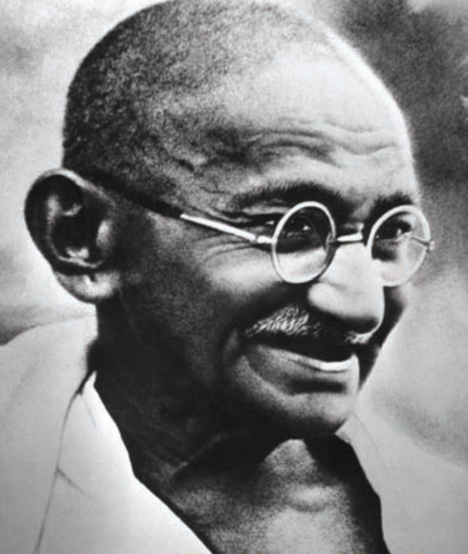
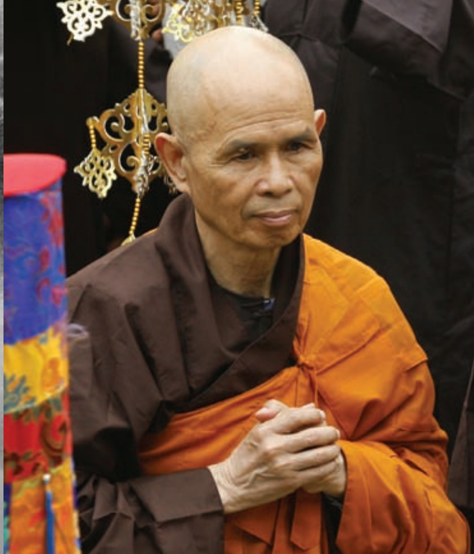
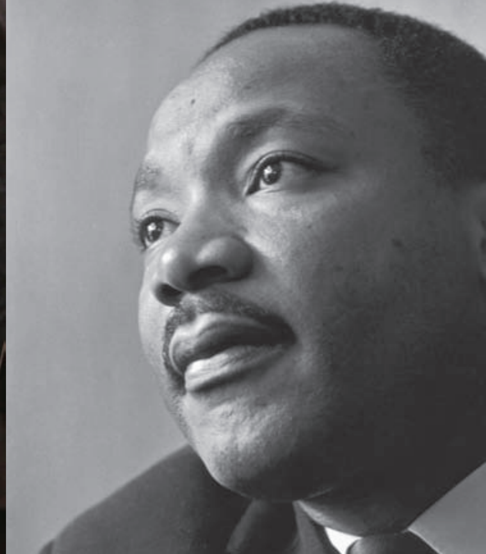

Comparative Religious Ethics

A Narrative Approach to Global Ethics

SECOND EDITION

DARRELL J. FASCHING, DELL DECHANT & DAVID M. LANTIGUA

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The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, UK

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For John S. Dunne,
for the Monks of Mount Saviour Monastery,
and in Memory of John H. McCombe

Contents

Preface xi
Acknowledgments xiii

Part I Religion, Ethics, and Stories of War and Peace 1

1 Religion, Ethics, and Storytelling 3
Storytelling: from Comparative Ethics to Global Ethics 4
Religion: the Sacred and the Holy 9
The Deep Structures of the Sacred and the Holy and Their Mediations 19
The Awakening of Ethical Consciousness: the Power of Religious Stories, East and West 20
The Great Religious Stories of the World – an Overview 30
A Postscript on Religious Language 36
Questions for Discussion 39
Sources 40

2 Stories of War and Peace in an Age of Globalization 41
Tales of Madness: from Auschwitz to Hiroshima 42
Auschwitz and Hiroshima: the Formative Religious Events of the Postmodern World 45
Techno-Bureaucratic Rationality and the Demise of Ethical Consciousness 51
Doubling and the Myth of Life through Death: the Spiritual Logic of Mass Death in the Twentieth Century 56
The Way of All the Earth: Global Ethics and Tales of Divine Madness 63
Questions for Discussion 72
Sources 73

