PROJECT MUSE®

On the Future of Religious Ethics: Keeping Religious Ethics,
Religious and Ethical

William Schweiker

Journal of the American Academy of Religion, Volume 74, Number 1,
March 2006 , pp. 135-151 (Article)

Published by Oxford University Press

➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/196830>

AAR

ARTICLE

On the Future of Religious Ethics: Keeping Religious Ethics, Religious and Ethical

William Schweiker

This essay proposes a method and aim for the future of religious ethics. Rather than surveying the usual debates about the field, the essay situates the various kinds of work in religious ethics both in the contemporary global context and with respect to the modern western conception of what defines a “discipline” and the aspiration to a system of the sciences. In response to the breakdown of the modern project, various claims about rationality and also moral inquiry have arisen. Isolating the insights and yet also problems in these alternative models of inquiry, the essay proposes, as a method for religious ethics, a multidimensional and reflexive hermeneutic that reflects on and with religious sources. Further, the essay advocates as the aim or purpose of religious ethics the humane reconstruction of traditions around their deepest convictions and reflexive interactions with others. Calling this enterprise a form of “religious humanism,” the essay seeks to show not only the adequacy of such a conception of religious ethics but also its pertinence to critical, comparative, and constructive thinking.

William Schweiker is a Professor of Theological Ethics at The University of Chicago, The Divinity School, 1025 East 58th Street, Chicago, IL, 60637.

Journal of the American Academy of Religion March 2006, Vol. 74, No. 1, pp. 135–151
doi:10.1093/jaarel/lfj003

© The Author 2006. Published by Oxford University Press, on behalf of the American Academy of Religion. All rights reserved. For permissions, please e-mail: journals.permissions@oxfordjournals.org
Advance Access publication January 10, 2006

ALTHOUGH ETHICS, OR MORAL PHILOSOPHY, HAS A LONG HISTORY IN THE WEST, “religious ethics” is a relatively new discipline in the academy. The enterprise is not without its problems. One point of dispute is about how to conceive of the field. What exactly is “religious ethics” as an intellectual practice, and how, if at all, does it differ from theology or moral philosophy (Green 1978; Gustafson 1998; Lovin and Reynolds 1985; Reeder 1998; Schweiker 2005a; Stout 1998)? Does either “ethics” or “religion” pick out anything useful for inquiry into the beliefs and practices of communities?¹ Why do religious ethicists not call themselves theologians, and why do some Christian theologians often scoff at the idea of religious ethics?² Is it at all possible to “compare” forms of religious ethics or is any attempt at comparison going to be the imposition of one set of ideas on another community (Fasching and deChant 2000; Twiss 2005)? Second, there are disputes in moral theory: particularists versus universalists; constructivists versus realists; and virtue ethics versus deontology of various stripes (Antonaccio 2005; Gamwell 1990; Lovin 2005). Finally, there are endless debates about how graduate education should be organized, what texts ought to be read, what histories to chart, and hence what counts as the “classics” that a scholar should know in order to carry on careful and rigorous work in the field (Dyck 2005; Hauerwas 2003). Clearly, religious ethics designates an intellectual practice arising at a specific time and engaged in for specific purposes and about which there will be ongoing debate.

I do not think another article is needed that surveys these well-known problems and debates about religious ethics. This essay has been prompted by thoughts and worries that have developed over the years of my career. The main worry is that all too often religious ethics in whatever form (theological ethics, tradition-specific ethics, or some generalized idea of religious ethic) carries on its work with conceptions of inquiry which reduce rather than articulate the richness of the “religions” (however defined), and, what is more, there seems to be little reflection on what the normative aim of religious ethics ought to be in the emerging global age. Accordingly, in what follows, I want to outline my thinking

¹ Some thinkers worry that ideas of “religion” seduce us into believing that there is a thing called religion that is the “object” of religious studies (see Asad 2003; Taylor 1998). The problem of terms and definitions is one reason that *The Blackwell Companion to Religious Ethics* which I edited begins the section on a “religion” with an essay titled, for instance, “Hindu Ethics?” The question mark is singularly important and every scholar must answer the question (Schweiker 2005: 159–448).

