

Patterns of Action

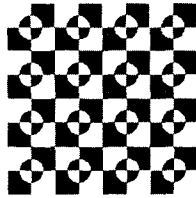
Religion and Ethics in a Comparative Perspective

DAVID CHIDESTER

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PREFACE

This book is a brief introductory tour through the world of religious ethics from the vantage point of the comparative history of religions. It is designed as a basic tour guide, an interpretive map to the territory of religious action. Indeed, I wrote this book while on a kind of world tour: Conceived in New York, the book was discussed in Dallas, tested in Santa Barbara, contemplated in China, written in Israel, revised in Africa, and finished back in California. The fact that this book has literally been around the world, however, does not account for its global perspective. I would have felt the need for a global approach to religious ethics even if I had never left home. But through these travels I was convinced of how small the human world can be—a mere speck in the vast expanse of cosmic space, a brief moment in the measureless eons of time. And yet within that small space and time human beings have generated tremendously diverse ways of being human. The study of comparative religious ethics provides one avenue of access into that diversity. This book is committed to providing a basic interpretive framework for understanding the diverse religious norms that inform ordinary human behavior in the history of religions.

Such a global perspective on religious ethics is necessary because the overriding religious fact of our age is religious pluralism. We are confronted, confounded, and confused, as perhaps

never before in human history, with the irreducible variety of religious experience. Modern human beings confront the dramatic differences among religious worldviews, the conflict among different religious traditions claiming absolute authority, and the great difficulties involved in appreciating and understanding the religions of others. Throughout this tour of religious ethics I have kept in mind this fact of religious pluralism, as it defines our current religious environment.

But there is a problem inherent in the nature of the tour itself. The modern avocation of tourism has been described as a tendency to “museumize the pre-modern.” We take objects, tools, and artworks out of their original living context and display them within a single collection. A statue of Apollo, a Chinese bracelet, a suit of armor, a Roman coin, a painting of Saint Barbara, a spinning wheel, an Egyptian mummy, a printing press, and so on are not only taken out of the context in which they were once used, worshiped, or enjoyed, but they are also placed together within the same cognitive architecture of the museum. A certain inevitable displacement occurs in this “museumization.” If we are not seeing the object in its intended context, within the frame of reference in which it originally made sense, then perhaps we are not really seeing the object.

A similar kind of displacement occurs when we take norms, rules, and values out of their

living traditions, out of the context in which they made sense for the people who lived with them, and display them in a general survey such as this book attempts to be. Something is surely lost in the process. But while this book attempts to record, catalog, and describe as accurately as possible actual ethical norms for human action, drawn from a wide range of cultural traditions, the real cultural situation it addresses is that of religious ethics in the modern world. Every discussion of ethical experience, ethical rules, and ethical values will return to this situation. Modern challenges in personal and social ethics is the primary concern of this book; hence the displacement of materials from different traditions—all appearing under the same roof, so to speak—does make a certain kind of sense in the context of the general displacement that seems to pervade the modern world when it confronts traditional patterns of life, action, and social relations.

One symptom of that displacement is the assumption that religious ethics must be subject to the demands of reason: The sacred authority invested in traditional patterns of ethical action must be evaluated by independent rational criteria of ethics. Recently, important work has been done in the field of comparative religious ethics, but I feel that much of this work has been tied too closely to the categories of philosophical ethics. Major recent contributions to the comparative study of religious ethics—such as *Religious Reason* (1978) by Ronald Green and *Comparative Religious Ethics* (1978) by David Little and Sumner Twiss—have provided rigorous examinations of the demands of reason, rational argumentation, and rational justification in religious ethics. The clarity, precision, and quality of thought that have gone into these projects is admirable, but I have opted for a more eclectic and interdisciplinary approach to the interpretation of religious ethics. I think the approach is consistent with the interpretive categories and interests

that have emerged in the discipline of religious studies.

My primary aim is descriptive—to describe materials for an imaginative engagement with the variety of ethical options that have been generated within religious worldviews. But the critical issue is one of interpretation. How do we interpret this variety? Each of the three major parts of this book explores a different interpretive perspective in the study of comparative religious ethics. An interpretive study of religious ethics can be organized around three basic perspectives: the concern with ethical experience, the concern with ethical rules governing the human life cycle, and the concern with ethical values embodied in social relations.

