic churches. An understanding of culture adds to the study of religious ethics by demonstrating just how pervasive and strong certain religious ideas have become, and how these ideas affect the behavior not only of adherents of a given religion but also of people in the same culture who do not follow that religion.

The study of religious ethics is complicated by another factor as well. While many people within each religious tradition believe

the same things and practice the same rituals, rites, festivals, and celebrations, there is no single expression of each faith tradition, no one way that really and truly is *the* illustration of that religious tradition. Practices and even moral codes vary tremendously within each tradition. For example, almost two billion people worldwide are Christian, and all express a belief in Jesus Christ. However, under the general umbrella of the Christian tradition are many different responses to that faith. Catholics and Presbyterians, for example, have differing ideas about who should lead churches and how worship services should be organized. Some groups within the Christian tradition insist that salvation is open to all, while others insist that only Christians will have an eternal life. Similar variety exists in the Islamic tradition. The world's 1.3 billion Muslims all believe in the one God whose messenger is Muhammad, but different groups within Islam have varying ideas about society and social organization, and about which practices are required of a "good Muslim."

This diversity within religious traditions complicates the introductory study of religious ethics, which requires a broad overview of the most basic beliefs of the various religious traditions. Because this work is an introduction, the material presented here is not meant to be comprehensive, nor to allow for every variation within each tradition, but to offer a basis for further study of each tradition. If one continues with further study, one will find many variations in thinking within each tradition.

WHAT STUDYING ETHICS REQUIRES

Studying the ethics of world religions requires several things, the most important of which are an open mind and a positive attitude toward studying ideas that may be unfamiliar. Respect for and listening to people of different faiths are

the habits of mind most closely linked to success in understanding religious ethics.

To effectively study religious ethics, one must be able to step outside one's own tradition and learn to see the world differently. Ultimately, each religious tradition presents a certain view of the world, a lens that clarifies and makes sense of the things that happen in the world and in one's life. People tend to act in harmony with their worldview and with the demands this view places on their behavior. Learning to see the world as others see it is a giant step toward understanding human behavior, but it can be difficult to learn to look beyond everything that one has been taught about religion, the meaning of human life, a Divine presence, and other human beings. A real study of religious ethics, however, requires no less.

Considering other explanations for human life and behavior and the worldviews of others does not mean giving up one's own beliefs. Rather, it means being open to the traditions of others and accepting their religious motivations as appropriate within their own religious contexts. In one sense, comparing ethics between religious traditions would seem to be easy. One would simply list how each tradition approaches a particular problem or some aspect of human life, and then compare lists. One could even envision a chart or spreadsheet set up to do just this. However,

comparing ethical traditions is not that simple. It requires learning to see the world through other people's eyes and trying to understand the real and complex motivations for behavior. Religious teachings and beliefs are only one part of the equation, though a large part for many people. Human emotions, culture, motivations, moral precepts, teachings, and relationship to the Divine cannot easily be reduced to an item on a chart or a list. Trying to do so is a bit like comparing apples to cars to spoons. It simply does not allow us to learn anything significant about religious ethics.

Finally, studying religious ethics requires one to learn to compare traditions without denigrating them or the people who follow them. One does not have to believe as others do to understand their motivations and actions, and evaluating the beliefs of others based solely on one's own beliefs interferes with the type of understanding that religious ethics seeks. This area of study is not about deciding whether a person's beliefs about the Divine and the human person and the world are correct or incorrect; it is about understanding people's values and how those values are demonstrated in actions. A search for understanding, not a critique of the beliefs of different faiths, is what should characterize the study of religious ethics.

Discussion Questions

1. What biases do you believe most people bring to the study of religious ethics? Can these biases be overcome?
2. What do you believe is the largest challenge in undertaking the study of religious ethics? Why?
3. In what areas of American life can you see differing religious ethics at work, even in small ways?
4. Describe your own worldview. Which aspects of this worldview will be the most difficult to overlook in the study of religious ethics?
5. How is your worldview different from that of your parents and grandparents? What might be some of the reasons for this?
6. Which major religious traditions are prevalent in your area? How have they influenced the dominant culture of your region?