² Consider James M. Gustafson’s famous statement that “An ethicist is a former theologian who does not have the professional credentials of a moral philosopher” (Gustafson 1978: 386). See also Hauerwas 1998.

on these two distinct but related matters, namely, how the field should be conceptualized (roughly matters of “method”) and the purpose of religious ethics. The onus placed on scholars of religious ethics, in my judgment, is to think as deeply and richly as the religions, to show the religious resonance of what is good and just, and also to labor to extend knowledge and understanding thereby to counter forces of ignorance and viciousness that arise within the religions and haunt the human adventure. I believe we need to keep religious ethics, religious and ethical. In that undertaking, properly understood, is to be found the field’s future.

To attain that future, my contention, boldly stated, is that the normative aim of the field, no matter how much constructive, critical, or comparative work is rightly done, must be to aid in the articulation and reconstruction of religious outlooks in order that they might serve their own most humane expression (Schweiker 2004a). Later I will speak about this aim in terms of *religious humanism*. I realize that there are various ways to aid the articulation and reconstruction of outlooks: the historian of ethics works in a very different way than (say) the social ethicist seeking to present a viable contemporary sexual ethics. Nevertheless, the context for all the forms of work in religious ethics is the pressing fact of the global interaction of the religions, for good or ill. How will the religions be lived? Nothing but moral timidity could convince a scholar that her or his job is to ride the *Zeitgeist* without care about global realities. Either intellectuals work with others to help to direct global forces in ways that combat ignorance through knowledge and injustice through responsible freedom or they embrace a remorseless cynicism about the power of ideas in human life as cowardly as it is vacuous. So despite the different forms scholarly labor can and must take in religious ethics, if one is interested in moral inquiry with and about religious resources, the present challenge is to aid the articulation and reflexive, humane reconstruction of traditions.

As a corollary to this aim, religious ethics needs to be reconceptualized. Typically, the “field” is now organized either in terms of ideas taken to be essential to one religious community’s moral outlook (say, narrative), and so what is called “tradition-constituted rationality,” or by means of some nontradition-specific theory of knowledge and inquiry. Despite the good these models of inquiry have done for ethics, they are also riddled with problems and pit tradition-specific ethics against more general version of “religious ethics.” I contend that we are now in a position to provide a more fulsome hermeneutic that moves beyond this dichotomy about what defines a discipline and valid cognitive claims. Shortly, I will write about that hermeneutics as a *multidimensional* one, a model of inquiry I have been developing for some time. If religious ethics is to be anything other than moral advocacy, commentary beholden to

traditional authorities, or the stepchild of moral philosophy, it must clarify the kinds of claims it makes and how it seeks to validate them. It must do so in ways that do not reduce the complexity of the religions or the dynamics of contemporary moral and religious life.

My contention, in sum, is that religious ethics is the name for a collaborative effort undertaken in different ways but sharing a broadly reconstructive and humane aim that is organized by means of multidimensional hermeneutical inquiry.³ To explain this proposal, I begin with the current situation facing ethics within religious studies. The majority of the essay addresses the two points noted, namely, the conception and the aim for the future of religious ethics. I conclude with responses to possible objections to the proposal.

ACADEMIC ANXIETIES

The anxiety of the religion scholar throughout the decades of the early and mid-twentieth century was that “religious studies” was only a pretender to inclusion in the university. That anxiety fueled debates about how to define religious studies and also the many battles between religious studies and Christian theology. In a moment, I will excavate some of the reasons for that anxiety embedded in modern ideas of what defines a discipline. First, one needs to grasp other features of our intellectual situation that have displaced the previous anxiety but which also confront scholars with a new challenge about the discipline of religious ethics.

Obviously, we live in a contested and morally ambiguous age. Three factors about this age are especially important for the work of religious ethics. First, despite the supposed dawning of the secular age, we are in fact living in a time of incredible religious vitality and conflict. Although modern religious ethics often fought about “secularism” under various guises, one salient feature of the current age is that the religions, old and new, are planetary forces. This has led to the scurry within the university to “get religion.” Increasingly we see courses on “religion” taught in many university departments. A second yet related feature of our situation is

³ My proposal stands with previous approaches to religious ethics. The account explores, like E. Troeltsch and others, the complexity of interactions among peoples and their social and cultural situation. Yet I am introducing decisive revisions in that kind of approach. This position does not assume a “religious a priori” as the transcendental condition of religion. It also does not seek to isolate “types” within a specific religion but rather charts the range of reflexive interactions among religions. Finally, the focus of analysis is not just on the relation of a religion and its sociocultural environment but, rather, on emergent global realities. I take these revisions to be necessary to meet well-known criticisms (See Schweiker 1998).

the global spread of awareness about moral problems ranging from human rights to the environmental crisis to problems of war and economic justice and medical advancements. The increased moral awareness crosses through different cultural and religious forms and is given various expressions and answers. These facts are important for the various kinds of religious ethics, precisely because these forms of thinking explore the intersection of “religious” and “moral” concerns. In a word, ethics is everywhere, and so too the study of the religions. To respond rightly to these facts, we must keep religious ethics, religious and ethical.

