

INTRODUCTION

Comparative Religious Ethics and the Contemporary Search for Meaning

Comparative study of religions, and by extension, comparative religious ethics, began as ways for persons from one religion, confronted by persons of differing beliefs and practices, to learn about one or more other religions and their ethical practices and beliefs. In the many decades since comparative study of religions began, we have learned a great deal. One of our most striking findings is how difficult it is to be “objective” in a study of the religions and cultures of others. This is not just a matter of prejudice, or assumed superiority of one’s own religious culture, though that has certainly been a prominent problem as well. Even well-intentioned persons have encountered pitfalls in attempting to learn other religious cultures.

Perhaps the most basic problem is that we inevitably approach another religious culture limited by our own culture and experience. Limited to experiences of our own religion, we take it as the norm, though in some areas our own may be the most idiosyncratic of world religions, and not typical at all. All the concepts that we know are limited by our language; just as there are some sounds that are peculiar to some languages and not to others,

there are also many concepts that are specific to some religious cultures and not found in any form in others. Thus when we approach another religious culture, in our ignorance of the range of religious cultures we may apply inappropriate norms based on our experience of our own religion. However, it would be wrong to assume that it is those without any religion at all who are most objective in approaching any religion. For persons without any religious training at all often lack, or have already rejected, some of the most basic concepts in all religions, such as the idea that humans can experience ultimate reality and that there is a goal and purpose to human life. Without openness to such concepts, understanding religions is virtually impossible.

As in language study, once we have learned one religious culture outside our own, we not only understand our own religion more clearly and objectively, but we are better prepared to learn another and yet another more easily, because our sense of the structure of religious culture is better informed, based on our having access to more and more examples.

This pattern—the adequacy of understanding increasing with growth in knowledge of

successive religious cultures—is not only true for individuals. It is also true for the discipline of comparative religion as a whole. Because there are many more scholars today who have been exposed to more religions in more depth than in the past, scholarly capacity to compare religions without distortion, while still difficult, is constantly deepening. While comparative study of religion and of religious ethics has not been in the past and is still not today totally free of religious and cultural bias, the situation has greatly improved over that of a century or two ago. Three of the factors that have facilitated that improvement are modern communications media, modern modes of travel, and migration. More and more data are available about more and more religions not only through increased publication, but also through digital means. At the same time, travel is so much faster than in the past that international conferences at which scholars from different religions from all over the world gather to exchange knowledge and perspectives are constantly occurring.

Today, for example, an academic planning an edited book on the status of women in world religions can enlist top scholars from all over the world in six or eight major religions to write first drafts on the status of women in their religion and then have all the authors fly to a single conference center for a few days of discussing and critiquing each other's work before each writes the final version of their chapter. I myself have participated in six or seven books based on this model, which was virtually impossible to organize before the Internet and certainly highly impractical before jet planes made it possible to attend intercontinental meetings that required only a day or two of travel.

Perhaps even more important for the improved quality of comparative religion

scholarship is the fact that religious diasporas have moved scholars from all the world's religions to universities everywhere in the world. The nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century perspective of western scholars on all the religions of the world, originally based in their knowledge of Christianity and Judaism, has more recently been broadened and corrected by the inclusion in the dialogue and research of international scholars from all over the globe. For example, the faculty in my own university department includes an African religions scholar from Ghana, a Latin American religions scholar from Colombia, and an American Islamic scholar whose parents immigrated to the United States from Iran, as well as U.S. scholars of Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity, and Native American religions. I also research in Indonesia and teach in a graduate university religion program there, while other United States faculty in my department regularly research and teach in Japan, Israel, and India. The level of interreligious collaboration possible today due to these factors helps to correct many of the mistaken understandings that characterized earlier attempts at comparative religions.

Dealing with Bias

In late modernity when comparative religious studies began, attempts to eliminate bias aimed at objectivity and often attempted to “bracket” the categories and classifications and interpretations that we take with us into the study of anything new. They insisted they could thus clear a path for simply describing what our senses tell us, without our attempting to interpret the data. Bracketing was a well-intentioned attempt, but it quickly became clear that the human mind interprets new data based on what it has already learned.