Part II War and Peace: Ancient Stories and Postmodern Life Stories **75**

Introduction: Ethics after Auschwitz and Hiroshima 77

3 Gilgamesh and the Religious Quest 85
The Story of Gilgamesh 86
Urbanization, Doubling, Death, and the Possibility of Ethical Reflection 91
The Quest – the Way of the Virtues 94
Questions for Discussion 99
Sources 99

4 The Socratic Religious Experience: from the Birth of Ethics to the Quest for Cosmopolis 100
The Story of the Trial of Socrates 101
The Socratic Invention of Ethics – the Way of Doubt 105
The Polis and the Quest for Cosmopolis: the Classical Era 109
The Story of Augustine's Confessions *– Faith as a Surrender to Doubt* 116
The Augustinian-Kantian Quest for a Global Ethic 126
Questions for Discussion 135
Sources 136

5 Hindu Stories – Ancient and Postmodern 137
Cosmic Story: the Myth of Liberation 138
Formative Story: Arjuna and Krishna 143
Life Story: Mohandas K. Gandhi and the Way of Brahmacharya 148
Comparative Reflections: the Paradoxes of War and Peace 159
Questions for Discussion 163
Sources 164

6 Buddhist Stories – Ancient and Postmodern 165
Formative Story: Siddhartha 166
The Cosmic Story Revised: the Myth of Liberation 173
Life Story: Thich Nhat Hanh, the Way of Mindfulness and the Dao of Zen 181
Comparative Reflections: Gandhi and Thich Nhat Hanh 196
Postscript: the Virtues of the Quest in Gilgamesh, Augustine, and Siddhartha 199
Questions for Discussion 203
Sources 203

7 Jewish Stories – Ancient and Postmodern 205
Cosmic Story: the Myth of History 206
Formative Story: the Audacity of Job 213

Life Story: Abraham Joshua Heschel and the Way of Audacity 223
Comparative Reflections: Heschel, Gandhi, and Thich Nhat Hanh 229
Questions for Discussion 232
Sources 233

8 Christian Stories – Ancient and Postmodern 234
Formative Story: Jesus of Nazareth 235
The Cosmic Story Revised: the Incarnation of the Word 242
Life Story: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Way of the Cross 247
Comparative Reflections: King, Heschel, Gandhi, and Thich Nhat Hanh 257
Questions for Discussion 260
Sources 260

9 Islamic Stories – Ancient and Postmodern 262
Formative Story: Muhammad 263
Cosmic Story: Further Revisions of the Myth of History 269
Life Story: Malcolm X and the Way of Pilgrimage 275
Comparative Reflections: Just War or Non-Violence? – Malcolm X's Argument with the Gandhian Tradition 286
Questions for Discussion 295
Sources 296

Part III The Path to Global Ethics – the Way of All the Earth **297**

Introduction 299

10 Feminist Audacity and the Ethics of Interdependence 300
The Feminist Challenge to the Myths of Life through Death 301
The Feminist Alternative: Interdependence and the Ethics of Care 305
Life Story: Joanna Macy and Buddhist Ecofeminism 311
Life Story: Rosemary Ruether and Christian Ecofeminism 316
Conclusion 324
Questions for Discussion 325
Sources 326

11 Cosmopolis: the Way of All the Earth 327
Globalization and the Story of Babel: from Ethnocentrism to Interdependence 327
Ecofeminism: from the Social Ecology of Conscience to the Social Ecology of Justice 330
The Way of All the Earth 343
Questions for Discussion 347
Sources 348

Index of Names and Terms 349

Index of Subjects 355

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Epilogue: Gandhian Ethics in an Age of Terrorism

Preface

In 1972 I was a graduate student in the doctoral program at Syracuse University, accustomed to spending a week or two at Mount Saviour Monastery in Elmira New York during the summer. From my first encounter with these Benedictine monks they taught me the profound meaning of "hospitality." It was there, under the spiritual guidance of Father Alexander, that I was first introduced to *zazen* – Buddhist meditation as a form of spiritual practice a Christian might profitably engage in.

