Moral Struggle and Religious Ethics

DAVID A. CLAIMONT
Praise for *Moral Struggle and Religious Ethics*

“Over the past several years, comparative religious ethics has emerged as a centrally important interdisciplinary line of research, crossing the boundaries among religious studies, history, anthropology, and ethics. David Clairmont’s book offers a strikingly original contribution to this emerging field. In contrast to most earlier work, he directs our attention away from the comparative study of texts, toward the moral and religious vision, and also the struggle and frustration, of the individual adherents of a given tradition. Admittedly, we normally have access to individual experience only indirectly, and primarily through texts, but if these texts are approached with an aim to identifying what they say or imply about individual struggles and perceptions, they can teach us a great deal. The person him or herself, mediated through the text, can be regarded as a religious classic, in David Tracy’s terms, not so much as a representative of an ideal, but as an exemplar of ongoing struggle with both personal and communal weaknesses and blind spots. The individual is exemplary in his or her struggles, precisely because sustained engagement with one’s weaknesses is by no means an optional academic exercise – on the contrary, this kind of ongoing struggle will inevitably characterize the life of any serious and self-aware believer. This focus on individual experiences of personal limitation and moral failure, seen in all their power to disrupt intellectual certainties and moral self-satisfaction, offers a powerful corrective to pervasive tendencies to presuppose that fundamental disagreements on these matters can only reflect the blindness or bad faith of one’s interlocutors. On the contrary, Clairmont shows that a serious and deep encounter with the very different religious and moral perspectives that we encounter everyday is not just a matter of courtesy or (much less) a way of instructing ‘them’ in ‘our’ values – it is, rather, a reflection of our own urgent need to learn from them.”

*Jean Porter, John A. O’Brien Professor of Theological Ethics, University of Notre Dame*
To Michelle Ann Pinard Clairmont

With love and thanks for your patience and encouragement

As disciples of Jesus we stand side by side with all people. Like them we are burdened
by the same struggles and beset by the same weaknesses; like them we are made new
by the same Lord’s love; like them we hope for a world where justice and love
prevail.

Constitutions of the Congregation of Holy Cross (2.12)
Moral Struggle and Religious Ethics
On the Person as Classic in Comparative Theological Contexts

David A. Clairmont
# Contents

List of Figures vii  
Acknowledgments viii  
List of Abbreviations x  

Introduction 1  

**Part I  Questions and Contexts** 7  

1  **Person as Classic: Questions, Limits, and Religious Motivations** 9  
   Persons, Limits, and Religious Classics 13  
   Classics: questions and limits in thought and action 14  
   Religious ethics: interpreting limited persons 17  
   The model of person as classic 19  
   Classic Persons: Ideas, Practices, and Questions 21  
   Bonaventure as mediator of classic ideas and practices 22  
   Buddhaghosa as mediator of classic ideas and practices 24  
   Moral struggle as classic question 28  

2  **Context: The Symbolic Religious Cosmologies** 38  
   **of Roman Catholicism and Theravāda Buddhism** 38  
   Moral Struggle in Greek, Roman, and Christian Philosophy 40  
   Weakness of will and volition in classical philosophy 40  
   Law, love, and wisdom in Christian scriptures 43  
   Love, sin, and self-examination in Patristic theology 45  
   Natural law and rational appetite in medieval theology 47  
   Moral Struggle in Indian and Buddhist Philosophy 49  
   Universal *dharma* and individual *dharma* in the Vedas and epics 49  
   Self and world in the *Upaniṣads* 54  
   Moral perfection in the Buddhist *Niḥśyas* 56  
   The Symbolic Religious Cosmology of the Trinity 59  
   Trinitarian doctrine 59  
   Trinitarian symbolism 60  
   Trinitarian exemplarity 62
Contents

The Symbolic Religious Cosmology of Buddhist Abhidhamma 64
Constitution of persons: aggregates, characteristics, and ultimate realities 65
The nature of reality and the structure of causality 67
Intention, volition, and personal continuity in Buddhist Abhidhamma 69
Abhidhamma and Trinity as Comparative Contexts and Categories 71

3 Context: Material Simplicity in Christian and Buddhist Life 82
Historical Introduction to Material Simplicity 83
Poverty and avarice in Bonaventure’s Europe 84
Simplicity and sponsorship in Buddhaghosa’s Ceylon 86
Bonaventure on Material Simplicity 88
Material sufficiency in institutional life 90
Voluntary poverty in individual life 92
Buddhaghosa on Material Simplicity 95
Wealth, giving, and the sacrifice of purification 101
On the twofold nature of materiality 105
Material Simplicity and the Problem of Moral Struggle 110