Our minds are not really tablets that can be erased so that we can experience anything as completely new. Our minds always use prior knowledge to interpret what our bodies are seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, and touching. Just as we use our knowledge of color learned in one part of our world to describe colors in another part of our world, our minds use prior knowledge of facial expressions and body language to understand new communities of humans. But since people and cultures can differ a great deal, sometimes using our prior knowledge causes us to misunderstand the new culture. Bracketing is not sufficient in part because we are often not even conscious of our use of earlier concepts, models, and patterns to interpret new ones.

Bias as Unavoidable

In the course of reading and discussing this text, you should be aware that as westerners, as Americans, we share a great many assumptions and convictions that are not shared with the rest of the world—and not because the rest of the world is less intelligent or less educated, as is often assumed. Every culture understands its own perspectives as self-evident. And there is a sense in which those assumptions are self-evident, in that they are responses to that culture's particular histories and events, geographies, and political structures. Understanding others' perspectives is often a matter of standing in another's shoes—if we had the same histories and experiences as people in another culture, we would probably see the world as they do. Westerners, perhaps especially Americans, are often somewhat blinder than persons in other cultures to the variety of ethical perspectives, and more likely to assume that ours is the best, or even the only truly ethical perspective. One reason for this is that we are such

a large nation that much of our social intercourse is with other Americans, who reinforce our moral attitudes and worldviews. We are also very aware that much of the world has admired the freedoms, prosperity, and power of the West and America, and we often interpret this as evidence that our way is best.

But there is another way to look at the fact of America's place in the world and its effect on our ethical perspectives. Precisely because America has been the most powerful and richest nation in the world for over a half century now, Americans have not needed to know other cultures—our very power and wealth have insulated us from dependence on other peoples, for it is the less powerful partner in any relationship that needs to understand the more powerful one. In the field of ethics, however, assuming the superiority of one's perspective is morally dangerous. In chapter 4, for example, we shall see how western assumptions about Muslim veiling can prevent understanding major shifts in social, political, and religious movements.

Postmodern approaches to avoiding bias have gone even further than attempts at objectivity. They consist of an acknowledgment that though we try our best, we will not be able to completely leave our own cultural framework behind, so that in addition to remaining aware of the need to be objective, we should disclose our own social locations to our audiences. Such disclosure, for example that I am a Christian (Catholic) white American heterosexual female university professor over fifty-five, allows my audience to approach my text with a hermeneutic of suspicion and to test my text for bias. Such disclosure opens up the conversation to those from other perspectives, which will significantly enrich the conversation.

Effects of Comparative Religious Education on Faith

Instructors in comparative religion have often insisted to the hesitant that exploring other religions does not undermine faith in one's own religion, but instead enables one to more fully appreciate its particular character and strengths. This is true for the most part. Still, instructors in comparative religion today have occasional students who belong to religions or denominations of religions that forbid the study of other religions/denominations, especially attendance at the worship services of other religions/denominations. Depending upon the characteristics of the students' specific religions, learning about other religions could raise questions about one's own, but this is most likely for students who do not know their own tradition well and/or whose tradition insists that it has a monopoly on truth. It is only honest to admit that the study of comparative religion develops students' critical facility. Religious cultures that are hostile to any questioning of the tradition or deny that any historical development has occurred in their tradition will not be comfortable with their youth learning of other religious traditions.

Yet just as studying the history of one's own religion opens up new understandings of the process of ongoing development that has characterized it, so studying another religion's ethical teaching makes us aware of the different priorities that can arise among the elements of religion in any religious tradition due to specific situations facing each religious community at any given time. As the situation facing the community changes, so does the priority that the community places on any single value or behavior.