However, there is a third factor too little noted that characterizes the global situation and seems to be a source of anxiety about the aim of ethics within religious studies. Moral sensibilities, especially about the protection of human life and matters of social justice, are reflexively reshaping the resurgence of religious practices. Human rights discourse, to use one example, is exerting force on religious outlooks worldwide to reconstruct traditional practices and attitudes. The same could be said about ideas of cultural identity, women’s movements, economic justice, ecological awareness, and the interactions among religions. People’s local identities are being transformed and refashioned in and through emergent global moral sensibilities. The main question facing religious people around the world is, accordingly, the extent to which they find good reasons within their heritages to accent convictions and practices that speak to these global moral sensibilities, or, conversely, if they are driven to deny, often violently, the reflexive moral transformation of their heritage out of the need to preserve its purity. What we are witnessing worldwide is the confluence and mutual reconstruction of religious life and moral sensibility within an increased awareness of the vulnerability of human and nonhuman life.

The current situation poses challenges to how one understands the character and interaction of the “religions” and other social and cultural forces. Previous worries about the credibility of the study of religion within the academy now seem utterly misplaced. As noted, the university hankers to “get religion,” and the study of ethics permeates most academic programs. Yet in the face of global dynamics and the resurgence of the religions, a new scholarly anxiety has arisen, one concealed in debates about how to conceive of religious ethics. The anxiety is over whether or not the legitimate task for the future of religious studies is to aid the reconstruction of traditions within the whirl of global reflexivity. Should religious ethics help to articulate a tradition’s most humane insights into the endangerments to life arising within the tradition knowing that this will aid in that religion’s reconstruction? Does any such reconstructive attempt smack of hubris and pretense and loss of scholarly objectivity?

Conversely, can the scholar honestly labor away in classrooms and in front of the computer screen while being unconcerned, indifferent, to the living, religious realities enhancing and yet also tearing at our world? Anxiety about how to answer these questions comes to indirect expression in the flurry to develop interdisciplinary studies, the desire to keep comparative ethics immune from any normative impulse, the need to separate Christian or Buddhist or Jewish or Islamic ethics from the work of the larger academy, and also the many forms of moral and political advocacy that unabashedly struggle to change traditions. How might we confront and answer this scholarly anxiety about the purpose of ethics within religious studies? This requires, I submit, a new conceptualization of religious ethics and also clarity about its aim.

RECONCEIVING INTELLECTUAL PRACTICES

The background to current religious ethics in its various forms is the modern western project of how to define and organize inquiry free from ecclesial and political authority. The purpose of the modern project was to understand the world and human life by specifying the method, purpose, and criteria of various disciplines to emancipate human beings from ignorance and tyranny through the rational control of nature and society (Habermas 1987; MacIntyre 1990; Toulmin 1990). Every “discipline” had to have a specific autonomous, nonreducible subject matter which was nevertheless rationally consistent with all other disciplines. The conjunction of diversity of phenomena within rational uniformity thereby constituted a system of the sciences that was to be institutionalized in the modern university.⁴ The anxiety this provoked for scholars of religion was, again, that “religion” could neither constitute an autonomous subject matter (it could be reduced to something else, say, psychology) nor could it be mapped onto the system of the sciences. The struggles to develop “Religionswissenschaft” and to disconnect the study of religion from normative, and usually theological, concerns testify to

⁴ The question of how to define a discipline is longstanding. One thinks of Plato’s distinction between practical and theoretic sciences or Aristotle’s ideas about theoretic, productive, and practical sciences. There is the classical rhetorical tradition that reached into the renaissance and beyond. In the middle ages, Christians drew a distinction between wisdom (*sapientia*) and science (*scientia*) and debated whether theology was one or the other or in fact both. The early universities were often organized about the “professions” as well as the *trivium* and *quadrivium*. In the modern West one finds the rise of empirical methods (Bacon) and transcendental or a priori arguments (Descartes) that culminate in the idea of a system of the sciences. Analogous debates and developments can be found in other cultural traditions, say, in Jewish, Islamic, Buddhist, or Indian philosophy.

the force of that anxiety in the development of religious studies, including religious ethics.