For Further Study

To learn more about world religious traditions, look for these titles:

Esposito, John, Darrell Fasching, and Todd Lewis. *World Religions Today*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.

Molloy, Michael. *Experiencing the World's Religions: Tradition, Challenge, and Change*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2008.

Neusner, Jacob, ed. *World Religions in America*. Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2003.

Smith, Huston. *The World's Religions: Our Great Wisdom Traditions*. San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1958, 2001.

To learn more about comparative ethics in general, read the following:

Twiss, Sumner B., and David Little. *Comparative Religious Ethics*. San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1978.

Schweiker, William, ed. *The Blackwell Companion to Religious Ethics*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005.

Notes

1. The reported numbers of followers of different religious traditions in the United States vary from source to source. Some estimates suggest the number of Muslims in the United States now equals or surpasses that of Jews. Estimates of the U.S. Muslim population range from 1.5 to 10 million, depending on the source. See the *Statistical Abstract of the United States* (available online at www.census.gov/compendia/statab). See also the research of the Pew Foundation into religious adherents in the United States, available at www.religions.pewforum.org/affiliations.

2. *The West* is a term in common usage that refers to people who live in industrialized societies, which are

generally the world's wealthiest. These include the people of the United States, Canada, and the culturally distinct societies of Western Europe, including the United Kingdom, France, and Germany. Most analysts also include Japan in this definition, as its GDP and trade partnerships with the other nations listed make it economically similar to them. Also possibly included would be Australia, New Zealand, and South Korea. It should be noted that some scholars and analysts object to the term *the West* because of its ambiguity and perceived condescension toward people who live in other areas of the world.

CHAPTER 1



Ethics, Morality, and the Study of Religious Ethics

It is not possible to begin the study of religious ethics without understanding what ethics and morality are and why they matter. The primary methods used in the study of religious ethics must also be examined to understand precisely what the findings of this study demonstrate. This chapter, therefore, defines *ethics*, *morality*, and *conscience* and inspects some of the ways that systems of ethics have been categorized over time; it also considers some of the foremost methods used thus far in the study of religious ethics.

ETHICS AND MORALITY

Most people are familiar with the term *ethics*, which appears almost daily in American life. Nearly every workplace has a “code of ethics” that employees must agree to follow, and the news is filled with the “ethical lapses” or “unethical behaviors” of public and private persons. These ethical lapses often lead to punishment: either a self-imposed penance such as a public apology or a penalty levied by another party, usually an employer or law enforcement agency. Some people are even imprisoned for their ethical

lapses. It is no wonder, then, that many people think of ethics as a set of rules to follow, with serious consequences for anyone who breaks the rules. While this is a common misperception, it is also a serious misunderstanding of ethics and what an ethical action really is.

Lists and codes can help shape and determine the behavior of those in an organization, but they do not, properly speaking, denote ethics. Ethics is a system of reflecting on human behavior, a way of defining and determining morality and moral actions.¹ Ethics is not about which actions are permitted or legal and which actions are not. It is about human beings and their behavior toward each other, and whether their actions are right or wrong. Rules and laws can express moral positions and shape human behavior, but ethics is about far more than that. Rules about right and wrong are useful summaries of agreed-upon ethical reflections, but they are not the totality of ethics. Ethics at its heart is about human beings and human communities and determining which actions are good and allow human beings to live together in peace and justice, and which actions subvert that goal. Ethics is the critical reflection on moral principles and what constitutes a

morally correct or incorrect action. Ethical reflection also helps one to apply moral principles to specific actions.

If ethics is all about morality, the next obvious question is, what is morality? Morality concerns our actions toward other people. Human beings are valuable in and of themselves and have dignity and worth regardless of their station, race, creed, or economic situation. A moral action will respect other people as human beings, and in some real way enhance or acknowledge their value and dignity as such. Conversely, an immoral action will be disrespectful of the dignity and value of human beings, or will harm or injure persons in some real way, even if that harm is evident only to those harmed. In actual discussions about ethics and morality, the terms *ethics* and *morality* or *morals* are often used interchangeably, although they mean slightly different things.