Part II Ideas, Practices, and Persons 119

4 Bonaventure and Buddhaghosa: From Ideas to Practices 121
Bonaventure’s Continuity with Medieval Debates on the Nature of Will 122
Buddhaghosa’s Manual of Practical Abhidhamma 128
Bonaventure on the Connection Between Sacrament and Virtue 137
Buddhaghosa on the Connection Between Morality and Meditation 141

5 Bonaventure and Buddhaghosa: From Practices to Persons 153
Bonaventure on Prayer 154
Buddhaghosa on Meditation 164
Bonaventure on Moral Exemplars 171
Buddhaghosa on Moral Exemplars 174
Comparing Persons in the Process of Struggle: Two Notions of Person as Classic 180

6 Personal Horizons: Moral Struggle, Religious Humility, and the Possibility of a Comparative Theological Ethics 189
Bonaventure and Buddhaghosa on Personal Struggle 189
Comparative Theology and Comparative Ethics: A Religious-Interpretive Work 192
The Methodological Struggles of Comparative Persons: Five Roads of Return 198
Struggles for a Comparative Horizon: Religious Humility and the Problem of Conversion 206

Appendix: Some Common Buddhist Lists, Their Relation, and Their Significance in Abhidhamma 214
Bibliography 226
Index 241
Figures

Figure 2.1  Relationship of khandhas to dhammas  66
Figure 4.1  Bonaventure on the parts of the soul, its powers and its perfections  127
Figure 4.2  Division of questions in Visuddhimagga  132
Figure 5.1  Introductory pattern of Itinerarium mentis in Deum  160
Figure 5.2  Bonaventure’s schematic of the threefold way  162
Figure 5.3  Summary of the 37 “factors contributing to awakening” (bodhi-pakkhiya-dhammā)  179
Scholarly work is collaborative work, even if its results are credited to individual persons. This book began as a doctoral thesis submitted to the faculty of the Divinity School at the University of Chicago. I want to thank first and foremost my advisor, William Schweiker, who guided me through many formulations of its central ideas and always gave unfailing support to all of us among his advisee group who wanted to pursue comparative studies within the larger discipline of ethics. I also want to thank the other members of my thesis committee, Frank Reynolds and David Tracy, for their patience, encouragement, constructive criticisms, and suggestions that this draft of a project’s ideas addresses. Special thanks also to Richard Rosengarten and Don Browning for their work leading and empowering a community of scholars of religion dedicated to serving the world through careful conversations. My gratitude also to many teachers and friends at the University of Chicago: Franklin Gamwell, Anne Carr, Steven Collins, David Wray, Margaret Mitchell, Kevin Jung, Kelly Brotzman, Melanie Barrett, Warren Chain, Sandra Peppers, Elizabeth Bucar, Michael Hogue, Michael Johnson, William Wood, Jonathan Schofer, Jamie Schillinger, Yuki Miyamoto, Bruce Rittenhouse, and John Wall.

The University of Chicago Divinity School provided generous financial support throughout my studies; the Henry Luce Foundation and the Woodrow Wilson Institute continued that support of my research in its later stages; and James Halstead and the Department of Religious Studies at DePaul University provided me with a welcome opportunity to teach. Among my colleagues and friends at the University of Notre Dame, I would like to thank especially John Cavadini, Paulinus Odozor, Jean Porter, Lawrence Cunningham, Gerald McKenny, Matthew Ashley, M. Catherine Hilkert, Cyril O’Regan, Robert Gimello, Jennifer Herdt, Michael Connors, Paul Doyle, Mark Poorman, Dorothy Anderson, David Lantigua, Kathleen Grimes, Conor Kelly, Brain Hamilton, and Deonna Neal.

Special thanks to Rebecca Harkin, Bridget Jennings, Lucy Boon, Isobel Bainton and Sarah Dancy of Wiley-Blackwell for their support of this work and for guidance through the process. Thanks also to Claire Creffield for copy-editing the book, to the Institute for Scholarship in the Liberal Arts at the University of Notre Dame for funding to support preparation of the index, and to James Martin for compiling it.

Finally, my debt for the support by my family and friends is great: Norman and Kathleen Clairmont; Matthew Spates; Robert Kelly and Sarah Ramsey; Jennifer Malin and Joseph Kelly; Louis and Elaine Pinard; Jackson Marvel, Paul Foster, and Patrick Moeschen. Lastly, my greatest thanks to my wife Michelle: for being with me every step of the way, for patiently reading every page of this book, for setting the highest example of labor for love of family, and for our sons, Joseph and John, who will face a beautiful but difficult world.
Abbreviations

A. Anguttara Nikāya
Ath. Atthasālīni
Brev. Breviloquium
D. Dīgha-nikāya
Hex. Collationes in hexaemeron
Itin. Itinerarium mentis in Deum
M. Majjhima-nikāya
Op. Om. Opera Omnia
S. Saṁyutta-nikāya
Sent. Commentaria in Quatuor Libros Sententiarum
Soliloq. Soliloquium de quatuor mentalibus exercitii
S.T. Summa Theologiae
Vsm. Visuddhimagga
Introduction

What is it that finally drives us from the intellectual and social comforts of our own religious traditions to learn about what is unknown, and what might even prove to be irreconcilably different? In summary, this book proposes a twofold answer to this question. What brings us to others is a shared moral struggle to live by what we believe, and what keeps us with others is the humility that emerges when we acknowledge the intellectual struggle involved in understanding our own beliefs and those of other people.