With the much celebrated breakdown of the modernist idea of reason and the organization of the sciences, two well-known accounts of rationality and intellectual practices dominate much current work in religious ethics. Each of these models has greatly enhanced the field, but, in my judgment, has now shown its shortcomings for orienting future work. One model, noted above, insists on the conventional and historical shape of moral thinking and therefore the tradition-constituted nature of rationality. This model has helpfully turned reflection to the particularity of moral communities and their distinctive modes of reasoning and ways of life. Yet, it is not at all clear that this model of rationality provides adequate resources for responding to the reality of the global situation. Its advocates hope to see their own community through other's eyes, but there is little in this account of knowledge to explain or justify how that might in fact happen or why it should happen other than for the sake of communal security (see Hauerwas 2003). These kinds of positions often seem driven by the root anxiety noted before, namely, how to manage the transformation of traditions via reflexive interactions among communities (MacIntyre 1984; 1988). The explicit norm of religious ethics becomes the self-preservation of communities rather than their humane and religious reconstruction.

Another dominant proposal for organizing inquiry focuses on dialogue or intersubjective communication. Found in many versions, the basic idea is that there are validity claims implied in any act of communication (Habermas 1990; Tracy 1981). It is thereby possible to redeem claims, to establish their validity, through attention to the standards implicit in distinctive communicative acts. This too has greatly advanced work in all fields of inquiry. It has freed scholars from the impossible modernist task of securing nondiscursive standards of truth without reducing truth claims to conventional authorities, like the other model of rationality often does. Yet this model of rationality also poses problems, especially for ethics. How should various modes of thought and their specific validity claims interact? How can one enter debates in bioethics, for instance, without attention to the relation between developments in biology and normative conceptions of human nature? The complexity of the problems facing people demands that ideas no longer be isolated one from the other in order to secure their validity. We simply cannot immune forms of thought from each other in the search for valid knowledge.

Tradition-constituted and dialogic communicative models for defining and organizing disciplines will continue to fund reflection and debates within the academy. Yet each model seems limited with respect to the complexity of reflexive relations among peoples and cognitive claims.

Each model seems to focus on communities or types of claims rather than engaging in the complex flow of interaction among communities and communicative acts. Happily there is a new movement afoot which, I believe, overcomes the problems in these other models. What I am calling a multidimensional hermeneutic insists on a multiplicity of forms of inquiry with their own structures of reasoning and discourse but which reflexively relate to others precisely to remain valid. As Mary Midgley has astutely noted,

We exist, in fact, as interdependent parts of a complex network, not as isolated items that must be supported in a void. As for our knowledge, it too is a network involving all kinds of lateral links, a system in which the most varied kinds of connection may be relevant for helping us to meet various kinds of questions. (Midgley 2003: 25; see also Gustafson 1996; Schweiker 2004c, 2005b; Toulmin 2001; Welker and Schweitzer 2005)

Given this conception of reason and knowledge, the onus on any intellectual practice is to specify those points at which it necessarily intersects with other forms of inquiry given shared interests. When carefully examined, basic questions naturally pose other questions which, if pursued vigorously, implicate reflection in other “disciplines.” The subquestions are “lateral links” between intellectual practices, to stay with Midgley’s metaphor. Knowledge is a reflexive space of reasonable claims advanced and redeemed in response to basic questions. These links will be important to establish the cogency, scope, and integrity of a “discipline.” Rather than focusing on the *autonomy* of a discipline within a unified *system* as the modern project did, the coherence of a *monolingual tradition*, or the diversity of validity claims and *communicative norms*, one will be interested in the lateral links, and so reflexive interactions, both within and among intellectual practices.

This multidimensional hermeneutic bears its fruit in a reconceptualization of ethics in our global age attentive to the practices, linguistic forms, and ways of life within communities. In very different ways the “religions” provide guidance for human living by answering a range of questions as well as the complex interactions among these questions. The questions demarcate a “space” of human existence determined by the problem of how one ought to live, say, live as a Shi’ite Muslim or a Tibeta Buddhist. “Morality” is thereby a name for the placement and right conduct of human existence, an outlook and way of life. “Ethics” is just the critical, comparative, and constructive thinking about this “moral” space of life by answering the question “how should one live a good life?” and the various subquestions that problem poses. Ethics is asking about the

meaning and the truth of a “morality” and all the ideas, practices, values, and norms implied in a community’s “morality.”