Comparative Religion and the Media Explosion

The explosion of information media today has made the teachings and rituals of even the historically least well-known and seemingly exotic religions the stuff of countless blogs and individual postings. We cannot only find on the Web how to make a bomb, but we can also in an instant find explanations of Jewish kosher practices, Anglican exorcism rites, and "insider" accounts of the last papal conclave in the Catholic Church. While the easy availability of information on a multitude of religions has the potential for eradicating ignorance, which is one of the most common sources of religious bias, it also has other effects. The secrets and special knowledge that were once a strong support for religious officials' claims of authority are now plastered across the public's screens (not always accurately, one should note). Nor are the private personalities of religious authorities secret today. The mystery that once surrounded the Pope, the Dalai Lama, ayatollahs and imams, Hindu gurus, and other high-ranking religious leaders has been eroded by our seeing their faces on TV and Internet, in newspapers and magazines, and reading interviews with them. Most of these figures write, often with the help of ghost-writers, books that sell to millions. While for some this accessibility has facilitated learning of another approach to religious faith, for many people today, religious authorities have become all blended together in the broader class of celebrities—those who are simply celebrated for being famous rather than for any particular accomplishments. This has been one factor in the spread of agnosticism and secularism in the modern and postmodern world.

Growth of Agnosticism and Secularism

Today in most universities, in the larger American public, and even more in other developed nations, there are growing numbers of nonreligious persons. For some of these persons, the existence of divinity or afterlife is an unsettled question. Such agnostics are neither believers nor atheists. For some of them, religion is not a great interest in their lives, but for others, these unsettled questions provoke an interest in learning about or experimenting with religion as a way of finding answers. For those nonreligious who are atheists, who have decided the nonexistence of divinity and afterlife, there is no interest in learning about religion, and the place allocated to religion in modern life, especially in the public sphere, is seen as both mistaken and an unjust imposition on nonbelievers.

Even among those who count themselves religious believers, there is reluctance in many not only to accept that any one religion has a monopoly on truth, but even to accept that any one world religion is the principal source of truth. In short, there is an unwillingness to concede authority either to religious officials or to the religious traditions that these officials seek to represent.

Varieties of Disestablishment

In much of the world where democratic forms of government have sprung up, ensuring religious freedom has meant the disestablishment of any and all religions. Disestablishment, however, has taken various forms; the U.S. version, separation of church and state, is not the only one, and in many places is considered extreme. In Great Britain, for example, the queen is still the head of the Church of England, though citizens

are not obliged to belong; and in Germany, citizens direct whether a share of their taxes goes to the Lutheran or the Catholic church, though it is possible to opt out. In many nations, one's religion is still listed on one's identity documents (birth certificates, passports), and not all religions may be recognized. A number of nations, for example, Israel, have different court systems for different religions, especially in matters of marriage, divorce, family law, and inheritance, though all citizens are subject to the national courts on other issues. The U.S. model of separation of church and state is seen by much of the world as the most secular, in that religion is made virtually completely private. Not only does the U.S. government not record—even in the census—the religion of citizens, but it cannot legislatively favor any religion in any way. The often-resented ban on local governments from displaying Christian nativity scenes at Christmas is but one example of the exiling of religion from public space in order not to use government power to impose any religion or its beliefs on citizens who are not members.

During most of the twentieth century, the challenge around religion in the United States was to protect non-Christians from both religious discrimination and from government-supported projections of Christian faith, for example, in the school systems, in holiday observance, and even in the prisons.¹ More recently, challenges have come from the non-religious, who object to any public projections of religious faith, whether governmental or not. For example, some atheist groups have objected to religious programs on television stations that are privately owned but use the governmentally regulated airwaves. Their protests have been denied on the grounds that the separation of church and state does

not require that religions have fewer rights than corporations or other associations of citizens; to support the atheist position in this would be to discriminate against religion, which runs opposite to the framers of the Constitution, who wrote separation of church and state into the Constitution not to limit religion, but to protect all religions from domination by one. Thus far, it has seemed impossible to find a policy that (1) equally allows all religious persons to freely express their religious beliefs, (2) without either permitting majority religions from using government power to project their practices on members of minority religions, or (3) subjecting nonreligious persons to direct or indirect proselytization efforts by religions.