Ethical experience can best be appreciated, interpreted, and perhaps understood within the phenomenology and history of religions. Ethical experience can be located within the multi-dimensional texture of religion. The human experience of confronting the obligations of sacred authority can best be understood, not through scientific explanation or philosophical reduction, but by interpreting the conditions of possibility for ethical action within religious worldviews. Patterns of ethical action are woven into the fabric of religious symbol, myth, and ritual that comprise any religion. The experiential encounter with authoritative norms for ordinary human behavior is an integral part of religion. That experience is intimately connected to all the other dimensions of belief, action, and experience that make up a religion. The interpretive categories of the history of religions, therefore, provide the best framework for locating religious ethics within human experience.

Ethical rules can best be interpreted as responses to the basic dilemmas, challenges, and crises of the human life cycle. Van Gennep, Malinowski, Turner, and many others have observed that religious rituals mediate life-cycle transitions of birth, adolescence, marriage, and

death. Erik Erikson has outlined the psychological challenges that arise at different stages of the life cycle. Ethical challenges also arise—abortion, infanticide, adulthood, gender roles, sexuality, euthanasia, and suicide—as human dilemmas that relate directly to the liminal crises of life-cycle transitions. Ethical rules pattern human behavior in response to the challenges of these transitions. They suggest basic patterns of action in the personal ethics of religious communities and traditions.

Ethical values can best be interpreted as they are embodied in social relations. Networks of human social relations define values, produce values, exchange values, and preserve values. That which is considered ethically valuable, desirable, or good in human experience is embodied and reinforced within a network of social relations. Ethical rules also govern social relations, but these rules are practical reinforcements of the underlying values that are embodied in institutions, technology, economic exchange, and strategies for collective survival. These shared values give concrete and tangible form to the religious worldview that is acted out in the ordinary interactions of any social group. Such ethical values support basic patterns of action in the social ethics of communities and traditions.

These three perspectives on religious ethics in the history of religions define the outline of this book. Part One is concerned with *ethical experience* in relation to the obligatory norms of sacred authority; Part Two explores *ethical rules* governing human behavior in response to the challenges of life-cycle transitions; and Part Three examines *ethical values* that are supported by a religious worldview and embodied in social relations. In each section, a separate important aspect of religious ethics is explored.

In Part One the patterns and processes of ethical experience are isolated in relation to religious norms for ordinary behavior. The section provides a *phenomenology* of ethical experience

in the history of religions, a typology of ethical responses to obligation, and an analysis of the tensions of dissonance and the strategies for achieving harmony in ethical experience. This most explicitly theoretical, and most broadly comparative, section of the book does not, however, develop a theory of comparative religious ethics that is then imposed on the issues raised in the other two sections. It is an analysis of ethical experience that can stand on its own. However, the analysis of dissonance as an integral experience in religious ethics (see Chapter 3) links this section to the rest of the book. The dissonance experienced in guilt, shame, and any sense that things are not as they ought to be is necessarily connected with the ethical dilemmas of the human life cycle and social relations that the other two major sections examine. But religious ethics is not simply issue-oriented: It involves patterns of action that negotiate an experience of ethical and ritual harmony in relation to the demands of sacred obligation governing everyday, ordinary behavior. Part One, therefore, presents a diagram of the basic pattern of ethical experience in the history of religions.

The other two sections are issue-oriented explorations of the most significant ethical dilemmas, challenges, and conflicts of the human life cycle and social relations. The ethical issues considered in Parts Two and Three are those that have arisen primarily in modern, western, industrialized societies. The resources of the history of religions, and the categories of cross-cultural and interdisciplinary analysis, provide opportunities for exploring in new ways those dilemmas that have appeared most acutely in the modern world. For individuals living in modern, western, industrialized societies, these sections provide an occasion for re-imagining crucial dilemmas of the life cycle and social relations by referring these issues to traditional norms, rules, values, and patterns of action in the history of religions. No attempt is made to provide a complete in-

ventory of religious beliefs and practices regarding these issues; this is not an encyclopedic collection of religious beliefs and practices in personal and social ethics. Rather, my intention is an interpretive engagement with specific issues of personal and social ethics in the modern world from the perspective of the history of religions. The emphasis is on the interpretation of basic patterns and processes in personal and social ethics. Contemporary ethical issues in personal ethics (such as abortion, sexuality, and suicide) and in social ethics (such as technology, economic exchange, and war) may appear in a new light from this perspective. Parts Two and Three, therefore, explore some of the available resources in the comparative study of religions for understanding crucial, contemporary ethical issues.

