The Blackwell Companion to Religious Ethics
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William Schweiker
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Preface

The Blackwell Companion to Religious Ethics provides a comprehensive account of issues and themes in current religious ethics as well as substantive treatments of the moral outlook and practices of the world’s religions. With the dawning of present global realities, the religions are, for good and ill, some of the most dominant forces on this planet. Increasing cultural and religious interaction makes it imperative that scholars working within “religious ethics” understand the impact of traditions and communities on each other. For those theorists and community leaders undertaking constructive and normative moral reflection within their own traditions, critical awareness of the interactions among the world’s religions seems extremely important as well. This volume, then, is meant for anyone interested in the moral beliefs and practices of the world’s religions and their meaning and significance for current life. It aims to provide for scholars, teachers, religious leaders, and students at all levels needed resources and tools for the study of the world’s religions.

The volume is structured into three parts, each of which has subdivisions. Part I: Moral Inquiry provides an account of basic conceptual issues in religious ethics. The chapters explore (1) the elements of moral reflection, (2) the mechanisms of transmission and innovation in traditions, and (3) questions about how to carry out comparison among traditions. Part II: Moral Traditions is the largest section of the volume, realizing that the very idea of a “tradition” is perhaps too ambiguous to capture the complexities of these religious realities. Major moral traditions are explored under four interlocking rubrics. The treatment of each tradition begins with the question of the appropriateness of the idea of “ethics” for exploring its moral teaching. This enables scholars of religion to clarify the form of thinking found in a specific moral community or tradition. This initial treatment is followed by chapters that explore the origin, historical differentiations, and present trajectories of a tradition. To be sure, no volume can capture the entire scope of any religion; no single volume can address every religious form found in history or present life. Limitations noted, the hope is that a fairly
comprehensive vision of a religious tradition will be presented, a vision that specifies its historical complexity. Finally, Part III: Moral Issues turns directly to contemporary questions of worldwide import. In each of these chapters, the author draws comparatively on the resources of traditions to address present challenges. These are roughly divided between moral problems arising within social and natural “systems” and those that bear more directly on the lives of “persons,” again realizing the ambiguities of these ideas. Between the covers of this book, the reader will find superb accounts of the moral beliefs and practices of the world’s religions, inquiry into the structure of religious ethics, and comparative treatments of some of the most pressing issues confronting peoples around the world.

Several concerns have guided the development of this volume. First, the terminology and conceptuality of “religion” and “ethics” is admittedly Western. More than once the editor and authors have been warned about the problem of presenting a companion to “ethics” with respect to the “religions.” Scholars interested in the “moral” life of communities and traditions must address questions about basic categories. Mindful of this challenge, we have included essays in Part I of the volume to address this issue. Additionally, each of the “moral traditions” sections starts with an essay that addresses the problem (e.g., “Buddhist Ethics?”). This matter is also addressed in an introductory chapter.

Another concern that has guided the development of this Companion is found within current academic debates but may in fact be rather longstanding. One might put it like this: how deep does morality go? Some authors argue that morality is free from claims about “reality” and thus conceptions, beliefs, and practices for guiding life develop with respect to distinctive social purposes, languages, and communities. Other scholars argue from within a tradition or on strictly conceptual grounds that the good and the real are intertwined. This debate has taken various forms: anti-realism and realism in moral theory; questions in hermeneutical theory; ideas about social constructivism and identity formation, and the like. If the first concern that has structured the development of this book was about concepts, at issue here are matters of validity and religious diversity. The purpose of the volume is not to resolve these debates. Mindful of the importance of this many-sided debate, we have tried to conceive the volume and select authors who provide a range of answers within the discussion.

Final scholarly concerns can be noted. It seems clear that questions about sexuality and gender as well as issues of race, ethnicity, and class are being debated around the world and within each tradition. The worldwide women’s movement has offered profound insights into traditions and beliefs. Attention to race and class provides new means to understand and analyze traditional beliefs, social structures, and questions of human rights. Likewise, there are debates about identity formation within the dynamics of global cultural flows, economic forces, and political realities. While not dominating any one specific essay, these matters are in fact addressed throughout the volume. Again, the purpose of the book is not to propose one answer to these matters. It is to see how and why they arise naturally within reflection on the moral thought and practices of the religions. Lastly, given the diversity of languages used in this volume, we have followed standard scholarly conventions for the transliteration of
terms (e.g. Kṛṣṇa; Qur’ān). A list of the most commonly used terms and their standardized English forms is appended to the volume.