Now, I contend that if one takes seriously recurring questions found in the legacies of religions and formulates them at some appropriate level of generality, it is possible to adduce the form or shape of ethics as multidimensional inquiry. These questions constitute interacting “dimensions” of ethics that explicate and/or compare some community’s moral space of life (see Schweiker 1995). It takes little imagination to see how exploring (say) the interpretive question “What is going on?” would form lateral links between religious ethics and history, social theory, anthropology, and, insofar as religious understanding is interpretive, literary and cultural studies. The same is true of other dimensions and leading questions of ethics. The validity of ethics as an intellectual practice will be then determined in large measure by the *scope* and *intensity* of its ability to intersect with other disciplines and redeem the pertinence of its claims. That is, an ethics or moral outlook that can intersect with and engage a wider scope of other outlooks and positions will attain relatively greater validity for guiding human lives than rival options. That is the case precisely because the moral space of life is defined by the reflexive interaction among peoples and their beliefs and actions. This differs, again, from the modern idea of the *autonomy* of a discipline or conceptions of *traditional* and *discursive* validity.

The force of this model becomes clear in terms of its implications for graduate education, something I have tried to enact in my own teaching. Most contemporary work in religious studies is an operation of criticism, comparison, and/or constructive thinking. Graduation education is usually, and rightly, about gaining competence in these intellectual tasks. The account of the organization of moral inquiry outlined here serves these various tasks and further enhances work in the field. It is, on this model, essential to become steeped in traditions and their given modes of moral thought and practice. Yet a tradition will be seen not as a monologic whole with some authority structure and/or the obedience of members to that authority confronting cultural or social or religious “others.” And the scholar will not try to isolate the “moral” discourse and practice from its entanglement with other dimensions of a community’s life. A tradition is conceived of as a complex “space” of reflexive interaction among visions of life. The intellectual task is to articulate, assess, compare, and even to extend religious enactments of the moral space of life. Graduate education can then seek to produce scholars with the knowledge, audacity, and gumption to learn from and contribute to a range of intellectual practices needed critically, comparatively, and constructively to explicate the moral worlds of traditions with respect to the questions a thinker asks and the answers sought.

Some colleagues will contest this multidimensional conception of the intellectual practice called "ethics." They will see in it another example of the modernist agenda of subsuming the particularity of their work within a general account of knowledge. I simply ask them carefully to consider if it is not the case that the questions that define multidimensional moral thinking are always present whenever they ponder and seek faithfully to render a community's moral outlook. There is, as far as I see, nothing invidious or destructive of traditions in noting commonalities in thinking. The questions asked do not prejudice the answers that might be given, say, about what it means to be an agent. One might find that accepted questions and concepts have to be refashioned in light of engaging a tradition's moral discourse and practices. Additionally, attention to the richness of religious sources and the interaction among the dimensions of a religious outlook exceeds models of communicative rationality built on distinct types of cognitive claims. The religions, I believe, present more subtle accounts of moral knowledge and experience than rationalized systems or specific linguistic forms (say, narrative or dialogue), a subtlety that this model for conceiving ethics attempts to explicate while providing coherence to the field.

THE AIM OF MORAL INQUIRY

What is jarring about this proposal for how to conceive of the method of religious ethics, I suppose, is that because knowledge is a reflexive network, the truth or validity of an ethical position must be demonstrated in the rough and tumble of multidimensional thinking with religious sources. Again, what counts as a true position will be one with greater scope and reflexive intensity than other options, where "scope" and "intensity" are defined within the dimensions of inquiry engaging religious sources rather than the ostensive content of the claim or some traditional authority. That is a demanding and public criterion of validity. It is also one that says something about human commonalities and the reach of moral insight beyond the confines of any one community or discipline because the validity of one's discourse is laterally linked to others. This insight returns us quite naturally to the other focus of my reflections. I stated above that the "aim" of religious ethics can and ought to be to labor for reflexive and humane reconstruction of traditions. Put more boldly, the aim of contemporary inquiry, I contend, is best undertaken in terms of a kind of *religious humanism*. I can now clarify this point.