The monastic custom is to have spiritual reading done aloud by one of the monks while the rest take their meals. During my visit that summer the spiritual reading was from a newly published book, *The Way of All the Earth,* by John S. Dunne of Notre Dame University. I was stunned, overwhelmed, and entranced by this book and immediately went out and bought a copy upon returning to Syracuse. Its thesis, that a new way of being religious was emerging in an age of globalization, one that he described as "passing over" and "coming back," became for me the organizing insight of my own life's work, including this volume. So I gratefully dedicate this book to John S. Dunne and the monks of Mount Saviour. Without their influence it would never have been written. It is also dedicated to the memory of the man I worked for and with at that time, Dr. John H. McCombe, then Dean of Hendricks Chapel at Syracuse University. He is for me a model of the very practice of "passing over" that Dunne advocates.

It is hard for me to believe the first edition of *Comparative Religious Ethics: A Narrative Approach* was published a full decade ago in 2001. Despite being a textbook, this book really functions as the third part of a four volume series on religion and global ethics that I undertook. The first volume, *Narrative Theology after Auschwitz: From Alienation to Ethics,* appeared almost two decades ago (in 1992) and was followed by *The Ethical Challenge of Auschwitz and Hiroshima* a

year later. The core themes of those two volumes are presented in the second chapter of *Comparative Religious Ethics: A Narrative Approach*. This book extends the argument of the 1993 book that global public policy ethics requires a critique of the narrative imagination. *Comparative Religious Ethics* shows how this type of critique emerged in the last half of the 20th century in the global dialogue between figures like Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., Thich Nhat Hanh, and the others presented in this book. Along the way, in *The Coming of the Millennium* (1996), I explored how a Christian ethic of hospitality to the stranger participates in this global dialogue and global experiment.

This second edition of *Comparative Religious Ethics: A Narrative Approach to Global Ethics* seeks to fill in some of the missing elements of the first edition, especially the inclusion of a chapter on philosophical ethics from Socrates to Kant's ethic of global hospitality; the inclusion of a section on Chinese religions (Daoism and Confucianism) and their influence on Thich Nhat Hanh's Zen Buddhism in Chapter 6, and an expanded treatment of global ethics and the inclusion of a model of "The Social Ecology of Justice" to complement the "Social Ecology of Conscience" in the final chapter.

I am especially pleased to have shared the authorship tasks of *Comparative Religious Ethics* with two of my former students, Dell deChant and David Lantigua. Both studied with me at the undergraduate and graduate levels. Dell co-authored the first edition with me and now David has joined us for this second edition. Dell is now Associate Chair of Religious Studies at the University of South Florida in Tampa and an accomplished author in his own right; David is a doctoral candidate at Notre Dame whom I can guarantee will soon be making significant contributions as an author. They have made this a multigenerational project that we all hope will reach a multigenerational readership.

Darrell J. Fasching
University of South Florida, Tampa

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Part I

Religion, Ethics, and Stories of War and Peace

1 Religion, Ethics, and Storytelling 3

2 Stories of War and Peace in an Age of Globalization 41

1

Religion, Ethics, and Storytelling

Human religiousness is defined by two opposing deep structures of human experience and imagination that shape the way stories are told, heard and interpreted. Moreover, our understanding of good and evil is defined by the kind of story we think we are in and the role we see ourselves playing in that story. The terms "sacred" and "holy," which have typically been used interchangeably, are proposed here as names for these opposing deep structures. The sacred defines the experience of those who share a common identity as "human" and see all others as profane and less (or less than) human. The sacred generates a morality expressed in narratives of mistrust and hostility toward the stranger. The experience of the holy, by contrast, generates an ethic which calls into question every sacred morality in order to transform it in the name of justice and compassion. An ethical story is one that questions sacred morality in the name of hospitality to the stranger and audacity on behalf of the stranger. The task of an ethic of the holy is not to replace the sacred morality of a society but to transform it by breaking down the divisions between the sacred and profane through narratives of hospitality to the stranger which affirm the human dignity of precisely those who do not share "my identity" and "my story."