Mindful of these concerns now found in scholarly work and, more importantly, among peoples around the world, *The Blackwell Companion to Religious Ethics* seeks most basically to aid in understanding and assessing the moral beliefs, values, and practices of the world’s religions. As the work of renowned scholars, it is our deepest intention that this work will help to define the tasks and purposes of the developing field of “religious ethics.”

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William Schweiker
On Religious Ethics

William Schweiker

The publication of this Companion represents a defining moment for religious ethics. Ethicists, historians of religion, theologians, philosophers, political theorists, and other experts have explored the moral outlooks and practices of the world’s religions. Drawing on and revising religious resources, basic themes in moral theory as well as a host of contemporary moral and political problems are treated. Given the comprehensive nature of this volume, the purpose of the present chapter is not to provide a detailed “introduction” to the book. Such an introduction is not possible given the sheer size of this volume and insofar as this is a collective work rather than a single line of argument. A few words about the book’s structure can be found in the preface. This chapter is meant to provide orientation to the range of questions and kinds of thinking found in the various parts of *The Blackwell Companion to Religious Ethics*.

Religious Ethics?

Anyone who works in religious ethics confronts an immediate and obvious problem. “Ethics” or “moral philosophy” is not indigenous to the world’s religions. Inspired by Socrates and other sages, Greek and Roman thinkers engaged in the rational analysis and justification of norms, practices, forms of character, and ways of life believed to secure human happiness or well-being (*eudaimonia*). The inspiration of Socrates, and the memory of his conviction and execution on the charge of impiety, meant that ethics was also a challenge to the authority of religious beliefs. What is more, the conception of a good human life advocated by Hellenistic philosophers is foreign to the religions. Religious traditions obviously sustain reflection on human well-being, happiness. However, these accounts are set within an order defined by beings, realms, ideals, purposes, and practices not limited to human life and happiness. The scope of concern found in the world’s religions is thereby wider than the discourse of ethics and Hellenistic ideas about human well-being. It is quite unremarkable, then, that the
world’s religions have generally not used the idea of ethics to specify the character of their outlooks on what defines a good life, right conduct, and proper social relations.

Similar problems surround the idea of “religion.” None of the historical legacies explored in this Companion initially defined themselves as a religion. The term seems to have arisen from the Latin religare, meaning to tie or to bind. Religion specified how one was bound to the origins of the city of Rome as itself a sacred reality. Other ideas of religion developed, especially during the seventeenth to twentieth centuries, in order to facilitate the study of the beliefs, practices, values, and histories of human communities. Definitions range from religion as belief in gods or one God, claims about sacred power, ultimate concern, to the charge that religion is about concealed mechanisms of domination. Most scholars agree that a religion includes several features: convictions about what is most important in life (experiences like birth and death, sex and sorrow), ritual actions, beliefs about the whence and whither of existence, codes of conduct, communal life, and also experiences of transcendence (e.g., enlightenment, redemption, mystical insight). However, these features of religion are disputed and bear different meanings in cultures and traditions.

The idea of “religion,” just like “ethics,” is a scholarly invention. As rightly noted in the various parts of this volume, these ideas are not native to traditions, much less necessary categories of the human mind. They are tools for inquiry and reflection. What is more, one must keep distinct, if sometimes related, the morality or ethic of a religion (the actual ways of life, beliefs, values, norms, and outlooks of a people) from the intellectual labor of scholars and thinkers called “religious ethics.” What is sought in this volume and this chapter is an account of the intellectual enterprise of religious ethics mindful of complex connections to ways of religious and moral living.