Ethics is the method of discernment, the way we determine which actions are moral or immoral. We might view the relationship between ethics and morality as similar to the relationship between theory and practice. Ethical reflection provides the foundation for decision-making, the theory that motivates human behavior. Morality puts the theory formed in ethical reflection into practice through the choices we make in various situations. Since everyone must make moral decisions daily about many different human interactions, ethics is an essential part of human life, as necessary and important as breathing. We cannot stop thinking or acting morally, just as we cannot stop breathing and yet continue to live.

In religious ethics, morality has another dimension. Many people live and make moral decisions without a religious framework, but for a believer in any religious tradition, ethics and morality also serve as ways to live one's beliefs. That is, moral actions are the way one actively demonstrates the core values of one's religious tradition. A central moral question for believers is, how do I live in harmony with what I believe?"

This makes religious ethics a vital part of each religious tradition, as crucial to that tradition as any other dogma or doctrine.

Moral Decision-Making

Many factors go into the process of moral discernment and into each moral or ethical decision. Moral decisions are profoundly influenced by who we are as human beings and by the factors that have formed and shaped us. As we learn and grow, so too does our capacity for solid decision-making. In a very real way, our decisions are an expression of our being—of who we are and what we value—as much as they are decisions about actions. These decisions reflect our own thinking about how to act toward others, certainly, but they also reflect our upbringing, our culture, our religious faith, our families, our social and economic class, and the communities in which we live. We all bring to moral decision-making our particular view of the world, our place in the world, and our understanding of how we ought to treat other people in the world. All of these factors help form our attitudes toward others and our moral consciences. How much influence each of these factors exercises on us varies from person to person, and whether these factors influence us negatively or positively also varies. With their many teachings about right and wrong, about the human person and the meaning of human life, religious ethical systems are as much about who we ought to be as about what we ought to do.

The Moral Conscience

In everyday thinking and discussions about ethics or morality, the conscience is often mentioned. People are told to “follow your conscience” or to not “act against your conscience.” Even those who spend little time thinking about ethics will have some idea about what the conscience is and how it works. Most can talk about “the little voice

inside my head,” and many associate the term *conscience* with a sense of guilt or regret, especially for actions they know were probably wrong.

A moral conscience is more than a nagging sense that we have done something wrong. It is an awareness of moral values, however those values are built.² In some sense, conscience is the expression of our deepest selves and the values we hold. It is our conscience that tells us which actions are right and wrong and guides our actions. A well-formed conscience can sometimes compel a person to sacrifice for others, or to act against his or her own interests for the good of others, or for the general good of all people. Acts of bravery to save others from danger or acts of sacrifice so that others may prosper are motivated by the moral conscience. Conscience shifts our focus beyond ourselves and asks us to look at situations and actions in the context of other human beings, their values, and their interests.

It takes a long time and a lot of input to form a conscience. All of the factors that shape us as individuals also shape our conscience. For example, early in our formal schooling, we are taught values that will allow all students in our classrooms to get along and learn. Values like sharing, waiting one's turn, and respecting other students' property teach us that others are as important as we are. Once these values are learned and internalized, our consciences become aware of and oriented toward other people and their needs and feelings.

Families and communities also teach moral values and offer us models of morally correct behavior. Perhaps our best moral models are our parents and other adults within our families and communities— aunts and uncles, teachers, service group leaders, coaches, and other adults with whom we regularly interact. Observing how they treat others, what they value in other people, and how they expect to be treated teaches us which actions are good and acceptable, and which actions do not meet the standards of behavior

necessary for people to live together. A somewhat extreme example of how the actions of these moral models can have real and lasting effects on our consciences is found in the contrast between the values of people raised in communities where diversity is encouraged and accepted and those raised in communities that are exclusive and intolerant, such as a white supremacist community. The conscience of someone from the first type of community would likely be bothered by instances of intolerance and hatred, whereas someone from the second type of community might well embrace those same actions without being bothered by conscience.