The Introduction places these explorations of religious ethics within the comparative study of religion and religions. Although a survey of the world's religions is not intended, this section provides an overview of the phenomenon of religion, classifying religions into primal, archaic, traditional, and modern, and exploring the comparative possibilities in the study of religion as a prelude to the study of comparative religious ethics. No prior knowledge of the history of religions is assumed, and suggestions for supplemental reading in religion and ethics are provided in the notes to the Introduction. The most important section of the Introduction for this interpretive study of comparative religious ethics is the discussion of ethical experience,

rules, and values, which will be developed in detail in the three parts of the book. Patterns of ethical experience, rules, and values within traditional and modern religious life form the subject matter of this book. It is possible that an encounter with the variety of these patterns may help to expand our ability to imagine ethical patterns of action.

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INTRODUCTION

RELIGION, ETHICS, AND THE COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

Religion is a vital dimension of human experience that can be identified, analyzed, described, and interpreted in a variety of ways. The approach taken in this book attempts to be simultaneously detached and empathic. A detached approach views religious phenomena in as objective a manner as possible. The investigator's own value judgments are temporarily suspended in order to permit the values, meaning, and power inherent in different religious worldviews to appear in their own integrity. An empathic approach respects that integrity, allowing the irreducible variety of religions to be appreciated as different experiments in being human. Detachment and empathy are both implied in the disciplined study of religion.

The study of the history of religions requires techniques for interpreting the religious dimension of human experience. First, religion itself must be identified. Perhaps the simplest defini-

tion would locate religion in the human engagement with sacred norms that inform belief, action, and experience. Second, this involvement with sacred norms can be analyzed in three dimensions:

1. a theoretical dimension of religious belief, myth, and doctrine
2. a practical dimension of religious action (rituals, laws, customs, and rules for behavior)
3. an experiential dimension of religion that includes individual experience and social forms of association, organization, and community

Third, religious beliefs, practices, and experiences can be described in different cultural con-

texts; the history of religions presumes a cross-cultural frame of reference. Finally, the central task of the history of religions is the interpretation of the sense and significance of religious phenomena. The interpretive strategies of the study of religion explore the basic patterns and processes of religious belief, action, and experience in order to deepen and expand our understanding of this important dimension of human life.

Religious ethics, which includes all the sacred norms that inform ordinary behavior, is one important aspect of religion. When we explore patterns of ethical action in the history of religions we find that ethical norms—standards, guidelines, rules, regulations, laws, values, and so on—for conducting human behavior in daily life are interwoven with all other aspects of belief, action, and experience that make up a religion. Patterns of ethical action form an integral part of religion. If we were to study patterns of ethical action in order to decide what are the proper standards for human conduct, then we would be involved in normative religious ethics. This is an important ongoing activity within any living ethical system. But if we simply wanted to survey the actual ethical beliefs and practices of a number of different traditions, and to make an inventory of the history of religious ethics, then we would be engaged in descriptive religious ethics. The first step in the approach to religious ethics suggested by the history of religions is to set aside our own normative judgments in order to enter into the work of description. A second step, however, involves the work of classification, analysis, and interpretation. The study of basic patterns and processes in ethical action within the history of religions may be called interpretive religious ethics.

We will be examining three basic interpretive perspectives on religious ethics in the history of religions. First, we will be concerned with the nature of ethical experience. Any ethical system contains certain powerful images of ethi-

cal behavior, and any individual may experience degrees of conflict or harmony in relation to those controlling images of action. We need to be sensitive to the experiential dynamics in the human engagement with ethical norms in the history of religions. Second, we will examine ethical rules. An ethical system will develop an explicit code of rules for behavior. As we survey different ethical codes, we may find that although particular rules differ, they respond to very similar challenges in the human life cycle and social relations. Third, we will try to uncover the nature of ethical values. Values may be simply whatever people feel they need, want, or desire; on a deeper level, however, values reveal fundamental ethical judgments about what is considered good in human life. Such values may be deeply embedded in the quality of social relations supported by an ethical system. The study of ethical experience, rules, and values forms the primary classification of the field of religious ethics in interpretive religious ethics.

