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Rejoinder to Gavin Flood

I WANT TO THANK Professor Gavin Flood for his insightful response to my essay on the future of religious ethics. Not only did he get my argument right, but at several points Flood makes a better case than I do! Happily, I need only expand on a few points.

Flood notes, first, that I recognize the ethical praxis of traditions “alongside” the work of religious ethics in an academic context. That is right. Yet, I also tried to suggest that a multidimensional hermeneutic might enable us to bridge the gap between types of ethical reflection that plague the field: (say) Buddhist or Christian or Islamic ethics versus theological ethics versus religious ethics. We need a more dynamic idea of religious ethical thinking than the forms of ethics defined by, or in rejection of, the modern conception of a “discipline.”

Second, Flood is right, the account of rationality that I and others advance can hardly be seen as Western paternalism: reflexive interaction is always at play, and, more importantly, the aim of “religious humanism” promotes the human good “through an engagement with traditions on their own terms.” Yet, my point was also that insofar as inquiry creates “a space of rational inquiry,” then what counts as “rational” is not defined merely by a “tradition” or the “academy.” The essay construes “reason” as a multidimensional and reflexive activity of orienting human life. Different “traditions” and different “disciplines” will orient life differently and thus form different human competencies, but that fact does not disallow ascribing reflexivity and multidimensionality to them. On this point, rituals themselves are “rational” activities wherein human beings orient life in a moral space. (Reason itself might be more ritualistic than we often think, but I defer on that discussion.) I am not sure that the contrast “reason” versus “ritual” is so helpful much like I am wary of seeing “traditions” or “disciplines” as internally defined and monological.

Finally, Flood is surely correct that religious traditions often do not and will not “speak outside of themselves,” and that the religions are concerned with “conveying values” through time and “creating certain kinds of human competence” different than religious ethics. Anyone who works in religious studies knows how impervious the religions can be to what we do! Likewise, the scholar’s calling is not to overall a tradition in his or her own image. Here too the point about reflexivity and multidimensional

mensional understanding needs clarification. As noted in the essay, the challenge facing religious people around the world is the extent to which they find good reasons within their heritages to accent convictions and practices that speak to 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. In my judgment, there really is no place to hide from what is happening globally. The religions will interact, and they will speak “outside themselves” even in attempts to deny reflexive interactions. (The same point could be made of any period of human interactions.) The proposal of the essay is that the “religious ethicist,” caught in the global moral space, can and should aim to humanize religious forces. This can be undertaken in various ways: historical, comparative, constructive. Yet the aim is, as Flood rightly notes, an aspiration; it is also, as far as I can see, the intellectual’s responsibility.

Again, I want to thank Professor Flood for his sensitive reading of my essay. I only hope that these few words of clarification about types of ethics, forms of rationality, and global reflexivity have not dampened his “great interest and mounting sense of excitement” about my proposal for the future of religious ethics.

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