Seeker Generations

It is a religiously interesting time. Influenced by all these movements, more university students than ever before are enrolling in religion courses across America, some even taking a major, a second major, or a minor in Religious Studies. Yet when asked about their religious status, most of these students reply that they are not “religious,” they are “spiritual.” What most of them mean is that they are interested in the questions of transcendence and theism, see themselves as serious seekers after wisdom, and find—or at least seek—riches hidden in the various religious traditions; but they no longer believe, if they ever did, that any one religion has enough of the answers to justify submitting themselves to the authority of that religion.

A UCLA-based study of American college youth surveyed over 112,000 college freshmen in 2004 at 236 public and private colleges and universities and then resurveyed 14,527 of these students (at 136 institutions) in 2007 as they were completing their junior year.² The

study found that, not surprisingly, attendance at religious services declines steeply during college/university, while other forms of religious engagement show similar but smaller declines. Student levels of religious struggle—defined as feeling unsettled about religious matters, disagreeing with family about religious matters, feeling distant from God, questioning one’s religious beliefs, or feeling disillusioned with one’s religious upbringing—increase significantly during the college years.

Yet at the same time, the authors found that student spirituality increases alongside the decrease in religious practice. Measures of what they call equanimity—defined as “the extent to which the student is able to find meaning in times of hardship, feels at peace or is centered, sees each day as a gift, and feels good about the direction of her life”—show significant increases during the college years, and these increases are correlated with increases in grade point average, leadership skills, sense of psychological well-being, ability to get along with other races and cultures, and satisfaction with college.³ An ethic of caring was also found to grow during students’ college years, and it was found to be related to charitable involvement and ecumenical worldview in students.

Findings such as these will not reassure much of the religious community about the religious direction of the young, but they go a long way to defuse the very troubling assumption long made that religious commitment is the only source of moral values.

There are a number of reasons for this preference in the young for spirituality over religion. At one level it reflects a kind of post-modern skepticism about authority in general. Inevitably, knowing about many religions and cultures relativizes any one religion’s claims of absolute authority or monopoly of truth,

even if it often does also deepen our appreciation of specific practices and teachings in our own. There is also a great deal of individualism involved in this preference of spirituality over religion. Americans, like persons in many late-modern/postmodern societies, are relatively well educated and accustomed to making responsible decisions for themselves as individuals, as well as for others within their specialized occupations. Yet in many traditional religions, decision making is restricted to an elite few. For many today, the disparity between their decision-making responsibility in their inherited religion and that which is exercised in the rest of their lives is not comfortable. There is a yearning for greater religious autonomy. For some, nothing less than complete religious autonomy will satisfy. But for many others, the felt need is for *participation* in religio-ethical decision making, for basing religious community upon the collective processes of experiencing and worshipping Ultimate Reality and deciding how that experience and worship should direct ethical choices for individuals and communities, and not simply upon the experience of persons in the far-distant scriptural past interpreted today by small elites.

Then, of course, there are the many scandals in religions that have further undermined the claims of religious authority. Popular TV preachers jailed for fraud and tax evasion or exposed as adulterers and/or sexual abusers, religion as the rallying cry for war and terrorism, churches declaring bankruptcy from paying legal settlements to victims of child sexual abuse by priests, and internecine battles over poaching members from the fields of other sects—all of these have disillusioned many, not only the young, and have further disinclined individuals to concede authority to religious officials and institutions.

Private Religion

Religion scholars for more than a generation have deplored student individualism in religion, arguing that there is no such thing as a private religion. If one is to practice a faith, we professors have argued, one should be part of a community practicing that faith. A religion for one is like cooking for one—not worth the trouble. Is an individual really going to develop ritual for herself? How does an ethic develop within a private religion with no partners in discourse? We have argued with