Comparative Religious Ethics: A Narrative Approach to Global Ethics, Second Edition.
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Storytelling: from Comparative Ethics to Global Ethics

In April of 1968, Martin Luther King, Jr., often referred to as "the American Gandhi," went to Memphis to help black workers settle a garbage strike. At the time, this Baptist minister from the black church tradition was looking forward to spending the approaching Passover with Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. Heschel, who had marched with him in a civil rights protest at Selma, Alabama, three years earlier, had become a close friend and supporter. Unfortunately, King was not able to keep that engagement. Like Gandhi before him, on April 4, 1968, Martin Luther King, Jr., a man of non-violence, was violently assassinated. Another of King's friends, the Buddhist monk and anti-Vietnam war activist, Thich Nhat Hanh, whom King had nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize, received the news of his death while at an interreligious conference in New York City. Only the previous spring, King had officially come out against the Vietnam War, partly at the urging of Thich Nhat Hanh and Abraham Joshua Heschel. This occurred under the auspices of Clergy and Laymen Concerned about Vietnam, founded by Heschel, John Bennett, and Richard Neuhaus. Now, he who had called for an end to hatred, violence and war was dead. But the spiritual and ethical vision he shared with his friends, across religions and cultures, is not. It is alive and well.

Our task in this book is to understand how a Christian minister, a Jewish rabbi, and a Buddhist monk, all inspired by a Hindu "Mahatma" (Great Soul), Mohandas K. Gandhi, were able to share a common ethical vision of non-violence while maintaining their respective religious identities. We shall do so while taking into account important questions concerning this ethic raised by the Muslim Malcolm X and the feminist voices of Rosemary Ruether (Christian) and Joanna Macy (Buddhist). Out of the dialogue among them we believe an important spiritual and ethical path for a global ethic is emerging. It is what John Dunne calls "the way of all the earth" – a biblical phrase that could also be translated "the way of all flesh" or the way of all mortal beings.

We live in a developing global civilization made up of many religions and cultures interconnected by mass media, international transportation, international corporations, and the internet. No longer can any person, country, or religion be an island: we are more and more interdependent. The twentieth century began with great hopes that science and technology would usher in a secular age of rationality, peace, and progress. Instead, it ushered in an age of apocalyptic nightmares – an age of nationalism, racism and global conflict leading to two world wars and an estimated 100 000 000 deaths. Science and technology, it seems, were better at creating instruments of mass destruction, like the gas chambers of Auschwitz and the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, than the instruments of peace. The question that hangs over our heads is whether the next century (indeed the next millennium) will bring more of the same, or whether diverse religions and cultures will find ways to build bridges to an era of peace. It remains an open question whether the religions of the world will be part of the problem or part of the solution.

In addressing this question we are, moreover, faced with the serious challenge of cultural and ethical relativism. Are religions and cultures so different from one another that all their interactions inevitably result in conflict and misunderstanding? Are they so

different from each other that no ethical consensus can be reached? The study of ethics must be more than an "objective" survey of abstract theories taught in a noncommittal fashion. It ought to convey the wisdom one generation has to pass on to the next. To leave the next generation with no wisdom in an age as dangerous as ours is to create a cynical generation that believes there are no standards and so one view of life is thought to be as good as another. The wisdom that has come to birth in our time, we are convinced, is that which has emerged in response to the atrocities of World War II, the indignities of racism, sexism and colonialism everywhere, and the violation of our environment by modern scientific/technological civilization. What the dangers of our time call for is an interreligious and international strategy for turning around our science and technology, protecting the human dignity of all peoples, and restoring the ecology of our mother earth. The study of comparative religious ethics has an important role to play in addressing these issues through forging a global ethic.