While oddly overlooked by religion scholars, a host of contemporary thinkers are reclaiming a humanistic aim in thinking beyond the modern

definition of disciplines.⁵ These thinkers are concerned to render humane the interactions among peoples and thereby to meet the religious and ethical challenges of the global age. Beyond the modernist agenda, they hope to forestall the return of repressed authoritarian modes of thought and life and to attend to the creativity and also vulnerability of human beings. Insisting on human particularity, these thinkers also seek to articulate the fragile bonds of human commonality amid difference. What does this outlook mean for religious ethics?

The term *religious humanism* designates an attitude and a moral stance long found among many thinkers in almost every religious tradition. As an attitude and stance, it conveys convictions shaped by a specific tradition, in my case Christianity, but not confined to the dogmatic strictures and authorities of the religious community. A religious humanist insists on the historical and social embeddedness of thought and conviction. Given that admission, one cannot grasp some abstract thing called “religion” devoid of historical referent. It is more proper to speak of (say) a Christian or Jewish or a Buddhist humanist. Yet one is also wary of ideological, ethnic, racial, and dogmatic “adjectives” that qualify shared human existence, especially when they imply exclusive right to moral insight and goodness. As a humanist, one believes that moral insight abounds in all traditions and that the company of people of good will is not limited to one’s own community and kin. Mindful of human fallibility, one insists on isolating the systemic distortions in one’s own tradition that are the source of ethical and political lapses found in societies and lives shaped by it and which have also shaped the community. The attitude and stance of a religious humanist is thereby marked by reflective engagement with and yet reflective distance from one’s home tradition.

Religious humanism as an aim for thinking is obviously an *ethical* project. The meaning and truth one hopes to articulate through critical, comparative, and constructive reflection is bound to moral matters, especially the responsible interactions among peoples. One wants to reconstruct a tradition humanely. Nevertheless, a *religious* ethicist of whatever stripe remains resolutely convinced that life is richer, more ambiguous, painful, and wondrous than can be articulated merely in terms of intrahuman purposes and goods. The aim of reconstructing a

⁵ Thinkers are reclaiming a humanistic outlook in various ways (see Antonaccio 2004; Gaita 2000; Glover 1999; Klemm 2004; Levinas 2003; Mendes-Flohr 2002; Nussbaum 2000; Said 2004; Schweiker 2003, 2004b; Sen 2000; Todorov 2002; Whitehouse 2004; Wright 2004). I prefer to call the outlook “theological humanism” but cannot explicate the reason for doing so in the present essay (See Schweiker 2004a).

tradition by its own most humane insights thereby remains bound to the religious impulse of a community and the current situation. That, of course, is how religious ethics remains genuinely religious as well as ethical.

To designate the aim of religious ethics as a version of religious humanism does not provide a predetermined content to an ethics or a religious vision. In fact, the exciting point is that what is meant by the "human" and "human flourishing" as religious claims and how these claims are related to the respect and enhancement due to other forms of life remain open questions. Further, this proposal does not mean that scholars have to give up on their historical, critical, comparative, and practical labors let alone their personal commitments and race to join a moral or political agenda. Yet once the aim of moral inquiry is stated in this way, the weapons used in the scholarly battles between religious and theological and tradition-specific ethics are beat into plowshares, the better to till the moral ground of human life and responsibility. Given current global realities, a religious ethicist engaged in constructive, comparative, and/or critical work with a humane purpose hopes to show that she or he addresses questions in ways faithful to religious sources while fashioning lateral links to other outlooks that better enable people to respect and enhance the integrity of human and nonhuman life.

CONCLUSION

I have arrived now at the far end of this admittedly ambitious statement of the future of moral inquiry with religious sources within the academy. The gist of my argument has been quite simple. The usual debates about "religious ethics," and with them the relations among religious, theological, and tradition-specific forms of ethics, seem, at least to me, to continue to trade on a conception of a "discipline" that arose in the West within the dawn of the modern university. Once we think beyond the modern disciplinary project and reflect on the network of knowledge constituted by questions and lateral links within and among intellectual practices, things begin to look different. Positions that once were adversaries can now be seen to be engaged in multidimensional inquiry that may and must help to refashion one's intellectual venture. Nothing is lost when lateral links are forged among modes of thought—nothing, that is, but the isolation and false consolation that comes with a naïve sense of the sufficiency of one's discipline or community. Multidimensional inquiry thereby quite naturally dovetails with a humane and reconstructive aim for religious ethics.