This question is perhaps one of the central moral and religious questions of our time. Adherents and practitioners of religions, as well as those suspicious of or even publicly critical of religions, share at least one common observation: religious people do not always do what their religious communities or leaders teach them to do, even when they agree (despite some divisions) about which common values ought to be pursued and which actions ought to be done. Critics of religion take this fact as preliminary justification for judging that religion is at best an innocuous consolation in a confusing world, with no real power to form people into responsible citizens in the global community. At worst, they take the very extremes of religious intolerance and violence as the very best that any religion can hope to achieve over the long term. At a time when people are increasingly frightened by the potential violence that religious teachings might unleash, even as modern people continue to admire and praise the moral exemplars and religious saints throughout the world, religious communities are beginning to examine in more systematic and sustained ways whether inter-religious conversation about moral and other matters might advance the well-being of the human community.

This book unfolds its answer to the foregoing question about motivations for inter-religious dialogue concerning moral matters by inviting into conversation three primary communities or “publics”: Christian theologians (especially but not only those from the author’s own Catholic Christian community), people affiliated with other religious traditions who are also searching for strong theoretical reasons for such
discussions and a framework in which to undertake them, and those philosophers and historians of comparative religion who are interested in the moral implications of religious beliefs, ideals, and practices (many of whom work in the field of comparative religious ethics).

In response to the question of what motivates conversation about moral matters across traditions, I argue that every potentially transformative inter-religious encounter is based, at least to some degree, on mutual acknowledgement of personal weakness and struggle (both moral and intellectual), and as such presupposes that religious traditions carry through time, in multiform exemplars and sustained arguments, tentative answers to fundamental human questions which few if any individual religious persons ever fully answer or embody. This book signals, by appealing to thinkers from the past, how we might view such potentially transformative inter-religious encounters in the future.

To elaborate this answer, and to develop its guiding question more fully, this study focuses on two interrelated tasks. First, it outlines a model of inter-religious conversation about moral matters by developing the idea of individual persons as classics to be interpreted, persons that call on other persons that they reach through personal contact or through trajectories of thought both spoken and written, to interpret their lives as projects both morally and epistemologically incomplete, in the process of purification and transformation, that nonetheless point beyond themselves, that is to say beyond any one action but also beyond the accumulation of all actions over the course of a life. The arguments advanced here present religious traditions not as insulated historical debates within communities but rather as series of linked questions and partially embodied answers unfolding over time. While such traditions are strongly rooted in both individual projects and the historical narratives of communities, they point finally beyond any individual or community, to what a group of persons might realize together in a morally complex world.

Second, this book takes as its central task setting forth a comparison to illustrate the model of person as classic, calling on two key thinkers in the histories of Buddhism and Christianity: Buddhaghosa, a fifth-century Theravada Buddhist monk and commentator, and Bonaventure, a thirteenth-century Roman Catholic priest and teacher in the Franciscan order. While I elaborate the specific reasons for the appropriateness and productivity of this particular comparison in the first chapter, I want to note here that these two figures occupy in their respective traditions places both revered and in certain respects forgotten, both by their own communities of practice and among the scholars who study them. Yet what remains so morally compelling about these figures is that they were able to bring to the renewed attention of their communities the deep inter-connectedness of basic religious ideas, practices, and moral exemplars through which these teachings could bear moral fruit.

Any comparison succeeds or fails based on its ability to say something truthful about the subject matter while at the same time interpreting the specific objects of comparison in ways not previously envisioned and showing them to be more relevant and potentially transformative of future actions than we otherwise might have judged them to be. In thinking through my own standards for what ought to mark a successful comparative project, I have drawn inspiration from two sets of sources. The first set includes those studies in the emerging field of comparative religious ethics that have undertaken investigations pairing two religious figures from days past around some
basic moral idea or problem. These studies have helped a new generation of scholars concerned with different religious ideas about virtue, vice, human flourishing, and practical reason to create and maintain a field of study, teaching, and scholarship that focuses on just these questions.