Given the conceptual problems surrounding religion and ethics, it is not surprising that one finds different options in the intellectual pursuit of religious ethics. Some distinct approaches have typified the field, although there are manifold subtypes and variations (see Part I; also Schweiker 1998; Twiss and Grele 1998: 11–33). First, some religious ethicists have sought to specify a unique concept, phenomenon, rational structure, or set of practices called religion more or less manifest in what are conventionally seen as the “religions.” Often called the formalist approach to religious ethics, the task is to show the place and import of religion for the moral life (see Green 1978; Gamwell 1990). Others adopt, second, a sociolinguistic approach. These thinkers explore specific action guides recommended by communities and/or how communities specify through ritual, myth, discourse, and belief often incommensurable ways of life (see Little and Twiss 1978; Stout 1988). Third, there are scholars who develop versions of ethical naturalism. This approach is concerned with the particularity of moral outlooks, but also “treats a system of beliefs as a whole and refuses to isolate moral propositions for analysis from propositions about how things are in the world and how they come to be that way” (Lovin and Reynolds 1985: 3). Each of these approaches in religious ethics, as well as various permutations on them, can be found in this book. No attempt, thankfully, has been made to demand agreement among them.

Another way of conceiving religious ethics is now coming into view and also finds expression throughout this Companion. The remainder of this chapter gives an account of this emerging hermeneutical and multidimensional option alongside other
approaches to the field. Like formalists, a multidimensional approach specifies a structure for ethical thinking necessary to examine specific traditions, but is not reducible to their distinctive languages and practices. Yet, as shown below, it moves beyond most formalist proposals in terms of how knowledge and disciplines are conceived. With the sociolinguistic and naturalistic options, a hermeneutical approach to religious ethics examines the distinctive outlooks of traditions. However, precisely as hermeneutical in character, religious ethics labors between and among traditions rather than focuses on the incommensurability of language-games, distinct action guides, or even moral worldviews. “Religious ethics,” on this new account, is defined in terms of critical, comparative, and constructive tasks of moral inquiry into religious resources undertaken from a hermeneutical standpoint and with respect to interlocking dimensions of reflection. My contention is that this account captures something of the scope and spirit of this book.

Of course, it must be immediately stressed that what follows is a proposal for religious ethics, developed in view of this volume. There is no assumption that every author will agree or even ought to agree with this depiction or, for that matter, any other depiction of religious ethics. As a field of inquiry, part of the vitality of religious ethics is precisely that it must constantly engage in appraisals of its purposes, methods, and criteria of adequacy. In fact, this Companion must partly be seen as engaged in that kind of appraisal.

We turn next to the question of how to characterize the tasks and dimensions of religious ethics in order that the full import of this volume can be grasped.

Tasks and Multidimensional Inquiry

There are many ways to define ethics and also many ways to carry out ethical reflection. Contemporary scholarship in religious ethics undertakes to a greater or lesser extent several related tasks. Religious ethics entails the critical inquiry into complex ways of religious and moral life, but often also indicates the constructive use of religious sources in meeting current problems. Each of those tasks, the critical and constructive, is usually bound to the work of comparison. As found in Part II, a scholar critically explores a tradition by comparing its expressions through time and/or seeing it in relation to other cultural and social dynamics, including other religions. Constructive work, like that undertaken in Part III, compares accounts of how to live with other proposals in order to assess duties and values binding on people. The question—explored in Part I—becomes: how ought we to define religious ethics as a discipline, an intellectual practice?

With the rise of the modern Western world there were extensive debates about what constituted a discipline of thought. There emerged the conviction that any genuine discipline must have a distinct subject matter, even as there was the need to define a “system of the sciences” around a fundamental principle or scientific method in order to ensure the coherence of knowledge. The core of the modern project was to understand the world and free human beings from ignorance and illusion. One did so by specifying the method, purpose, and criteria of various disciplines in such a way that each was autonomous and yet consistent with all others because they shared a rational
structure. As Stephen Toulmin has noted: “In the underlying European worldview, then, the value of a single all-embracing system of theories, into which phenomena of all kinds could eventually be fitted, was taken for granted right up until the twentieth century” (Toulmin 2001: 87). Ethics, for instance, had to be about a distinctive domain of human conduct, say, about obligation or utility, which was different than other sciences, and yet founded rationally or empirically in the same way as other sciences. This led to the radical distinction between ethics as a normative discipline and other descriptive approaches to human behavior. One finds, interestingly enough, residues of this modern outlook in formalistic approaches to religious ethics. Even those who reject the modern enterprise, from the Romantics to some sociolinguistic thinkers and ethical naturalists, assume that definition of a discipline only to deny it. They contest the modern account through ad hoc or unsystematic approaches to inquiry.