I realize that readers will have a number of questions about the meaning and direction of this vision for the future of religious ethics. I can

bring these reflections to a close by engaging a few of these questions. And, first, some might find my idea of the normative aim of religious ethics to be far too expansive, exchanging critical inquiry and comparison for moral advocacy. No scholar, they will contend, should aim to change what she or he studies. I agree. Scholars do not and ought not seek to overhaul a religion just on their own, and, further, we should avoid the hubris that we could ever do so. The politicization and moralization of scholarship is intellectually dangerous and irresponsible. Nevertheless, I still believe that a religious ethicist can and should decide to look at those moments within history where interactions among peoples have taken place in humane or violent or deceptive ways and in doing so isolate resources for contemporary thought and action. This is to open the possibility for the self-transformation of living religions as well as a deeper grasp of their historical subtlety and ambiguity.

Second, more conservative thinkers may suspect what they will sense as the universalism of my proposal. The best way to respect and enhance the integrity of life, they might argue, is to admit one's particularity and not to try to impose ideas of humanity and the like on others. But, in fact, the real issue is not universalism against particularism. The real issue is how specific or particular social identities are constituted: they are always formed in relation and response to others within complex patterns of reflexive social interaction. The approach to religious ethics outlined above merely admits as a fact what is always the case with living human realities. Not all interactions with others are betrayals of one's identity, reason for conflict, or the chance to demonstrate the superiority of one's mode of life. Some interactions among peoples may well enable the emergence of one's true identity and new insight into moral goodness. If we think about this in the present situation, we need to find within traditions resources for their reconstruction in ways that respect and enhance rather than destroy or demean life. That aim can be a shared purpose no matter what mode of ethical thinking one undertakes, multidimensional or not, or the scholarly tasks one assumes (criticism, comparison, and constructive work).

To be sure, other questions about this proposal can be posed. Some might challenge any idea of "humanism" as religiously and morally bankrupt, excessively anthropocentric, or vacuous; still others will worry that this proposal is too demanding for the purposes of graduate education. It is not possible in this short essay to address these questions or others that might arise within the course of reflection. In these pages I have tried to state as boldly as possible a vision for the future of ethics within religious studies given current global realities that increasingly define the cognitive and moral space of human existence. This has

required that I confront honestly the often concealed anxiety that besets contemporary religious ethics, namely the anxiety about whether or not it is the calling of the scholar to work for the humane expression of the religions, even religions one does not personally inhabit. It is my hope that when the history of early twenty-first-century religious ethics is written it will be said of me and of scholars around the world that we did not shrink from the task of providing humane orientation to religious life, but, rather, arose in good faith to the full measure of the intellectual's responsibility.

REFERENCES

Antonaccio, Maria
2004	"Iris Murdoch's Secular Theology of Culture." <i>Literature and Theology</i> 18/3 (September): 271–291.
2005	"Moral Truth." In <i>The Blackwell Companion to Religious Ethics</i> , 27–35. Ed. by William Schweiker. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing.
Asad, Talal
2003	<i>Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity</i> . Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
Dyck, Arthur J.
2005	"Comment on JRE 25th Anniversary Supplement." <i>Journal of Religious Ethics</i> 33/2 (June): 375–393.
Fasching, Darreel J., and
Dell deChant
2000	<i>Comparative Religious Ethics: A Narrative Approach</i> . Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.
Gaita, Raimond
2000	<i>A Common Humanity: Thinking About Love and Truth and Justice</i> . New York: Routledge.
Gamwell, Franklin I.
1990	<i>The Divine Good: Modern Moral Theory and the Necessity of God</i> . San Francisco, CA: HarperSan-Francisco.
Glover, Jonathan
1999	<i>Humanity: A Moral History of the Twentieth Century</i> . New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
Green, Ronald
1978	<i>Religious Reason</i> . New York: Oxford University Press.
Gustafson, James M.
1978	"Theology Confronts Technology and the Life Sciences." <i>Commonweal</i> 105 (June): 386–392.
1996	<i>Intersections: Science, Theology, and Ethics</i> . Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press.