While such studies have been exemplary in their care and detailed examination of primary source materials, and in testing the viability of certain concepts across traditions, I do not believe they have yet enunciated clearly enough the rationales for why such comparisons ought to be advanced and more importantly why the religious communities, who claim and preserve the work of the thinkers these scholars study, ought to care about the scholarly comparisons being developed. This has also resulted, not coincidentally I think, in the delay of an important conversation between those who work in the field of comparative religious ethics and those who work in the field of comparative theology. The present study explores the possibility of a comparative theological ethics as a way to advance these conversations, sensitive to the rationales for comparative engagement that emerge as much from the texts and communities that scholars study as from what the scholars themselves find interesting.

To attend to these unexamined issues in comparative theology and ethics, I have drawn inspiration from a second set of sources, the many instances of which can be roughly described as theologies of religious interpretation or, as they are sometimes called, “theological hermeneutics.” Among other topics, these sources investigate what happens when one tries to cross over from one’s own religious experience, informed by attempts to interpret religious texts, to the religious ideas and practices of other people. This strategy takes seriously that interpretation always occurs from some location characterized by social, historical, and, perhaps most importantly, moral limits. It has become the equivalent of a scholar’s “home plate” to acknowledge the limits of one’s cultural perspective, the boundaries of one’s scholarly project, and the prejudices embedded in one’s own patterns of learning in order not to risk intellectual violence on other scholars or on the subject matter one is studying. However, as important as such precautions are, they do not by themselves address what it is like to be inside the mind of the interpreter, to confront what is new and potentially life-altering, to move beyond one’s initial fears and confront a world seemingly without meaning and marked only by chaotic if interesting coincidence. In other words, the life of the scholar of comparative religion need not (although it may) be as dangerous and disorienting as the life of the believer confronting the history of her or his own tradition, in love and anger, fear and hope. This book approaches comparative ethics from a “theological” perspective, that is a perspective within a religious tradition, while admitting that such a perspective might be challenged and reformulated by engagement with comparative ethics.

Not only individuals but religious traditions too have initiated periods of substantial, sustained self-examination and have started to take a serious look at their own impact on other religious traditions and on global political, cultural, and ecological realities. While this period of self-examination (occasionally with attendant reformulation and correction) may have drawn initial inspiration, at least in the West, from the challenges to religious authority exemplified in the Protestant Reformers such as Martin Luther and in the search for a realm of critical, autonomous reason characteristic of Enlightenment thinkers such as Immanuel Kant, the motivation and energy for
sustained self-examination now comes from the religious communities themselves. Religious persons have their own reasons for entering into dialogue about moral issues, not the least of which is the desire to become more truly what they are called or envision themselves to be. These reasons may differ from religion to religion, and they may not mirror the reasons that scholars have for studying religious ethics comparatively, although mapping out those areas of overlap is certainly a worthwhile task. Whatever motivations scholars may have in studying religious ethics, with ever greater frequency religious persons and their communities are coming to see that the depth of understanding they seek for their own traditions is bound up with their knowledge of other traditions and the questions asked to them from outside their own communities. Perhaps more importantly, religious and secular people alike are beginning to recognize that the very horizons for their thoughts and actions, that is to say the very range of moral options they envision and about which they think themselves capable of choosing freely, are closely related to how their self-understandings, their understandings of their own religious histories (with the suspicions often attached to these), and their understandings of other religious persons and their imperfect histories all interact.

A level of practical humility emerges in religious traditions when persons in those communities realize that there are final human limits both to their own understandings about what they believe most deeply and to their own freedom in a complex world affected and at times constrained by their own past choices. This dynamic – the constraints of self-understanding and action placed on us by our own histories and by other incomplete, as yet unfinished persons and their histories – forms the basic concern of this book.

Part I of this book deals with basic issues in comparison and outlines the religious cosmologies and historical contexts for the thinkers examined here. In Chapter 1, I explore the basic question mentioned earlier about what finally drives us out of our own traditions and into the world of differing views and behaviors. I emphasize that it is of recurring interest to religious persons across cultures and times, but particularly to thinkers in Buddhism and Christianity, why people fail to live up to their own best moral guidance. I then examine how this basic facet of human experience – moral struggle – which I variously term a perennial human problem or classic question, helps us to think about the motivations for comparative engagement. Motivations for comparison emerging from a religious tradition might differ from, even as they helpfully supplement, motivations for comparison that emerge from the comparative philosophy of religious ethics, highlighting the importance of moral transformation within rather than across traditions as a central rationale for comparison. To that end, I develop the notion of “person as classic” in order to point out the fundamental level of humility about personal moral weakness and religious knowledge that must be presupposed if such a transformative rationale for comparison is to be both plausible and meaningful. I conclude the first chapter with a more detailed introduction of the two figures that will be the subject of the remainder of the book, suggesting their particular appropriateness as classic persons, calling for our interpretation. In Chapter 2, I lay out the important connection between religious ideas and their function in the moral life and how religious ideas are both
bound to and yet point outside of particular religious cosmologies or thought worlds. For Bonaventure and Buddhaghosa, ideas are not fanciful speculations of minds freed from material concerns. They provide the conditions necessary for productive religious practices to occur. I present the symbolic religious cosmologies through which Bonaventure and Buddhaghosa wrote by examining the contours of Bonaventure’s Trinitarian symbolism and Buddhaghosa’s use of the analytic tools of Abhidhamma. In Chapter 3, I turn to the topic of materiality and practices of material simplicity, examining how Bonaventure’s and Buddhaghosa’s answers to the question of moral struggle emerge from (indeed, cannot be fully understood apart from) their practical instructions about how to engage in moral formation through interactions with the material world. I suggest how for each thinker the material world, variously interpreted, represents both the condition for moral progress even as it also forms the first and most profound obstacle to that progress. Together these two chapters present the two sides of these thinkers’ historical contexts: ideas and practices.