As our moral awareness grows, so does our ability to reflect on what we have learned. This reflection, then, produces a specific response in us that will guide our actions in the future. When we do not live up to the moral demands that we have learned and internalized, we know we have done wrong, and the conscience we have worked to develop bothers us.

Moral consciences can also be influenced by the desire to learn and grow as human beings, and thereby develop better ways of acting toward others. As people learn and grow, so do their consciences. Consider, for example, the person raised in an exclusive and intolerant community. This person can grow beyond what he or she has been taught and learn a new set of values that shapes conscience in a different way. One common example of learning that results in the reshaping of conscience is religious conversion. A convert from Buddhism to Islam, for example, would have to learn and internalize a new set of guidelines and rules for human behavior and for acting well toward others. In a sense, this convert is becoming a different person by transforming his or her understanding of the world and his or her place within that world. This new understanding will lead to new ways of acting, since new forces and understandings are at work within the convert's moral conscience.

One's conscience is not, then, static. It changes as we change and grows as we grow. Developing one's moral awareness can be a difficult task, requiring practice and attention. But it is also rewarding. For this reason, this task is often undertaken, particularly by those who are serious about their religious tradition and interested in deepening their religious commitment.

The Role of Religious Traditions

All of the factors listed above—family, community, and so on—strongly influence what we decide to do in a given situation. For many people, religion and religious values rank among the most significant influences in their lives and are the primary factor in the formation of their consciences. By their nature, religious traditions impart values to their believers, and these values can influence even those who do not believe in that specific religious tradition. The values of the dominant religion in a culture can affect the norms, or standards of behavior, of that culture as a whole. Moral norms influence all human behavior toward others. For example, a Christian living in Japan will likely be influenced by the values of cleanliness and purity associated with the Shinto tradition, because those values have become a part of the larger Japanese culture and are difficult to escape. A Buddhist living in Israel will likely be influenced by the values of Judaism that have made their way into the Israeli laws and broader culture, even though he or she does not believe as Jews believe. This person might internalize the Judaic value of rest and the sacredness of the Sabbath, a day of rest, as well as many of the Judaic customs associated with food that are meant to demonstrate the value of the lives of the animals we eat. Escaping the values of either the Shinto or Judaic tradition would prove virtually impossible while living where those religious traditions are dominant.

Religious traditions are important to the formation of conscience because they help form and address questions about the meaning of human life and the meaning of actions toward human beings. In so doing, these traditions impart a certain view of the world to their believers. Each tradition, for example, has its own view of time, goodness, evil, and the human person. This worldview is as much an ethical system as a belief system, because it shapes behavior in ways that few other factors can. In addition to conscience, religious faith becomes entwined with many other factors that influence behavior; family, education, culture, and even one's choice of friends can reinforce the teachings of a religious tradition and thereby increase the influence of that tradition. (An antipathy toward a certain religious tradition or religion in general can have the same effect, another instance where religion influences even those who do not believe in its teachings.) Because religion has such a strong influence on behavior, studying and learning about the various world religious traditions can give deep insights into why people act as they do and what values their actions represent.

CATEGORIES OF ETHICAL SYSTEMS

Philosophers and theologians have developed several categories to broadly describe ethical systems. These categories can be useful in describing certain aspects of religious ethics, although most religious ethics defy easy categorization and are, in fact, a mix of many of these types. Following are overviews of four such categories: deontology, consequentialism, virtue ethics, and divine command ethics.

Deontology

Deontology is a category for moral or ethical systems that emphasizes doing what is right

regardless of the situation or consequences; this category highlights the basic duties and obligations that human beings have to each other. Deontological ethics stresses that some actions have fundamental meanings and intrinsic moral values that do not depend on the consequences of those actions, either for the people involved or for the society as a whole, and those actions are essential for moral human behavior.³ For example, telling the truth may be a good regardless of the consequences of telling the truth and is therefore a fundamental obligation of all human beings. Each of the moral duties or obligations in this category is important for individual human beings and the whole human community.