This book aptly shows that the aspiration to isolate one formal structure of reason built on a single principle or to specify one scientific method as alone adequate for research is insufficient given genuine moral, religious, and cognitive diversity. Still, as formalists have long seen, there is also the need to define and characterize the discipline of religious ethics as an intellectual pursuit. Further, the modernist desire to establish the autonomy of ethics around some sui generis dimension at action (e.g., the ought) fails to indicate how moral reflection can and must interact with other intellectual practices in order to address exceedingly complex problems and phenomena. A crucial aspiration of much contemporary discourse is to move beyond the formal rationalism of the modern project, as well as its denial by Romantics and others. It is to grasp a more humane, practical form of reasonableness. Yet in order to be apt for religious ethics, this construal of ethics must also, as naturalists and sociolinguistic approaches show, explore the connections among “moral” beliefs and actions and other convictions and practices of actual living communities.

There is an important new turn in providing an account of knowledge that bears promise for religious ethics. This is what I have called multidimensional thinking. What is rejected by a range of thinkers in various fields is a depiction of knowledge gained and justified through autonomous disciplines tenuously held together by one formal rational structure or method of inquiry. 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)

In this light, the burden placed on any intellectual practice aimed at knowledge is to specify those points at which it is linked to other disciplines given shared interests. Knowledge is a complex, reflexive network; it is a space of warranted intelligibility or reasonability. This depiction of knowledge is important not just for addressing shared interests. It is basic to the determination of the cogency, scope, and integrity of a discipline. Rather than focusing on the autonomy of a “discipline,” one will be interested in the lateral links wherein reflection and information move in and out of an intellectual practice (see Gustafson 2004). Scope, rather than autonomy, will be essential in deciding the validity of claims. Accordingly, a discipline is best defined in terms of the basic
questions it seeks to answer. When carefully examined these basic questions naturally pose other questions that, if answered, implicate a form of reflection in other modes of inquiry pursuing their own questions. A method must be devised not on one formal model but in order to match the problems and questions that need answering.

A multidimensional account of inquiry seems particularly apt for religious ethics. In very different ways, what scholars call the religions provide guidance for human living through rituals, myths, exemplars, doctrines, and teachings that answer a range of questions surrounding human existence. These questions demarcate a space of human existence determined by the problem of how one ought to live religiously – say, live as a Protestant Christian or a Tibetan Buddhist. “Morality,” the religious ethicist can insist, is a term for the space or network of questions within which human life transpires and the answers a community gives to those questions in order to shape character and guide conduct. From the perspective of actual traditions, religious ethics must be conceived as examining various features of how the moral space of life is conceived and enacted in life. Viewed as a whole, this book can be seen to enact just this kind of examination of religious moralities.

If one takes seriously recurring questions found in the legacies of religions and formulates them at an appropriate level of generality, it is possible to adduce the multidimensional shape of religious ethics (see Schweiker 1995). At least five deeply interrelated questions ground the dimensions of inquiry used to engage in its comparative, critical, and constructive tasks. These questions are not related in a sequential or deductive manner; they are not a check-list to be applied to thinkers, texts, or practices. They constitute the interacting “dimensions” of ethics that aim to explicate a religion’s account of and directions for orienting existence and conduct in the moral space of life. And insofar as religions use stories, rituals, and exemplary characters in order to guide life, these dimensions explicate and analyze the moral meaning of these phenomena. Further, the dimensions are important for the reader of this volume to understand what questions a scholar is answering, even as the religious ethicist is held accountable for questions not answered but which are in the background of a religious outlook.