Part II of the book moves the study forward into the substance of the comparison, beginning with a discussion of the classic question of moral struggle and then examining the particular concepts and practical strategies used by Bonaventure and Buddhaghosa to address this question. In Chapter 4, I compare Bonaventure’s account of how participation in the sacramental life of the church provides the conditions for the development of Christian virtue with Buddhaghosa’s account of how preparatory practices that cultivate virtue provide the conditions for the possibility of successful meditation. In Chapter 5, I undertake a comparison between Bonaventure’s account of the relation of theology to prayer and the place that conceptual and symbolic language plays in understanding the limits of such activities and Buddhaghosa’s account of the transition between calming or preparatory meditation and the meditation that fosters insight into the true nature of the world. This chapter concludes by examining the similarities and differences in the two accounts by focusing on what kinds of limits religious practices and ideas reveal for each thinker, thereby suggesting the importance of moral exemplars (that is, those through whom ideas and practices are related) for each account. Here I also examine the place that moral exemplars hold in each account, arguing for the important role that persons play in helping individuals persevere in their struggles despite often discouraging instances of moral failure. In Chapter 6, I conclude by summarizing my observations about moral struggle in my treatments of Bonaventure and Buddhaghosa, suggesting different ways that persons can function as classics for each thinker, as well as how we might think about the person as a shared concern for both comparative ethics and comparative theology (as yet, a largely unexplored conversation between these groups of scholars). I revisit why I think that future work in comparative ethics must take seriously that abiding by moral convictions is just as important as (and perhaps, in this age of religious suspicion, even more important than) fostering shared moral convictions and establishing minimum standards of behavior across cultures. The study concludes with five vignettes from recent work in comparative ethics intended to suggest analogies between what I am describing as “persons as classics” and other ways that personal struggle has appeared in recent comparative studies.
Introduction

Notes

1 The language of scholarly “publics” used here reformulates for the community of theological ethics and comparative religion the three publics of theology proposed by David Tracy, namely the academy, the church, and the wider society. For a description of the three publics of theology, see his *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), especially 1–46.

2 This idea of the classic, as well as the more specific language of the religious classic, has its roots in certain theological appropriations of philosophical hermeneutics, literary theory, and philosophy of language. The central figures used to develop this method are the Roman Catholic systematic theologian David Tracy, as well as the continental philosophers Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur on whose work Tracy relies to develop his idea of the religious classic. Because the model I develop here is designed to advance inter-religious discussions on moral matters, I have also drawn on recent work in Roman Catholic moral theology, especially intra-Catholic debates about the idea of “basic” or “fundamental” freedom which seeks to explain, among other things, how it is that human actions can be both morally imperfect while at the same time still expressions of a person oriented toward God. See especially Klaus Demmer, MSC, *Shaping the Moral Life: An Approach to Moral Theology*, James F. Keenan, ed. Roberto Dell’Oro, trans. (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2000); Josef Fuchs, SJ, *Christian Ethics in a Secular Arena*, Bernard Hoose and Brian McNeil, trans. (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1984) and *Human Values and Christian Morality* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1970). This form of hermeneutics, employed as an approach to comparative ethics, therefore, most closely resembles the multidimensional approach outlined by William Schweiker. See especially his essay “On Religious Ethics,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Religious Ethics*, William Schweiker, ed. (Malden: Blackwell, 2005) as well as his *Theological Ethics and Global Dynamics: In the Time of Many Worlds* (Malden: Blackwell, 2004).


4 As will become clear in the subsequent chapter, I limit this source to those thinkers that focus on the necessity of and reason for interpreting one’s own and other religious traditions.
1

Person as Classic: Questions, Limits, and Religious Motivations

Ethics covers those areas of life where our basic human questions meet our limits. Ethics is commonly understood as a form of critical discourse concerned with morality (that is, with the mores – the customs, values, laws, and other social standards – of various human communities). Moralities emerge from many places: families, cultural groups, religious communities, academic debates, and so on. Critical discourse can also come from many of the same places. In each case, we see individuals and communities asking questions such as: How should I live? How are we to live together? How are we to live with people who do not share our values and standards? When we offer answers to these questions, or offer further questions to challenge the prevailing answers, we are involved (even if sometimes implicitly) in the work of ethics.