The duties described in most deontological systems are those that affect the primary relationships in human lives: relationships with the people closest to us and with those who make up the society in which we live. These duties can either be prescriptions, which specify what we must do, or prohibitions, which tell us what we must not do. They can be ascertained from the general moral norms of society and also through our reflection on what constitutes proper action. According to deontology, although the right action does not always produce happiness for individuals, one must act properly anyway. Thus, although what is right does not always produce what is perceived as good for the individual, this does not negate the obligation to follow the rule under all circumstances. For example, according to deontological ethics, one must tell the truth in all circumstances, even when the truth will bring about punishment or another unwanted consequence for oneself. The action of telling the truth upholds the obligations of society; one is therefore always required to follow the rule, even though the consequences may seem bad from one's own perspective.

Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) is probably the best known of the deontological moral philosophers. He believed that morality is a principle of human reason and that there are moral absolutes

that all human beings can know through the use of reason. The most famous of his moral pronouncements is that of the categorical imperative, an unconditional moral law that states: “Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.”⁴ In essence, one should only do those things we wish everyone would do. Such actions derive from the moral laws, and they are performed out of the pure intention to act morally, without regard to the ensuing consequences.

Consequentialism

Although it is tempting to think of consequentialism as the opposite of deontology, in reality both categories encompass ethical systems that aim to ensure the good for many, if not all, human beings, especially those to whom we are closest. Consequentialist theories and systems emphasize that what is good must also be what is right, and that we can know what is both good and right by looking toward the consequences of our actions. The probable outcome of an action, then, determines whether that action is moral or immoral. Actions that may be deemed “right” under deontology but that produce an outcome that is not “good,” cannot be morally correct under a consequentialist system.

Probably the most widely used consequentialist system is that of utilitarianism, first developed by philosophers Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill. Utilitarianism advocates that the rightness or wrongness of an action be judged by whether it produces the greatest possible benefit for the greatest number of people.⁵ This is usually summarized as “the greatest good for the greatest number.” The greatest good maximizes those things that bring about good consequences and human flourishing, and minimizes those things that do not.

Consequentialism proposes that certain concepts and actions, primarily those that produce

good for many human beings, should be applied to human behavior. Concepts and actions that produce good, especially good for many, can be considered rules for human behavior; these loosely interpreted rules become the norms of a morally oriented society. These rules or guidelines can change. As the real consequences of rules or guidelines become clearer, they shift and gravitate toward those concepts and actions that produce the greatest good.

Virtue Ethics

A third category of moral systems is virtue ethics. Virtue ethics focuses on the development of certain virtues, or praiseworthy traits, within the individual. A person's actions will then flow from those virtues. Cultivating the virtues—understanding them and internalizing their deep meaning—and then acting from them ensures that one's actions are morally correct and promote human flourishing. The development of a virtuous character insures that people can act morally by habit, as morally correct patterns of behavior are practiced and become a part of that person's consistent approach to moral problems and questions. Virtues differ from emotions in that they are reliable, fixed standards for action and constitute the whole of a person's character when properly nurtured and developed.

There is considerable debate about which traits constitute virtues, and the writing on this subject is voluminous. Most often, arguments about virtue revolve around the definition of the named virtue—for example, what is temperance?—and the interpretation of what that virtue entails—does temperance mean refraining from alcohol? Because of these debates, virtue ethics fell somewhat out of favor during and after the Enlightenment, but it experienced a resurgence in the latter half of the twentieth century.

Virtue ethics in Western thought stretches back to Aristotle in the fourth century BCE (in Chinese thought it goes back even further). Aristotle advocated the development of the virtues as the way to moral actions. He described the virtues—courage, temperance, generosity, friendship, and so on—as the path halfway between two extremes of action. Courage, for example, is the mean between rash actions and cowardly ones.⁶ Aristotle believed virtuous actions would flow from a virtuous character. For virtue ethicists, the most important question is not, what should I do? but, who should I be? Who I am will determine which actions I take or do not take.