Finally, ethical experience, rules, and values will be explored in a cross-cultural context. The comparative method will form the basis for our interpretations of religious ethics in the history of religions. Comparisons are not made for the purpose of judging whether particular ethical systems are right or wrong, better or worse, superior or inferior; such an approach would be an exercise in normative religious ethics. Rather, a comparative interpretation of religious ethics clarifies the cultural variety of ethical experiments in being human. The global scope of comparative religious ethics suggests an almost endless variety of ethical possibilities. We will be concerned with identifying the sheer diversity in that play of possibilities. But at the same time we will find that similar underlying structures in human life provide the basic conditions of possibility for ethical action. In a variety of ways ethical systems respond to the same challenges: the challenge of forming personal identity and the challenge of cooperation among persons in a net-

work of social relations. The human life cycle and social relations provide fairly constant underlying structures that generate a range of different ethical patterns of action.

Exploring comparative religious ethics in this way calls for an imaginative engagement with different possibilities of being human. Through the interpretation of otherness, strange, foreign, or different ethical beliefs and practices may become more familiar. Imaginative involvement may make the strange familiar, but it also has the potential for producing the corresponding effect

of making the familiar strange. Many patterns of action that we take for granted may suddenly seem unusual, curious, and perhaps even foreign. The comparative study of religious ethics may open up new possibilities for ethical action. Ultimately, the value of this interpretive approach to comparative religious ethics lies in the possibility of returning from these encounters with otherness to look at ourselves with new eyes. As the poet T. S. Eliot put it, "The end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time."¹

Religion and Religions

The term *religion* designates a general class of human beliefs, practices, and experiences; religions are particular subspecies of that class. Religions, or religious traditions, are identified as particular illustrations of the general class of religion, just as apples, oranges, pears, and bananas might be subspecies of the general class, fruit. Since most cultures do not have terms for religion or religions, these designations are problematic in the comparative study of religion. Their precise definitions are stipulated by the study of religion itself. The historian of religion Jonathan Z. Smith makes this point with regard to the concept of religion:

If we have understood the archaeological and textual record correctly, man has had his entire history in which to imagine deities and modes of interaction with them. But man, more precisely western man, has had only the last few centuries in which to imagine religion . . . That is to say, while there is a staggering amount of data, of phenomena, of human experiences and expressions that might be characterized in one culture or another, by one criterion or another as religious—there is no data for religion. Religion is solely the creation of the

*scholar's study. It is created for the scholar's analytic purposes by his imaginative acts of comparison and generalization.*²

If the class of *religion* is constructed out of our imaginative encounter with historical records, the same is the case with our concept of *religions*. The historian of religion Wilfred Cantwell Smith has observed that all that exists for our study are accounts of personal faith and the cumulative traditions within which that faith is expressed. The notion of discrete religions—Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and so on—is also the result of academic classifications.³

But if we are going to use these terms, we should at least be clear about what we mean by them. Outlining some basic working definitions will provide a preliminary orientation for our exploration of comparative religious ethics. Some sense of what it means to identify and analyze religion (and to classify different religions) will provide a useful map to the territory we will be exploring.

Identifying Religion

We have suggested that a simple definition of religion would identify it as that dimension of human experience engaged with sacred norms. But how should we understand the term *sacred*? In one sense, a descriptive approach to the study of religion requires a circular definition of sacred: Whatever someone holds to be sacred is sacred. Our task is to describe and interpret the sacred norms that are actually held by individuals, communities, and historical traditions. We can carry this analysis a step further, however, by recognizing that what people hold to be sacred tends to have two important characteristics: ultimate meaning and transcendent power.

Religion has been defined as a vital concern with the ultimate meaning of human existence. The theologian Paul Tillich suggested that the religious dimension in experience is awakened at those points in which human beings are grasped by an ultimate concern.⁴ Some have interpreted Tillich's proposal to mean that whatever is held as a supreme or pre-eminent human concern qualifies as religion; in this sense the worship of gods, nation, or wealth could be considered as a religious concern if it provides the ultimate frame of meaning for human life. But the word *ultimate*, from the Latin *ultima*, indicates something that is last, final, or the end of a series. An ultimate concern, therefore, must come up against the absolute limits of human life. In the face of the ultimate human limit situations of birth, change, and death, religion appears as a creative response that generates a sense of meaning. In the face of the apparent limitations of human consciousness and will, religion generates a context of sacred ultimate meaning.