In a very basic sense, we ask and answer these questions in a world characterized by limits. Clearly, we live in a world of physical limits, marked above all by our bodies and the geographical range of our personal interactions and relationships. We also live in a world of social limits. Our communities impose limits, as we are born into families, structures of authority, and cultures we do not choose. Many people are also raised in religious traditions, the influence of which often develops so gradually that we often do not realize the extent of their formative power on us. Religious communities too exist within historical and cultural limits, even as they offer forms of discourse and model forms of life that challenge their members, to a certain degree, to pass beyond those same limits.

Yet we also live in a world of moral limits expressed in terms of a basic human problem: we do not seem to be able to live in accordance with our own best moral counsel, standards which may or may not be those advocated by the communities of which we are a part. We come to realize these moral limits when, for example, we start to examine our own self-destructive and other-destroying habits in new ways, or by reflecting on our culturally influenced patterns of moral rationalization, or our own blindness to the needs of those who are outside the daily course of our personal relationships and social obligations.

To admit that we live in a world characterized by the need to return constantly to our own most profound questions, questions that arise within a world of limits, does not mean living in a constant state of doubt and confusion. Nor does it mean that we are caught in a vicious relativism. Rather, it means that we seek to deepen our understanding by posing questions to ourselves and others about our personal histories and the histories of our communities. How communities carry on these conversations (what is sometimes referred to as the “logic” or “implicitly normative” dimension of “discursive practices”), while an important and necessary dimension in understanding what it means to pose questions about moral matters across different culturally specific moral “vocabularies,” does not necessarily capture the depth, motivations, or complexity of asking such questions.

Indeed, when we consider these same questions and limits from the perspectives of religious communities, we have moved into somewhat different terrain. Certainly discourse about religious ethics is characterized not only by different sources for moral reflection, culturally specific concepts, and endemic patterns for thinking, but also by a distinctively complex way of construing basic human problems. Religious communities carry on their own internal debates, not only about the meaning of basic human problems but also about which sources and modes of discourse are even appropriate to describe the problems at hand. While these debates can certainly devolve into violent sectarian conflicts, they can also over time help communities gain perspective on their own histories, their beliefs, and their moral standards. Put differently, behind each religious debate about moral norms is an equally difficult debate about mediating the community’s past and present, its texts and practices, and its own way of balancing what is possible for human life and the vision of moral excellence for which the community strives.

There are many approaches to religious ethics, the variety of which reflects a legitimate array of prudent scholarly judgments (and disagreements) about what methods are most appropriate for the topics and traditions under consideration. This book develops one possible approach, a comparative theological ethics, grounded in the discourse, motivations, and methods of one religious tradition (Roman Catholic Christianity), in dialogue with the discourse, motivations, and methods of another religious tradition (Theravāda Buddhism). The comparison focuses on the phenomenon of persons in religious communities struggling with the meaning and implications of their own communities’ claims: about what ought to be regarded as the tradition’s central ideas, material and discursive practices, and the complex role of moral exemplars in traditions. For although questions about the nature of religious traditions, identities, and authorities are distinctly modern preoccupations, the negotiation of what is true and compelling within traditions, amidst the internal plurality of their activities, is a deep and longstanding religious puzzle.

In what follows, I argue for a strategy of engaging in inter-religious conversations about moral matters based in a renewed notion of human persons as classics calling for moral interpretation. The notions (if not the precise terms) “person” and “personhood” have a long history in Greek and Roman philosophy, as well as South and Southeast Asian philosophy, in Christian theological debates, as well as in contemporary sociological, anthropological, and legal discourse. While I will refer to these debates occasionally, my contribution to the discussion about the place of persons in
ethics will be confined to a particular topic: namely how persons can be understood as places for the interpretation and integration of the sometimes overlapping, sometimes mutually critical, questions and practices in the moral life. I use the term person to denote a distinctive kind of space where moral thinking occurs, where questions are posed and meaning is constructed and discerned, as individual human beings converse about their own ideals and experiences of moral frailty and struggle.

Such conversations might be realized conversations, as when two persons from different religious communities speak together, or hypothetical conversations, as when scholars select two or more thinkers for sustained examination around a particular issue. While this book engages in the latter kind of conversation by selecting classic figures from Catholic Christianity and Theravāda Buddhism (the thirteenth-century Franciscan priest Bonaventure, and the fifth-century Theravāda monk Buddhaghosa), it does so with an eye toward understanding the dynamics of the religious lives of believers that are frequently both more open-ended, and more complex and self-critical, than surface judgments about the ideological uniformity of religious traditions sometimes assume.