The answers we seek, however, lie not so much in theories as in the life stories of extraordinary persons who have wrestled with questions of justice, non-violence, and ecological well-being in an age of racism, sexism, religious prejudice, nationalism, colonialism, terrorism, and nuclear war. Our story picks out a thread of cross-cultural or global conversation from the human drama of history that begins with the Russian novelist Tolstoy (1828–1910) who in turn influenced Gandhi (1869–1948) who in turn influenced a generation that includes Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929–1968), Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907–1972), Thich Nhat Hanh (1926–), and Malcolm X (1925–1965). King, a Baptist minister, drew on Gandhi's Hinduism to launch the civil rights movement and protest the Vietnam War. Heschel, a Hasidic Jew, marched with King and was himself a leader in the protest against the Vietnam War. King nominated the Buddhist Thich Nhat Hanh for the Nobel Peace Prize for his non-violent struggles against the Vietnam War. And of course, Malcolm X argued with King about the merits of non-violence even as he moved closer to King after his conversion to traditional Islam.

Out of these lives (and the lives of others we cannot explore here), we believe, has emerged an interreligious global ethic of human dignity, human rights and human liberation. Their individual lives of tireless struggle for human dignity and human rights, their common involvement in issues of justice, war, and peace, and their involvement in each other's lives and religions, we contend, demonstrates that not only can a shared ethic emerge, it is emerging among people of different religions and cultures. There is a Jewish tradition that says that God always sees to it that there are 36 righteous persons hidden in the world for whose sake God spares the world, despite rampant evil. This book is not so much about ethical theories as it is about such persons – individuals whose holiness has changed, and continues to change, the world. It is about them and about the religious stories and spiritual practices that sustain them.

There are many ways to study religious ethics comparatively. One approach would be to study moralities empirically through comparative ethnography – an *anthropological*, purely descriptive, study of moral practices in different communities, which would contrast similarities and differences. A related approach would require doing an *historical* study of the changes in moral practices that have evolved in different religions and cultures. Or we could take a *philosophical* approach. This could be descriptive,

comparing ethical theories across cultures, or else prescriptive, attempting to formulate theoretically a universal ethic of what we ought to do, and advocating that it be shared by all religions and cultures. All of these are important to do, and we will, in some modest degree, draw on most of them. However, our main approach will take us in a different direction.

Our approach will be through *comparative storytelling* and *comparative spirituality* in response to some of the defining events of the twentieth century – the struggle against colonialism, racism, sexism, terrorism, and the human capacity to inflict mass death revealed at Auschwitz and Hiroshima. We will not be looking to the philosophers and legal experts for guidance, but to the stories of heroes and saints, both ancient and postmodern; those whose heroism and holiness have shaped and continue to shape each tradition. So we will look to stories of ancient figures like Gilgamesh, Socrates, Moses, Muhammad, Jesus, Arjuna, and Siddhartha (the Buddha) and also to contemporary figures like Abraham Joshua Heschel, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., Gandhi, and Thich Nhat Hanh. And we shall seek to recover the missing voices of women through the lives of Rosemary Ruether and Joanna Macy.

There are several assumptions and historical factors that shape this approach. First, the primary way in which ethical insights occur and are communicated within religious traditions is through story and ritual rather than through theory. Our narrative approach to ethics is founded on the assumption that *our understanding of good and evil is primarily shaped by the kind of story we think we are in and the role we see ourselves playing in that story.* While every religious tradition tends to develop experts on settling complex ethical issues, that kind of ethics is necessarily the activity of a religious and intellectual elite. Their activities do not reflect the way ethics functions for the typical believer. Philosophical and legal expertise do play an important role in every tradition, but not the most important role. It is misleading to try to understand the role of religion in morality by putting the emphasis on experts. For most religious traditions, philosophical and/or legal reason, unaided by story and ritual, is incapable of leading to an understanding of what is good and what we ought to do. The primary and most pervasive ways religious traditions shape ethical behavior are through storytelling and spiritual practices. Storytelling shapes the ethical imagination of its members, especially through stories of heroes and saints. Spirituality shapes the character of its members through ritual activities such as worship, prayer, meditation, fasting, pilgrimage, etc., aimed at bringing about a transformation in individual and communal identity and action. These aspects of religious ethics will be our focus, for the deciding factor in religious ethics is not good arguments (although they are important) but spiritual transformation.