Divine Command Ethics

Another category of ethics that is sometimes included in discussions of religious ethics is divine command ethics. This view of ethics is not accepted as valid by all scholars, but is mentioned here as it sometimes appears in discussions of religious ethics. Divine command ethics is the view that morality is dependent on the will of God, that God commands what is good and prohibits what is evil. The morality or immorality of an action cannot be evaluated apart from God and God's commandments. This form of ethics would only apply, then, to religious ethical systems that are associated with a God who gives commandments to human beings, such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Buddhism, which does not express a belief in this type of divine being or god, could not be evaluated using divine command ethics.

Categories and Comparative Religious Ethics

Although these categories have long been used to describe different theories of ethics and ethical systems, they emphasize only individual aspects of religious ethical systems. Most ethical

systems have elements of all three of these categories, however, and religious ethical systems in particular do not fit neatly into any classification. Judaism, for example, lists a great many rules for moral conduct in the Torah and explains these rules in the Talmud. But this does not make Judaism a deontological system that is set apart from a consequentialist or virtue ethics system, for Judaism also emphasizes what it takes to be a good person and a faithful believer. Similarly, Buddhism emphasizes virtues as well as duties and obligations, the latter of which are many and varied.

In some ways, the categories discussed above can be seen as complementing each other and thus can add to our understanding of religious ethics. Instead of struggling to fit the moral concepts of each religious tradition into one of these classifications, it is more helpful to identify the elements of each category that exist in each religious moral system. This enhances the understanding of not only the individual aspects of each tradition but of the traditions overall as well.

COMPARATIVE METHODS

Method is the term used to describe a given approach to studying the material of religious ethics. Because comparative religious ethics is a relatively young discipline, no one method is considered by scholars as the best way to study diverse moral traditions. Because of the multidisciplinary nature of studying religious ethics, it is likely that many different approaches to the subject will continue to be accepted as positive contributions. New approaches may also arise that contribute new perspectives to the field as it matures.⁷ There are many ways to approach the task of studying religious ethics. For our purposes, we can separate these methods into two loosely related groups: descriptive methods and conceptual methods.

Descriptive Methods

The first of the descriptive methods might be called the “direct approach” or “compare and contrast.”⁸ In this method, one simply looks at the different responses to the same moral issue from the perspective of the various traditions. Probably the most common approach to comparative ethics, this method is simple, direct, and easy to follow. Answering a single question or analyzing the same moral problem from the perspectives of the different traditions allows one to see clearly the similarities and differences between them. However, this approach is limited because it focuses only on the specific problem or question being considered and not on the more general moral sense permeating each tradition.

A second way to approach comparative religious study is the descriptive-conceptual approach. Closely related to the direct or compare-and-contrast approach, the descriptive-conceptual approach simply describes each tradition and its major moral concepts in a neutral way. Used by most world religions textbooks, the descriptive-conceptual method attempts to inform and explain, not make judgments about which religious tradition better understands a specific moral situation. This is a good approach for beginners, but a deeper understanding of the moral traditions of the world’s religions requires greater investigation and more complex moral thinking.

Another method for comparing religious ethics uses case studies. Case studies differ from the moral questions considered in the direct or compare-and-contrast approach, because case studies are more complex and involve layers of moral inquiry and the actions of multiple decision-makers. These case studies resemble those used in the fields of sociology or psychology or ethnographic studies. Case studies in comparative religious ethics often highlight specific moral questions, not broader issues.

For example, a religious ethics case study might present a situation that asks questions about the treatment of a person in a nursing home. The responses with this approach would pertain only to the facts of that particular case, not the underlying moral issues associated with the administration and need for nursing homes.

Case studies make for compelling reading and offer many ways to gain insight into particular moral problems. They also more accurately describe real-life moral dilemmas than any other approach, because the questions presented derive from real situations and do not simplify the moral dilemmas for the sake of presenting a particular worldview or opinion. In addition, case studies offer many avenues for discussion and debate about principles, moral thinking, and the interplay between diverse opinions within the same tradition. The drawback to this approach is its complexity; one can become mired in the details of each case without being able to stand back and see the larger picture involving the religious tradition and its moral views.

Conceptual Methods

In contrast to the descriptive methods noted above, conceptual methods focus less on detail and more on broad moral concepts that illustrate the tradition. This does not mean detail is unimportant to conceptual approaches; indeed, detail can serve to highlight broad moral concepts.