Two assumptions guide my approach to this study. First, I assume that people who spend their lives associated, to varying degrees, with religious traditions try to live ever more closely by what they judge to be the best moral insights their traditions provide, even if they might be involved in a lifelong process of examining the truth claims of the tradition to which they have committed themselves. There may sometimes be disagreement about what is the preeminent value for an individual or community to realize at any particular time, or a particular course of action that ought or ought not to be taken, given current circumstances. There may also be long periods of time in which people live comfortably and without much sustained critical thought about the truth of their religious traditions. However, once such judgments have been formed, we are likely to find a strong level of agreement among people, religious and secular alike, that people ought to follow their own best judgments about what course of action will result in realizing those values that give life purpose and coherence. In other words, as philosophers from ancient to modern times have questioned, can we really imagine that a person can go through life with the singular ambition of becoming morally worse? Such attempts certainly take different forms in present-day religious communities than in pre-modern traditions, but some desire for reflectiveness and moral consistency are common features of any attempt to live a moral life.

The second assumption is that we have not yet begun to think deeply enough about the capacity possessed by what has sometimes been called the religious “alien” or religious “other” to inspire reflectiveness and moral consistency within a given religious community or discourse. Although this hypothesis cannot, strictly speaking, be tested in this study, I offer this study in part to suggest how such inter-religious engagement, even at the level of reading classic authors of another tradition, might shed light on a community’s own struggle with moral consistency and deeper levels of self-awareness and reflectiveness. Efforts at inter-religious conversation about moral matters often proceed from the assumption that once one has decided what one ought to do in dialogue with other people who are concerned about the same or similar moral problems, the motivation or inspiration to live according to that judgment will come exclusively from one’s own religious or cultural tradition. In other words, the
assumption is that the real problem in inter-religious conversation about moral matters is to agree on what meaning a particular religious discourse assigns to key moral terms and then to understand how people in that tradition employ these terms in their moral reasoning.\(^4\)

On the contrary, as I argue in this chapter and throughout the remainder of this book, we might helpfully expand our thinking about our own traditions and the nature and purpose of comparative engagements if we hold as a preliminary hypothesis nearly the opposite assumption from the one most frequently made in cross-cultural discussions about ethics. Rather than focusing only on how moral ideas are embedded in particular cultural-linguistic or religious frameworks,\(^5\) or on the patterns of moral reasoning that provide particular justifications for moral actions commended or condemned in varied religious discourse,\(^6\) we ought first to look at what is involved in trying to interpret individuals as moral works-in-progress, as broken, incomplete, morally blind persons trying to understand and live with other broken, incomplete, morally blind persons. Such efforts will not sidestep the important questions of differing world views or justifications of truth claims, but they will rather embed these questions within the broader trajectory of moral agents struggling to know themselves, what they care about, and what they ought to do.

Put most sharply, if the struggle to understand oneself and one’s moral existence (however this is expressed) is taken to be reducible in the final analysis to some other single mode of discourse, then the notion of struggle itself vanishes and the moral life will soon and easily be ceded to those who prize comfort and certainty above all else. Moreover, without some notion of intellectual and moral struggle at play in the work of interpreting other religious traditions, it becomes difficult to envision what if any rationale there could be for undertaking deliberate comparative engagements in the first place. For consciously theological comparative engagements, there must be some way of envisioning the unity between how we approach traditions other than our own and why we approach them.

While each religious interpreter of moral discourse draws her or his primary interpretive framework from one particular tradition, one must rely on analogues of moral and intellectual struggle in other traditions, precisely to keep particular elements of one’s own tradition intellectually vibrant and morally compelling in one’s own mind. What Jacques Maritain called “practical atheism,” if not taken dismissively but as an honest expression of intellectual and moral struggle, may provide an important point of contact among people of different religious views and those who hold no such views.\(^7\) It is for this reason that I want to suggest that final motivations for acting are not bound exclusively to the framework of one’s own religious tradition, precisely because one’s own religious tradition can become too comfortable, too familiar – at best, a dull goad requiring the moral whetstone of comparison. To understand one’s self and one’s tradition deeply and clearly, one needs comparative engagement.

Drawing on these assumptions, and illustrated though a comparison of two classic religious thinkers, Bonaventure and Buddhaghosa, this book proposes that persons can be understood as classics in the sense of being temporary coordinations or carriers of tradition-rooted questions and partially exemplified answers, which call for interpretation and critique precisely insofar as their expressions of epistemological humility relate to their moral limitedness. In other words, every person exists in the world as
an unfinished project, as an attempt to come to terms with their own community’s most profound questions by testing in their lives the community’s answers to these questions.