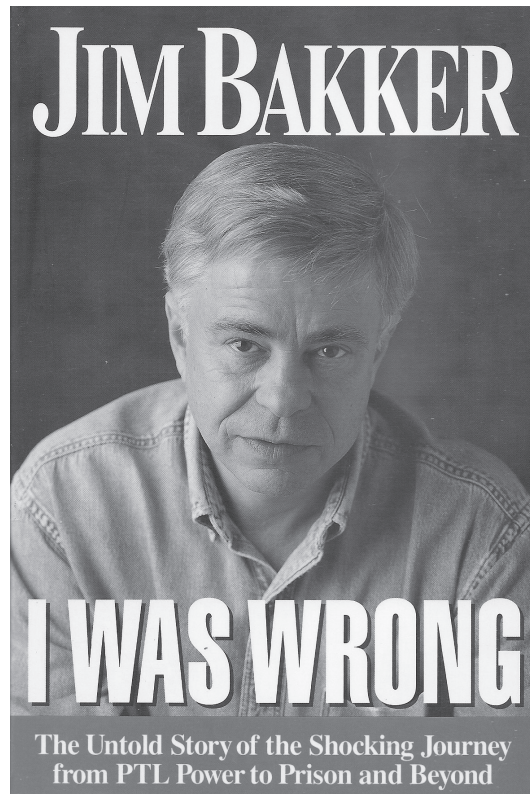


Fig. Intro.1. Jim Bakker, former Assemblies of God televangelist, was convicted in 1989 of multiple counts of fraud and bribery involving his Praise the Lord club after he was removed from leadership following rape charges by an employee.

our students, often attempting to turn them back toward the institutional religions they came from, urging them to get involved and fix what was wrong, but not to kid themselves about having a private religion. To no avail. And now many of those students are parents, even grandparents, still disaffected with religious institutions, and still seekers.

It is time, I think, to realize that we cannot turn back the clock. Many traditional religions seem to be in decline, but religion around the world is fertile and fermenting, throwing up new experiments constantly. Many millions of persons are religious seekers, and hundreds of new religions are born every year. Many—perhaps most—of these new religions will not last, but some will eventually become large, venerated religious traditions. It is a time of global religious births and revivals, and university Religious Studies need to be interacting with this religious reality.

These young and no-longer-young skeptics have been crying for relevance in religion: How does this tradition speak to me in my situation? Too often, academic Religious Studies has not had an answer. This situation is changing as the dominant method in Religious Studies moves from textual, theological, and historical study of religions to social scientific study of religious belief and practice around the world. This is a shift in focus from what might be understood as “ideal” religion, studying religion in texts as handed down by the theological and liturgical experts, to studying what could be understood as “real” religion, as actually practiced by participants. This trend needs to grow, and more attention needs to be given to it. Mobility in the populations of the world, increased interest in interreligious dialogue, advances in communication technology, and the adaptations that occur with the spread of religions into new

cultures—all of these have made our world a cauldron of religious change.

Is Seeker Religion “Private” Religion?

These seekers of all ages who cry for relevance between faith and everyday life and describe themselves as “spiritual”—are they all doomed to private (individual) religions? No. Some seekers are always finding new religious homes by either joining more open and experimental communities within previously existing religions, or by joining, even creating, new religious communities. Some of these associations will endure and some will not, for different reasons. One reason for dissatisfaction and shifting of religious affiliations is not only true for seekers, but for nonseekers as well: at different stages of our lives we have different ethical and spiritual needs.

Sociologists tell us that in the late teen years in most western religions the majority of young people drift away, either partially or completely, from the religious communities in which they were raised.⁴ For some Christian churches, as many as two-thirds to three-quarters become “unchurched.” This is a part of what the UCLA study was finding. But between their midtwenties and their thirties, well over half of these will return, at least for a time, largely because they have married and now have children. These returnees want their children to receive a spiritual and moral socialization. But most have no idea how to provide it on their own and so revert to the example of their own parents. Some of those who do not return will not affiliate anywhere; they may become seekers or atheists or simply religious agnostics.