One conceptual method is the narrative approach, which uses stories and examples to illustrate the moral convictions of each tradition. These stories and examples usually are taken from the scriptures of each tradition or from moral stories told within the tradition. Stories exemplary of Hinduism, for example, might include readings from the Vedas and the Bhagavad Gita, as well as stories about the life of Gandhi and other important Hindus. A section on Christianity would include stories about

Jesus from the Gospels and from other early Christian writings and would likely include stories about John Wesley, Pope John Paul II, or Martin Luther King Jr.

A narrative approach has many strengths. Telling the stories of the ethical traditions of the world's religions, using their own narratives, is a good way to communicate some of the basic concepts and values of those traditions. It makes interesting reading and offers many avenues to further study. The main weakness of this approach is that all traditions have scores of stories, all of which are necessary to give a complete picture of the tradition. Most traditions encompass such diversity that only one aspect of the whole can be properly highlighted. For example, in illustrating the Buddhist ideal of social engagement and action for the good of the community, does one choose the story of the monks who protested the war in Vietnam, the more recent political actions advocated by some monks in Sri Lanka and Burma, or one of the many instances of oppression of Buddhists in China? Each tells a story of Buddhism, but none offers the whole picture.

The historical-conceptual approach is another way to compare religious ethics. This method looks at the major moral concepts of each tradition and analyzes how they developed historically, with an eye toward applying those concepts to similar contemporary problems. This approach is useful for studying the development of the moral theory behind each tradition, and then attempting to relate that theoretical framework to modern situations. Additionally, this method locates moral responses within the entire context of the tradition, not just one modern aspect of it. This is important because it lends historical perspective to modern moral problems and provides avenues for exploring the consequences of moral actions based on historical data that other methods cannot. This can greatly expand our knowledge of the analysis of

moral problems within that tradition and provide a deeper understanding of the basic concepts of the tradition.

The historical-conceptual approach also provides insights that can develop and expand the understanding of the religious tradition itself, even beyond its moral precepts. Investigating the development of moral theory can lend insight into the lives of important figures, for example, or demonstrate how conflicts between groups often led to the development of different moral trajectories over time. It can also deepen one's understanding of the genesis of religious communities and divisions within a religious tradition. One example of this is the development of the principle of nonviolence in the Hindu tradition and the influence those teachings had on Mohandas Gandhi. His adoption of this religious principle tells us a great deal about Gandhi, as does his later translation of the religious principle into a political principle. The political power of the principle of nonviolence in a society dominated by Hinduism also offers significant insight into how Hinduism itself works in the lives of believers. The actions of many people during the Indian war for independence from Britain, in which the nonviolence of Gandhi played a large part, illustrates the conflict between differing views of violence, nonviolence, justice, and oppression within the Hindu tradition.

One major drawback to the historical-conceptual approach is that it remains rooted in the past and in the conflicts and moral questions of the past. It is often difficult to bring historical responses to problems into dialogue with contemporary problems. Moral problems are rooted in specific situations, and how people respond to these problems is also rooted in particular contexts. The modern world and its problems sometimes differ greatly from the historical situations and questions that each tradition has faced. For example, questions of

medical ethics within each religious tradition changed tremendously in the twentieth century as medical technology enabled new treatments and cures. The historical-conceptual approach can lend insight into these emerging problems but cannot completely address all of the issues involving new technologies.

A final method for comparative study, at least for the purposes of this book, is the interreligious dialogue approach. This method sees the task of comparative religious ethics as an opportunity for cross-cultural understanding and dialogue among religious traditions. This approach accepts the pluralism of the modern world—the diversity of religious thinking and moral values that live in close proximity to each other—and seeks to bring discussion and understanding between religious groups to bear on common moral problems. The search for common ground in addressing moral problems that affect society is aided by dialogue between religious traditions and also by dialogue between religion and secular elements in society: atheists, nontheists, and humanists, for example. The interreligious dialogue approach acknowledges all perspectives as important for addressing moral problems, especially those problems that affect all people in a society. While it remains rooted in the study of religion and its general moral imperatives, this approach views comparative study as a vehicle for social transformation through understanding.