-
- 1998 "A Retrospective Interpretation of American Religious Ethics, 1948–1998." *Journal of Religious Ethics* 25/3 (25th Anniversary Supplement): 3–22.
- Habermas, Jürgen
1987 *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*. Trans. by Frederick Lawrence. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- 1990 *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*. Trans. by Christian Lenhardt and Shierry Weber Nicholsen. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Hauerwas, Stanley
1998 "Christian Ethics in American (and the JRE): A Report on a Book I will Not Write." *Journal of Religious Ethics* 25/3 (25th Anniversary Supplement): 57–76.
- 2003 "Between Christian Ethics and Religious Ethics: How Should Graduate Students Be Trained?" *Journal of Religious Ethics* 31/3: 399–412.
- Klemm, David E.
2004 "‘The Darkness Inside the Human Soul’: Uncertainty in Theological Humanism and Michael Frayn’s Play *Copenhagen*." *Literature and Theology* 18/3 (September): 292–307.
- Levinas, Emmanuel
2003 *Humanism of the Other*. Trans. by N. Poller with introduction by Richard A. Cohen. Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press.
- Lovin, Robin
2005 "Moral Theories." In *The Blackwell Companion to Religious Ethics*, 19–26. Ed. by William Schweiker. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing.
- Lovin, Robin, and
Frank E. Reynolds, eds.
1985 *Cosmogony and Ethical Order: New Studies in Comparative Ethics*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.
- MacIntyre, Alasdair
1984 *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*. 2d ed. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.
- 1988 *Whose Justice? Which Rationality*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.
- 1990 *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopedia, Genealogy, and Tradition*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.

-
- Mendes-Flohr, Paul
2002 "Postmodern Humanism from the Sources of Judaism." *Criterion* 41/2 (Spring): 18–23.
- Midgley, Mary
2003 *The Myths We Live By*. New York: Routledge.
- Nussbaum, Martha C.
2000 *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Reeder, John
1998 "What Is a Religious Ethics?" *Journal of Religious Ethics* 25/3 (25th Anniversary Supplement): 157–182.
- Said, Edward W.
2004 *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Schweiker, William
1995 *Responsibility and Christian Ethics*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- 1998 *Power, Value and Conviction: Theological Ethics in the Postmodern Age*. Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press.
- 2003 "Theological Ethics and the Question of Humanism," *The Journal of Religion* 83/4 (October): 539–561.
- 2004a *Theological Ethics and global Dynamics: In the Time of Many Worlds*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing.
- 2004b "The Ethics of Responsibility and the Question of Humanism," *Literature and Theology* 18/3: 251–270.
- 2004c "Die Hartn äckigkeit des Realismus. Gegenwärtige Strömungen in theologischer und nicht-theologische Ehik." In *Moralischer Realism: Theologische Beiträge zu einer philosophischen Debatte*, 27–52. Ed. by Johannes Fischer et al. Stuttgart, Germany: W. Kohlhammer.
- 2005a "On Religious Ethics." In *The Blackwell Companion to Religious Ethics*, 1–16. Ed. by William Schweiker. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing.
- 2005b "Intellectual Fences and Cultural Values: The Shift Boundaries Between Ethics, Practical Theology, and Biblical Studies." In *Reconsidering the Boundaries Between Theological Disciplines/Zur*

- Neibestimmung der Grenzen zwischen den theologischen Disziplinen*, 137–150. Ed. by Michael Welker and Friedrich Schweitzer. Münster, Germany: LIT Verlag.
- Schweiker, William, ed.
2005 *The Blackwell Companion to Religious Ethics*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing.
- Sen, Amartya
2000 “East and West: The Reach of Reason.” *New York Review of Books*. July 20, 33–38.
- Stout, Jeffrey
1998 “Commitments and Traditions in the Study of Religious Ethics.” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 25/3 (25th Anniversary Supplement): 23–56.
- Taylor, Mark C., ed.
1998 *Critical Terms in Religious Studies*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.
- Todorov, Tzvetan
2002 *Imperfect Garden: The Legacy of Humanism*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Toulmin, Stephen
1990 *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity*. New York: Free Press.
- 2001 *Return to Reason*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Tracy, David
1981 *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism*. New York: Crossroad.
- Twiss, Sumner B.
2005 “Comparison in Religious Ethics.” In *The Blackwell Companion to Religious Ethics*, 147–156. Ed. by William Schweiker. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing.
- Welker, Michael, and
Friedrich Schweitzer, eds.
2005 *Reconsidering the Boundaries Between Theological Disciplines/Zur Neibestimmung der Grenzen zwischen den theologischen*. Münster, Germany: LIT Verlag.
- Whitehouse, Glen
2004 “Unimaginable Variations: Christian Responsibility in the Cinema of Broken Identity.” *Literature and Theology* 18/3 (September): 321–350.
- Wright, Dale
2004 “Human Responsibility and the Awakening of Character in the Buddhist Film *Mandala*.” In *Literature and Theology* 18/3 (September): 308–321.