There are, of course, dangers in this now well-recognized trend in religion. Scholars deplore the shallowness of much of the

current interest in religion. Students often want to know “the basics,” sometimes even only the most exotic practices, of a number of religions, instead of delving deeply into any one. There is a worry that much of the riches of individual religious traditions will be lost. In the “cafeteria” approach favored by many students of Religious Studies, one can choose to practice Buddhist meditation, Native American sweat lodge, or Jewish *mikvah*, the five daily prayers of Muslims, and Christian baptism. Critics charge that such a cafeteria approach ignores the intrinsic relationship between different aspects of a single tradition: each part is linked to the others, sharing a single worldview and metaphysics. Perhaps most important for ethics and spirituality, critics point out that at the heart of each religion is a discipline designed to connect individuals not only in mutual obligation to each other, but also to God/the Divine/Ultimacy. These disciplines are not easy paths. They involve multiple steps and much trial and error within the process of spiritual training. Critics doubt that choosing the most attractive practices from a number of religions will constitute a sufficiently coherent discipline to achieve the goals of divine communion and caring commitment to others.

Beyond Secularization Theory

Yet it does not seem as if the troops will go back to the barracks. We should be clear here. For a century, social scientists studying religion have debated the secularization theory: the idea that as the world becomes increasingly modern, with higher levels of education and persons involved in many different complex organizations, religion becomes less and less important, and the masses become increasingly secular. In the last decades,

however, it has become clear that the conclusion of the secularization theory is false; religion is not disappearing. Andrew Greeley points out to the contrary that following the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991 religion enjoyed a strong resurgence throughout Eastern Europe and Russia.⁵ In Europe as a whole over the last decades, religion has been not only both advancing and retreating, depending upon the local situation, but also changing and becoming less institutional. Religion in China has been on the rise for some decades now, and new religions are springing up all over the world. New forms of Christian Pentecostalism are enrolling many millions across Asia and are coming close to becoming the religion of the majority in some nations of Africa and Latin America.

Persons Both Secular and Religious

Yet at the same time that religion is not dying out, the role of religion in human society has definitely been changing during this end of modernity and beginning of postmodernity. Even among the religious, religion is becoming more and more voluntary—that is, chosen by the individual—instead of prescribed by one’s family, even though extended families often choose to follow one of their members into a new faith. This increasing voluntariness of religious identity and membership means that religion is a serious interest for many today at the same time that religion in much of the world, certainly in the West, has been pushed out of organized public life.

Before the modern era, when a new religion arose it was taken for granted that when it enrolled the controlling powers (a monarch, the aristocracy, the military) of a nation, it would become the state religion. When one state conquered another, it almost always imposed participation in its own religion on

the conquered, though often not attempting to eradicate the previous religion. Many states, for example, the Roman Empire until the fourth to sixth centuries, dealt with religious challenges to the established religious cult by simply including the new god in their pantheon. Nor is this pattern historically obsolete. Especially in Asia, where native religions have never been exclusivist as have the western Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), we commonly see Japanese marrying in Shinto rites and dying with Buddhist funeral rituals. For religious Chinese, their practice is often a mixture of Daoist, Buddhist, and Confucian traditions. In the Hindu pantheon, there are not only a multitude of gods and goddesses that are the accumulation of different geographical areas and historical periods, but a number of deities are called by a variety of names and titles with different origins, clues as to past amalgamations of religious cults.

The western Abrahamic faiths have strongly resisted inclusion of beliefs and practices of other religions. Of course, such inclusion has taken place despite official policies to the contrary, sometimes at the initiative of religious officials, and sometimes despite their efforts. An example of the former would be the adoption of Christmas by the Christian church. Missionaries in northern Europe were faced with the difficulty of converting the local population, given that conversion would bar them from participating in the communal celebrations to the gods that marked the winter solstice. By deciding to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ on December 25, the missionaries established an alternative reason for celebrating with Christmas trees, yule logs, mistletoe, and the foods and drink of the winter solstice celebration.

An example of the latter pattern, where adoption of practices or beliefs from other religions was opposed by religious officials yet occurred nonetheless, was the worship by ancient Jews of Yahweh alongside his consort Asherah, a Ugaritic goddess commonly worshipped in Canaan. Though biblical evidence was sparse, more recent archeological excavations, many from the eighth century BCE, have unearthed a number of artifacts that mention Yahweh and his Asherah. Most scholars now agree that monotheism developed slowly among the ancient Jews, many of whom worshipped Yahweh and Asherah—the pairing of gods being common in the Ancient Near East—until priestly monotheism, aided by the 586 BCE conquest by the Babylonians, was finally able to prevail.