This account of moral inquiry articulates an approach for religious ethics that labors alongside formalists and those working sociolinguistically and naturalistically with religious traditions and communities. The account admits with formalists that a construal of “ethics” is an intellectual construct, but it denies that one dimension alone defines “ethics” and it specifies, like the other approaches, questions and answers of ethics from within the resources of real traditions. In this way religious ethics escapes the modernist reduction of a discipline to one rational principle or method, while also avoiding relativistic forms of postmodernism. What, then, are the multiple and interacting dimensions of inquiry that represent a new option for religious ethics and can provide orientation for reading this volume?

The descriptive dimension

Human beings live and act in specific places, times, and sets of relations. How a situation is described and defined has implications for the possibilities and limits on actions and relations. In its widest compass, some construal is given of the moral context of
the entirety of human life, often enough through myths, ideologies, or a moral worldview. Specific moral situations will be described and defined with reference to the wider outlook. So when, for example, a Buddhist practitioner must decide in a situation what to do, there is the need to answer a basic question, “what is going on?” This is a difficult question not only because of the complexity of any situation, its openness to multiple interpretations, and the limitations of human perception and attention. The question is rendered all the more difficult because someone (authority figure, practitioner) must sort out what reality or perspective on reality is at issue, one marked by conventional truth or one rooted in Dharma. A devout Muslim too must determine “what is going on” in a specific situation. This requires not only a description of that case, but also knowledge of how Allah is acting, the import of Shari’a, and also specific reasoning skills.

While each tradition provides answers to the question “what is going on?” they do so in wildly complex and different ways. Ethics has a descriptive dimension that is linked to other interpretive disciplines, ranging from studies of myth to specific analyses of events and situations that provide ways to construe and understand moral situations. Religious ethics draws on a range of resources, experiences, types of discernment, and even beliefs about reality. These resources provide the means to describe and analyze a situation in terms of its moral meaning.

The normative dimension

Deciding “what is going on” in any concrete situation is never a disinterested activity. The descriptive dimension of ethics is necessarily related to some norms and values that orient thinking and action. These norms and values allow some realities to appear within moral perception; they also can conceal. Christian ideas about neighbor love, for instance, might allow a perception of human worth and vulnerability even for those deemed enemies. This depends, of course, on how neighbor and love are normatively understood. “What norms and values ought to guide human life?” That too seems to be a basic question asked repeatedly in the legacies of religious traditions. A religious ethics has a normative dimension.

A bewildering diversity is found among the religions on the normative question. In many traditions there are distinct and sometimes conflicting sources for defining what norms and values ought to guide life. One source is the native intelligence of human beings struggling to live together; it is reason. The other source is the ultimate binding claims and teachings, the revelation, of the community. Consider aspects of Jewish thought. Rooted in the so-called Noahide covenant, Jewish thinkers have long insisted that every person can at some level grasp moral principles. Yet, for the Jewish community, this knowledge is rudimentary in light of the revelation of the divine will in Torah. Not surprisingly, there are debates within religious traditions about the relative authority of the various sources of norms and values and how these ought to relate in living religiously. The sources drawn upon in moral thinking also link to other intellectual practices, especially ones interested in human valuing, social norms and goods, and debates about moral intelligence.
Disputes about the sources of moral norms and values also turn on the content of and relations among norms and values. Generally speaking, religious traditions acknowledge and seek to sustain a range of goods, like bodily integrity, family, education, art, and, at the highest level, moral excellence and righteousness (see Finnis 1983; Nussbaum 2000). How these goods are understood differs between traditions and even within a tradition; they constitute another link to disciplines, from economics to anthropology, which explore basic goods. Classical Hindu accounts of caste show, for example, that the meaning of bodily integrity shifts between the warrior caste (Kṣatriyas) and the priestly caste (Brahmans). Nevertheless, some domain of goods or values is protected and promoted by living morally. There are also debates about the norms for deciding how to respect and enhance goods. African beliefs about what is owed ancestors as the norm for human choice are decidedly different than, say, the Ten Commandments in the Hebrew and Christian Bibles. In each case, norms protect and promote goods within religious living.