Second, living in a global civilization after Auschwitz and Hiroshima; we live in an interconnected world where people are often deeply shaped not only by the stories of their own traditions but also by those of others – for example, Gandhi's ethical views were shaped not only by his own Hinduism but by Tolstoy's writings on Jesus' *Sermon on the Mount* and King's ethical views were deeply shaped by Gandhi's insights into the Hindu scripture, the *Bhagavad Gita*. Gandhi did not become a Christian and King did not become a Hindu, but in each case their own religious identity was deeply influenced by the other. Martin Luther King, Jr. was a different kind of Christian

because of Gandhi and Gandhi was a different kind of Hindu because of Tolstoy. Gandhi and King provide us with a model for doing comparative religious ethics as a genuine quest to discover wisdom not only in one's own tradition but in that of others. In this book, you are invited to engage in such a quest.

Third, while different religious traditions do sometimes offer unique perspectives on common problems, more often than not the dividing line between people on ethical issues is not between people of different religions but between people within the same religious tradition. A corollary of this is that there is no one Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jewish, or Islamic position on ethical issues and that very often people of different religions find themselves allied with each other against others in their own tradition – this is certainly the case with abortion today, for example. Our goal, then, is not to ask what is the Buddhist or Christian position on this or that (a misleading question) but rather, how might the stories of Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, etc. shape our ethical imagination when dealing with a particular problem and how might the spiritual practices of each help to transform us into better human beings. In this book we will explore the life stories of Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., and other contemporary figures, in order to understand how story and spirituality can inspire lives committed to social justice and the alleviation of suffering in our technologically-oriented global civilization.

Our task will be to pass over through sympathetic imagination into the stories of diverse religions and religious figures, see the world and the problems we face through these stories and their lives, and then return to our starting point with new ethical insight as a consequence of this exercise. We shall seek to do what Martin Luther King, Jr. did when he passed over into Gandhi's Hinduism and the story of the Bhagavad Gita, only to come back to his own Christian Baptist heritage with new insight into the Sermon on the Mount and how it could be used to deal with racism non-violently. In this process of seeing the world through the stories of others, we shall pay attention to certain narrative themes that have deeply influenced more than one religion and culture. We shall explore, for instance, the oldest of all epics, the story of Gilgamesh, as a model for two of the most pervasive themes of religious narrative: (1) wrestling with the stranger and (2) the quest for an answer to the problems of old age, sickness, and death. Out of these two themes a number of key issues for narrative ethics after Auschwitz and Hiroshima will be explored, especially those of obedience vs. audacity in relation to authority, and hostility vs. hospitality in relation to the stranger. We will find these to be organizing themes for many, but not all, of the stories we will encounter in our journey through the world's religions.

This book is an example of the very narrative themes we shall discover and explore. That is, our task is the common human task of wrestling with the stranger as we engage in a quest to find answers to the problems of old age, sickness, and death – answers that enable us to relate to the stranger with justice and compassion. We shall strive to understand how others see life and death and how their stories either encourage or discourage hospitality to the stranger. We shall strive to come to understand the meaning of good and evil through the stories of strangers from other religions and cultures as well as our own (wherever we find ourselves beginning). And we shall look for convergences and divergences that might be used to construct a

global ethic that could encourage peace and justice among religions and cultures in the third millennium.

Finally, our approach will be contemporary, applied, and normative. We shall be reflecting on the ethical challenges presented by science, technology, and human diversity in the contemporary world. And we shall be seeking a normative interreligious and cross-cultural or global ethic that will help us decide what we ought to do about the challenges we face. In this sense, we do not pretend to have written a neutral text. Instead we seek to persuade you of the importance of the "the way of all the earth" and the ethic of interdependence and audacity we see emerging out of the spirituality of passing over and coming back exemplified in the lives of Gandhi, King, and others, especially their feminist critics who may provide the integrating bridge to a postmodern global ethic. Yet we hope to do this not be dictating to you but by challenging you to make your own journey and arrive at your own insights.