Some western religions still forbid the inclusion of “foreign” practices in worship, such as the Vatican teaching that forbids Catholics from practicing Buddhist meditation. Yet the very reason for announcing such bans is that many members of the church are practicing such meditation. Buddhist meditation and yoga have become common practices among many Jews and Christians, and even among small but increasing numbers of Muslims. Today in the United States many people practice the purification rites of their own as well as other religions, such as Native American sweat lodge or Ramadan-type fasting, as part of seeking a higher level of religious consciousness.

At the same time, some barriers are breaking down between religious sects. In the United States for example, there was until the last forty years a fairly strong division between Catholic and Protestant Christian hymns. As the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) reformed Catholic worship toward more congregational participation

and the use of the vernacular, Catholic music directors were hard-pressed for some years to find sufficient substitutions for the Gregorian chant and Latin hymns that had prevailed before. New liturgical music was developed, but in the process people realized that except for the Catholic emphasis on Eucharist in many of the new hymns, it was difficult to tell the difference between Protestant and Catholic hymns. So old Protestant standards, such as “Amazing Grace,” and even Luther’s “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God,” became familiar mass music for Catholics at the same time that some of the new hymns developed for Catholic worship appeared in Lutheran and Presbyterian hymnals.

Audience for This Text: Seeker-Skeptics

This book is written for the seeker-skeptical students of Religious Studies who know that there is something valuable to be found in the study of religion, however reluctant they may be to sign on to any one existing religion. We will have to wait and see how the present shake-up of religions works itself out and whether the seeker-skeptics will yet find organized religious communities that suit their needs. Meanwhile, within their search for religious meaning, they will test varied religious teachings within the structures of their everyday lives. They will attempt to see, for example, whether any of the teachings of religions on human work relate to their experience of work, how their welfare as defined by religions is connected to that of needy strangers, and whether what religions say about the roles of food and body adornment is relevant for their project of creating self-identity. This book is a resource for such analysis.

Religion, if it is alive, is a part of everyday life, not a few moments periodically outside that life. In this volume, we will examine various aspects of everyday life and the moral decisions we make concerning them—about eating, working, covering our bodies, sex, friends and family, anger and violence, and charity—looking to isolate the ethical problems felt by living persons today, the concerns that world religions have had ethical discourse about in these areas of life, and areas of overlap between the two.

The ethical systems of religions have much more in common than do their belief or ritual systems, because the members of very different religions often had very similar life experiences, and because religions did not invent basic human values, but rather built upon them. Human experience has always grounded the establishment of religions; it was through human experience that values were discovered and lifted up. The real differences that do exist within comparative religious ethics are largely the result of the different cultural, historical, geographical, and even climatological contexts in which those religions developed, as each focused on using a body of largely similar human values in resolving the particular set of problems facing it. Some values took on greater priority in specific situations.

Biblical scholars have often pointed out, for example, that because of the harshness of the semi-arid Ancient Near East, the value of hospitality became highly developed and took on an ethical priority in the religions born there (Judaism, Islam, and Christianity) that was not found in more temperate zones.⁶ The very existence of trade and travel in the Ancient Near East depended upon a collective willingness to share water wells and even food with weary travelers. For this

reason, many of the stories in the Christian Old Testament/Hebrew Scriptures revolve around the virtue of hospitality and meetings at wells. A number of the stories about the Jewish patriarchs in the Hebrew Scriptures, and about Jesus in the Christian New Testament, occur at wells, and a number of Muslim hadith deal with justice around owning, sharing, and using wells.