Normative and descriptive dimensions of inquiry are reflexively related at the level of perception and decision making. They link ethics to other ways of articulating, describing, and valuing human actions and relations. Adducing these dimensions from widespread questions in no way blinds us to the stark differences between and within traditions. Attention to these dimensions facilitates critical, comparative, and constructive work.

The practical dimension

When people ask about what is going on and what are the norms and values that ought to orient their living, they do so for practical rather than merely theoretical reasons. While the ethicist or religious thinker will develop complex epistemological theories or debate the nature of value and the validity of some conception of a norm, this is not the concern of most people. As the Bhagavad Gītā opens Arjuna, standing beside Krṣṇa, watches a bloody battle unfold between members of his family. Should he join the battle? In the struggle of decision, a host of forces might be active, the advice of a god (Krṣṇa), duties bound to class or social role, bonds of love. Here too is a basic question: “what ought I or we to do?”

Religious ethics has a decidedly practical dimension, no matter how theoretical and speculative moral inquiry becomes. It is related to other disciplines that focus on decision making and judgment. Little wonder that so many religions link their ethics to law as well as the demand to imitate moral saints or to participate in practices of divination or study and commentary. Traditions develop complex and subtle patterns of moral reasoning in order to answer the practical questions of life. Confucian teachings about how to live the scholarly life are decidedly different than Jewish patterns of Halakhic reasoning. Each is, nevertheless, a response to the practical question “what ought I or we to do?” Of course, it might be illuminating to explore how Halakhah throws light on Confucian practices of moral reasoning and vice versa. Comparison is always possible in religious ethics.
It is also clear that this “I” is never some kind of isolated and ghostly being, but someone in relation to others. What I ought to do is related to what we ought to do. While certain traditions have emphasized a radical individualism in moral action, by and large there is profound awareness that moral quandaries find people amid others. Therewith develop patterns of communal reasoning and judgment; that is, the formation of a political ethics. The point is that some form of practical reasoning and judgment will be found. The work of scholars in other fields (law, social analysis, rhetoric) can aid the religious ethicist. Noting the practical dimension of ethics facilitates, rather than delimits, critical, comparative, and constructive thinking.

The fundamental dimension

Insofar as individuals and communities confront questions about how to orient life, something is asserted about the moral structure of reality and human beings as creatures with the power to act and choose in concert with others and thereby influence reality, themselves, and others. Human beings can be and ought to be aware of themselves in relations to others, the context of life, and with respect to norms and values about how rightly to live. Any ethics aims, thereby, to answer a question seemingly presupposed in other moral questions: “what does it mean to be a moral agent within the wider compass of reality?” From philosophy to neuroscience, religious ethics is linked with other fields of inquiry into human being and doing and the very nature of reality.

Religions present fantastically complex accounts of agency and the moral context of life. This is what is meant by a fundamental dimension of ethics. A good deal of modern Western ethics defined an “agent” as a being with reason and will who can act intentionally, bring about changes in reality, others, and the agent’s self, and have accountability for actions imputed and/or ascribed to him or her (see Gewirth 1978). The scope of the moral world is determined by the interactions, cooperatively or not, among these agents. Each of the defining attributes of agency has of course been hotly debated. What do we mean by reason or will or intentionality or accountability or moral ascription? How do we best understand the formation of moral character, say through the virtues? There has been reflection on the limitations of agency, the nature of corporate agency, and questions about moral self-understanding.

Work in religious ethics is challenging and amending modern Western conceptions of agency by attending to non-human powers and also the wider realms of reality. In the Christian tradition, what it means to be an agent is defined not only in terms of the power to act and to be held accountable. It is also defined by patterns of relation in which the self exists in God and in others through faith and love before God’s kingdom. Further, faith and love are understood with reference to the divine activity, and this means, paradoxically, that at least two agents, the human and the divine, act in any genuinely good action. Sin, or a broken relation to God and others, is marked not just by wrong acts, but, more profoundly, by an estrangement in which one must act alone and for one’s own purposes and good. God’s judgment on sin is really the withdrawal of the divine presence such that the agent is left to his or her own devices. In traditional African ethics what it means to be an agent is rendered complex by the fact that the ancestors are operative