We begin this journey by providing a framework in the two chapters of Part I. In this chapter, we will examine what we mean by terms like "religion," "ethics," "morality," and how these terms are related to storytelling as a mode of ethical reflection. In Chapter 2 we shall turn to the stories of Auschwitz and Hiroshima that have shaped the religious and ethical imagination of human beings on a global scale in the twentieth century. And we shall trace the emergence of a global ethic of human dignity, human rights, and human liberation articulated through the lives of Tolstoy, Gandhi, and Martin Luther King, Jr., and others in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

In Part II (Chapters 3 through 9) we will engage in a historical survey that will allow us to pass over into some of the key stories and practices (myths and rituals) of the great world religions that are available to shape and inspire our ethical imaginations. In successive chapters we will look at the world's great religious traditions from three narrative perspectives. We shall look at the classical cosmic story (or stories) that has shaped the worldview of each religious tradition. We will also study a formative narrative, a key story that has deeply shaped each tradition, such as the life of the Buddha or the life of Jesus. And then we examine the life story of a twentieth-century individual who has brought these ancient stories to life in new and ethically transformative ways through his/her own spirituality and actions. In each case we shall be looking at the life story of someone, like Gandhi or Martin Luther King, Jr., whose commitments to justice and compassion have not only made them models of the ethical life but whose lives have typically had a transformative influence on how that tradition interprets the requirements of an ethical life in the world we live in today. Finally, beginning with Chapter 5, each chapter will end with "comparative reflections" which will suggest some of the key ethical issues that emerge from comparing these lives. In our comparative reflections we will be taking sides on some of these issues. We do so not to dictate the conclusions you must come to but to point out to you important areas of creative tension between these religious social activists we are studying and invite you to the debate. Consequently, each chapter will end with some possible questions for further discussion.

In Part III, we shall, in Chapter 10, consider the missing voices of women in the world's religions and how the inclusion of their voices may alter comparative religious ethics by introducing themes of interdependence and ecology. For the ancient history

of the world's religions is dominated by male heroes and saints. These religions seem to downplay the role of women in the religious and ethical life. The contemporary inclusion of women's voices is having a transformative impact on virtually all religious traditions. In Chapter 11, the concluding chapter, we will review our journey and suggest that it is possible to see in contemporary eco-feminism a reconciling bridge between Eastern and Western ethical traditions. Drawing on the lives we have studied – of the men and women who have passed over into other religions and cultures and come back with new insight into their own – we shall suggest the contours of the global ethic of eco-justice we see emerging in our time. Our hope is that the journey we are taking, and the strangers we wrestle with along the way, will help us to discover what they discovered, namely, "the way of all the earth" – an ecological ethic of human dignity and human liberation appropriate for an emerging global civilization.

Religion: the Sacred and the Holy

Human destiny and the sacred

Life, it has been said, is just a bowl full of stories. As far back as we can see into the misty recesses of time and the human adventure, human beings have been not only storytellers but story dwellers. Their stories coursed through their veins and sinews and came to expression in song and dance. To this very day human beings see and understand the world through the lenses of their stories. And for most of human history the primary stories that have inspired the human imagination and human behavior have been the great religious stories. To understand the nature of religion, the types of religious story and their relation to ethics is our goal in this chapter.

Let's suppose that we could somehow transport ourselves back to the city of Rome in the first century. Why are we interested in that time and place? Because our word "religion" was invented by the Romans, therefore understanding what they meant by it should help us understand our topic. So imagine yourself now walking down a street in Rome in the first century. Indeed, let us suppose that you are a reporter doing a newspaper article on Roman religious behavior. You approach a small group of Romans on a street corner and you ask them: "What religion are you?" – they look at you a bit oddly, as if you are speaking a foreign language (which of course you are – Latin). They understand the individual words you used but the phrasing is awkward. People don't normally use the words the way you are using them. Some give you blank stares while others just look puzzled. Frustrated, you try rephrasing your question and ask: "Are you religious?" Suddenly their faces light up, they smile and one of them says "Of course, isn't everyone?"