What This Text Will Not Do

It is perhaps necessary to also say what this text will not do. It will not compare meta-ethical systems of religions.⁷ It will not lay out the moral worldview and basic moral principles of the world religions.⁸ It is not focused on comparative religious ethics as a basis for doing interreligious dialogue.⁹ It will not compare comprehensive thought systems of ethical leaders in the various religions.¹⁰ Instead, this text will attempt to lift up values, meanings, and interpretations from religions and also from “secular” thought (most of which has been influenced by the dominant religion of the culture) that are relevant to the most basic interests and activities of contemporary human beings in North America. The text will not try to convince readers of the truth of any one religion or of the superiority of any one system of religious ethics.

Instead, the focus will be eminently practical. The text will try to demonstrate that because humans have been virtually unanimously religious from our very origins, a great deal of the treasury of human wisdom and training in virtue is to be found within the religious traditions of the world, despite the institutional problems that afflict so many of them today. A helpful glossary at the back of the book clarifies the meanings of specialized terms used in the text.

Weighing Historical Richness and Contemporary Relevance

While some scholars lament that new religions springing up do not have the depth of theology or the richness of ritual developed over millennia that are found in traditional world religions, these things, while excellent in themselves, are not sufficient if believers cannot find links to their own lives in these religions. Relevance is what many contemporary seekers are searching for.

The spiritual and ethical wisdom in the world’s religions was not easily learned by the human race and was often learned at great cost. Like religions, most individual humans find that they learn their most valuable lessons from experience. We begin such learning in infancy when we learn not to touch hot things by burning our hands. With the development of multistep reasoning and analytic ability, young people and then adults are able to recognize in their own experience situations that resemble those they have heard in religious myths and codes. When we recognize an analogy between religious teachings and our life situation, impulsive responses can be checked and we are more cautious and deliberate in deciding action. The more ethical wisdom we have been exposed to, the more likely we are to have some of the necessary resources for making complicated ethical decisions today, both individually and as members of society. At the same time, as we will see in chapter 1, doing ethics will also require a great deal of social analysis of our current reality.

NOTES

1. Until the last few decades, U.S. prisons had chaplains, but only Christian and occasionally Jewish ones. More recently, in

- part as the result of court decisions, both prisons and the U.S. military have enlarged their chaplaincy programs so as to be able to provide spiritual and religious care for virtually all inmates/members, though the increasing variety of religion in America makes this a daunting task. Chaplaincy in federal prisons is still Christian-oriented, however, in that a prerequisite is eighty hours of graduate education in theology, sacred texts, religious history, and ministry at a school accredited by the organization that accredits seminaries and theological schools.
2. Alexander W. Astin, Helen S. Astin, and Jennifer H. Lindholm, *Cultivating the Spirit: How Colleges Can Enhance Students' Spiritual Lives* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010). An overview of the findings is available online at <http://spirituality.ucla.edu>.
 3. See overview at <http://spirituality.ucla.edu/findings/spiritual-measures/equanimity.php>.
 4. Similarly, but at much younger ages, Amish youth, usually between sixteen and eighteen, observe a period called *rum-springa*, during which they are allowed some laxity of behavior (often not nearly so radical as popularly depicted) in order that they come to a final decision about whether to accept baptism within the community, or leave it.
 5. Andrew Greeley, *Religion in Europe at the End of the Second Millennium* (London: Transaction, 2004).
 6. Two examples: Mario Liverani, *Myth and Politics in Ancient Near Eastern Historiography*, ed. Zainab Bahrani and Marc Van De Mieroop (London: Equinox, 2004), ch. 8, 160–92; and Andrew Arterbury, *Entertaining Angels: Early Christian Hospitality in Its Mediterranean Setting* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Phoenix, 2005).
 7. As does Charles Mathewes's *Understanding Religious Ethics* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).
 8. Mari Rapela Heidt, *Moral Traditions: An Introduction to World Religious Ethics* (Winona, MN: Anselm Academic, 1991), took this approach.
 9. See Sumner B. Twiss and Bruce Grelle, eds., *Explorations in Global Ethics: Comparative Religious Ethics and Interreligious Dialogue* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2000).
 10. For a text that does this, see Darryl J. Fasching, Dell deChant, and David M. Lantigua, *Comparative Religious Ethics: A Narrative Approach to Global Ethics* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).