To set the stage for the comparison I shall undertake, this chapter has two principal aims. First, I introduce the notion of person as classic by examining the idea of the religious classic as it appears in the work of the Catholic theologian David Tracy, attending also to the theories of religion and interpretation from which this idea draws inspiration. Second, I introduce the two figures – Bonaventure and Buddhaghosa – whose writings will be the primary subject matter of this comparison, noting how each holds the place of a classic figure in the respective histories of each tradition’s moral thought. Each thinker works with the classic ideas and practices of their respective communities, sometimes in innovative and integrative ways, in ways that highlight the struggle of persons to know the nature of the moral world they confront and the practices that facilitate this knowledge. Moreover, each figure helps us to advance our own thinking about what might be termed a “classic human question,” namely the problem of moral struggle.

**Persons, Limits, and Religious Classics**

Classics are ambivalent cultural phenomena because they traverse the best and worst of the past, calling our attention to the best and worst of our present. It is easy to dismiss the importance of classics because they would seem to bind us too strongly to the past, to an over-determined view of history that constrains our future choices, as they link us in various ways to what has gone before us. Yet it is precisely this linking to the past that signals their initial appeal. Classic books, paintings, films, music, automobiles all roughly fit this understanding of classic. Debates surrounding the place of literary classics in primary, secondary, and college education persist to this day, as does the question of what qualifies as a classic and whether the criteria used to establish certain artifacts of human creativity as classics are inevitably bound to particular expressions of cultural power wielded by the social groups that produced them. This debate about what constitutes the proper “canon” for liberal education has become even more complicated as teachers, students, and administrators think through what, if any, place classic texts (especially religious texts) ought to have in a liberal arts curriculum.

Related to these debates are two important questions that inspire the use of the term “classic” as it is employed here. First, are there general features of classics that help us to understand how particular cultures single out and elevate for sustained critical attention certain transformative elements of that culture, whether literary, musical, or visual? Second, what moral functions do classics serve and is it proper to draw an analogy between how people interpret classics and how people interpret themselves (or, put differently, how people are themselves classics)? To answer these questions, I want to examine several aspects of the notion of the classic developed by David Tracy and then extend Tracy’s idea (in a suggestion he makes only briefly and does not develop) that it might be possible to think about persons as classics worthy of sustained interpretation.
Classics: questions and limits in thought and action

At the beginning of his discussion of the “nonclassicist notion of the classic” in his 1981 book, The Analogical Imagination, David Tracy provides the following summary statement on the importance of examining the theory and practice of interpretation for contemporary Christian theology, as well as for the religious thought of other communities: “The heart of any hermeneutical position,” he says, “is the recognition that all interpretation is a mediation of past and present, a translation carried on within the effective history of a tradition to retrieve its sometimes strange, sometimes familiar meanings.” The goal of such interpretation is a particular kind of understanding. The understanding that arises in a conversation that addresses a particular question or area of common concern (what Tracy calls the “subject matter”) is something that happens as the result of the event of conversation rather than something one wills as the outcome of a conversation or a single pre-determined result that one wants to achieve. What is the nature of this happening? As Tracy puts it, “every event of understanding, in order to produce a new interpretation, mediates between our past experience and the understanding embodied in our linguistic tradition and the present event of understanding occasioned by a fidelity to the logic of the question in the back-and-forth movement of the conversation.”

While the tradition of theological and philosophical hermeneutics on which Tracy draws is too long to summarize here, there are certain elements of this line of thinking that ground Tracy’s views on conversation, interpretation, and understanding which are necessary in order to make sense of his notion of the classic, as well as the moral implications I draw from it. For Tracy, a close connection exists between the phenomenon of reading a text and the phenomenon of entering into a conversation with another person. Drawing on the account of language and discourse in the generation of meaning in Paul Ricoeur’s Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning, Tracy reviews three options available to readers approaching a text in the moment when we judge the text to be relevant to our questions and concerns, that is to say as a text that might be meaningful to us: in terms of the “author’s original intention,” in terms of the “original discourse situation,” and in terms of the “first historical addressee of the text.”

All three of these interpretive options presuppose, as Tracy states following Ricoeur, “the process of linguistic ‘distanciation’” whereby “a written text, precisely as written, is distanced both from the original intention of the author and from the original reception by its first addressees.” For Ricoeur, the process of distanciation was not only an interpretive problem for readers but more profoundly a problem of the struggle to understand oneself. Distanciation is “a dialectical trait, the principle of a struggle between the otherness that transforms all spatial and temporal distance into cultural estrangement and the ownness by which all understanding aims at the extension of self-understanding… [it is] the dynamic counterpart of our need, our interest, and our effort to overcome cultural estrangement.” Recognizing distanciation invites us to consider how we prioritize and balance what we can know of the author’s horizon with what we can know of our own.