Sacred norms are also characterized by transcendent power. Some scholars have located the essence of religion in the human relationship

with super-human powers. E. B. Tylor defined religion as simply "the belief in spiritual beings."⁵ And more recently the anthropologist Melford Spiro has clarified the culturally specific context in which religion emerges by suggesting that religion is "an institution consisting of culturally patterned interactions with culturally postulated superhuman beings."⁶ Both definitions recognize that religion involves an engagement with powers that rise above or go beyond ordinary human experience. Religion is not simply a concern with the meaning of human life, but also an engagement with the transcendent powers, forces, and processes that human beings have perceived to impinge on their lives. Rudolf Otto tried to describe this sense of sacred power as the *sensus numinous*—the felt sense of an awesome, terrifying, yet at the same time mysteriously attractive power beyond ordinary human capacities.⁷ But religion is not simply a feeling; human beings act in observable ways in relation to the transcendent power that is invested in sacred norms. The engagement with transcendent power may be observed in a wide range of religious behavior: rituals of worship, techniques of meditation, and the whole range of ethical action. These forms of behavior are religious because they are involved with sacred norms that provide a living context of ultimate meaning and transcendent power.

Analyzing Religion

In analyzing the concept of religion it is possible to distinguish three basic dimensions: belief, action, and experience. Each dimension can be divided into two aspects, producing a basic schematic outline, and clarifying the terminology that will be used in our description and interpretation of religious phenomena.⁸

Religious Belief Religious belief, the first dimension, takes two forms: myth and doctrine. By *myth* we mean a story or set of stories referring to sacred beings, sacred objects, and sacred events. Myths often tell of events such as the creative acts of gods and goddesses, the deeds of culture heroes, and the origins of natural processes and human institutions. These events all tend to take place in a time outside of ordinary time. Sacred narratives are much like histories in that they tell stories about the deeds of divine beings, ancestors, and communities; they are not, however, subject to the same criteria of truth that holds for historical narratives. It is more important to ask if a myth is alive or dead than to ask if it is true or false. If a myth is alive, then it creates a context in which the living reality of a religious tradition emerges. Human beings, to the extent that they are religious, live in a world of myth, a world that is meaningfully structured by the sacred stories preserved and handed down in a tradition. These stories provide a living model for the identity of both the community and individuals within the community. They set a pattern of images, ideals, and values that carry sacred authority over human behavior. Myth represents a fundamental orientation to the world. To be a human being is not simply to live in a world, but to live in a meaningful world; myth is one important way in which human beings invest their world with meaning.⁹

By *doctrine* we mean statements of religious belief. Where myth takes the form of stories, doctrine takes the form of propositions of belief that are affirmed within a given religious community. For example, the story of creation in seven days takes the form of a myth; the statement that there is one God who created heaven and earth is a doctrine. The story of the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus functions as a myth; the statement that Jesus is one person with two natures, human and divine, is a doctrine. The stories of Muhammad's flight from Mecca to Medina and his miraculous ascent into the heavens are myths;

the statement that there is one God and Muhammad is his prophet is a doctrine.¹⁰ Doctrine can be worked out more or less systematically within a religious tradition. But, in most cases, subscribing to a religious doctrine serves as a sign of membership within a religious community that holds that particular doctrine. So although doctrine represents one aspect of religious belief, it is not simply a conceptual exercise. Doctrine may perform an important social function by serving as a sign that a believer belongs within the worldview of a particular religious group.

Religious Action Religion is not simply a matter of belief. Belief may, in fact, be the least important dimension of religion. What people do and what they experience are far more important within a religious tradition. So the second dimension of religion is action. Here again religious action may be divided into two aspects: ritual and ethics. *Ritual* is symbolic action with reference to what is held to be sacred. Rituals are performed in extra-ordinary times and places. They respond to life-cycle transitions, marking out the passage of birth, the initiation from childhood to adulthood, the ceremonies of marriage, and the funerary rituals of death. Rituals also mark transitions in the sacred calendar of a community. Specified practices are performed for the new year, harvest festivals, and other holy days. And rituals occur as creative responses to the afflictions of human existence, such as illness, drought, famine, and uncertainty. Ritual takes the various forms of religious worship, prayer, sacrifice, techniques of meditation, festival, celebration, and pilgrimage—all of which provide structured and formalized ways of participating in the power of the sacred through meaningful, symbolic action. The living ritual practices of a religious tradition are not empty, mechanical routines, but a vital, active means of access to sacred power.¹¹

Ethics is also an aspect of religious action.