A major benefit of interreligious dialogue is the opportunity it offers for different groups to learn about each other's religious traditions, worldviews, and concepts of ethics and moral behavior. Dialogue and study can draw out many similarities in moral thinking and can bring members of diverse communities closer together. A drawback, of course, is that dialogue can also highlight differences in moral understanding, some of which may be strong and may produce more conflict than consensus.

The Ongoing Development of Method

These are not the only methods for studying religious ethics. Many different methods are used and others are still being developed. Some newer methods focus on the various religious traditions from a feminist perspective, honing in on the ethical aspects of the tradition in relation to women and the treatment of women. Some of the newest methods are ecologically oriented and consider how each tradition views the earth and one's responsibility to it. There are also methods that examine religious traditions, conflicts, and moral actions in a particular geographical context, inspecting

one country or region in the world and the interplay between different religious understandings in that area.

All of these are valid approaches to studying religious ethics, primarily because the task of comparative religious ethics cannot be contained entirely in one method. Different approaches are also complementary; realistically speaking, no one method can productively stand alone without insight from many of the others. The narrative approach, for example, relies on the insights of the historical-conceptual approach, which in turn draws from the descriptive-conceptual approach. In the same way, the interreligious dialogue approach must draw from several others to accomplish its goals.

Conclusion

Ethics and morality are closely related, and because both concern human behavior, the terms are usually interchangeable. Many forces, including our families, communities, and teachers, shape our moral conscience. Of all of the influences that form who we are and what we do, religion is among the most powerful and is a potent force in the formation of the moral conscience.

As we have seen, numerous methods exist for the study of comparative religious ethics, although distinctions between them are somewhat artificial since each method complements the others. The following chapters will examine various religious traditions and the foundations of ethics within these traditions.

Discussion Questions

1. Think about all of the factors in your own life: your family, community, friends, religion, and so on. Which ones have been the most influential in forming your conscience? Could any of these factors be considered equally influential for all people?
2. Scholars have voiced different goals for studying religious ethics. Consider the different methods described in this chapter. What do you think should be the goal of the study of religious ethics? How would you accomplish this goal?
3. Do you agree or disagree that ethics is an essential part of human life, a part of being human? Is it possible to escape the responsibility of moral decision-making?
4. What is the relationship between religious ethics and the broader secular culture? In your opinion, is this a good relationship or a bad one?

5. In an American context, do you think the values of the Judeo-Christian tradition can be completely removed from the public sphere?
6. Consider the methods of studying religious ethics discussed in this chapter. What other perspectives might shed more light on religious ethics and how it operates in the world?
7. In light of the many differences between religious traditions, can moral systems be validly compared? Why or why not?
8. What are some of the intellectual dangers in engaging in the task of comparing religious ethical systems?
9. What role does the religious faith of the scholar play in studying religious ethics?
10. Are there any religious traditions or groups of which you are aware that would not be good candidates for comparative religious study? Why would these traditions make poor subjects for comparative study?

For Further Study

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Notes

1. Daniel C. Maguire and A. Nicholas Fagnoli, *On Moral Grounds: The Art, Science of Ethics* (New York: Crossroad, 1991), 7.

2. Maguire and Fagnoli, *On Moral Grounds*, 146.

3. Lawrence C. Becker and Charlotte B. Becker, eds. *Encyclopedia of Ethics* (New York: Routledge, 2001).

4. Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, ed. Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 17.

5. John Stuart Mill and Jeremy Bentham, *Utilitarianism and Other Essays*, ed. Alan Ryan (New York: Penguin Books, 1987), 145.

6. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, book II, trans. Terence Irwin (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 1985).

7. Elizabeth M. Bucar, "Methodological Invention as a Constructive Project," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 36 (3): 355–73.

8. The descriptions and categories of methods that follow are my own assessment of the work currently being done in comparative religious ethics. Every person who writes about comparative ethics and methods will have his or her own list, which may differ significantly from this one.