In first-century Rome, with very few exceptions, people didn't belong to a religion as a distinct and exclusive community. Rather, being religious was the same as being part of one's culture. Our first-century respondents would probably continue their answer to your question something like this: "Am I religious? Of course I am. Isn't everyone? It's simply a matter of common sense. I respect all those powers of nature that govern my destiny. Therefore I worship all the gods and goddesses. It would be stupid not to.

If I am going to war I want the god of war on my side. It would be suicide to engage war without him on my side. So I perform the correct ritual sacrifices before going into battle. And if I am intent on pursuing an attractive marriage partner, I certainly want the goddess of love on my side. And needless to say if I am planting my crops I certainly want the goddess of fertility and the gods of the wind and rain on my side. I am not a complete idiot. Anything else would be stupid."

What does this tell us? For the ancient Romans, and nearly all other human beings in all places and all times throughout history, religion has been about what people hold sacred. To say that something is sacred is to say that it matters more than anything else. And what typically matters most to people is their destiny – living meaningful and secure lives, avoiding suffering, and transcending death. Their response is embodied in a way of life meant to address these issues. Everywhere in the world, what people seem to hold most sacred is their way of life and the powers they believe make such a life possible.

Although there are other possibilities, the word "religion" is most likely derived from the Latin *religare* which means, "to tie or bind." It expresses our sense of being "tied and bound" by relations of obligation to whatever powers we believe govern our destiny and secure our way of life – whether these powers be natural or supernatural, personal or impersonal, one or many. For ancient peoples everywhere, the powers they believed governed their destiny were the forces of nature. Why? Because, on the one hand, the forces of nature were experienced as that awesome overwhelming collection of powers that surround human beings, providing them with life and all the good things of life (food, clothing, shelter, etc.) and, on the other hand, these same powers could turn on human beings and destroy them quite capriciously, through earthquakes, storms, and floods, etc. Therefore, the forces of nature evoked in human beings the ambivalent feelings of fascination and dread. Rudolf Otto, the great early-twentieth-century pioneer of comparative religions, argued that the presence of these two ambivalent emotions is a sure sign that you are in the presence of the sacred. Their presence is a defining mark of religious experience across cultures. They are the emotions that are elicited by the uncanny experience of being in the presence of that power or those powers which one believes have the ability to determine one's destiny – whether one lives or dies and beyond that how well one lives and dies.

Myth and ritual

We can say then, that whatever powers people believe govern their destiny will elicit a religious response. That is, it will inspire them "to tie or bind" themselves to these powers in relations of ritual obligation – a way of life that assures that these powers will be on their side. How do we know what our obligations to these powers are? Throughout history this knowledge has been communicated through myth and ritual. Our word "myth" comes from the Greek *mythos* which means "story." Myth, we could say, is a symbolic story about the origins and destiny of human beings and their world which relates them to whatever powers they believe ultimately govern their destiny and explains to them what these powers expect of them. Ritual is the symbolic enactment of these stories whereby they are passed on from one generation to the next.

Myth and ritual are typically tied to the major festivals or holy days of a religious tradition so that by celebrating a cycle of festivals spread throughout the year one comes to dwell in the stories that tell you who you are, where you came from, and where you are going. For example, Passover is one of the most important holy days in Judaism. At Passover, Jewish families gather for a meal at which the story of the Exodus, the liberation of the Jews from slavery in Egypt, is retold. The Passover Seder is not a literal reenactment of the Exodus but a symbolic reenactment. As the story is retold, certain foods are eaten to remind participants of what happened. Nevertheless, this symbolic reenactment is experienced as having the power to make one an actual participant in the original event of the Exodus. The distance between past and present is felt to dissolve and the events of the Exodus are felt to be "happening to me now."

Through participation in the Passover Seder, Jews experience who they are – a chosen people, called by the God of all creation to live justly and be a light (that is, example) to the nations, preparing for the messianic day when death will be overcome, justice will reign, and the heavens and the earth will be made new. In this way each Jew knows that his or her life is not trivial. On the contrary, each life has cosmic significance, helping to bring about the fulfillment of all things. In this way, the myth and ritual perform a religious function – that is, they "tie or bind" the life of the individual into a great cosmic drama that gives life meaning and purpose which is expressed in the Jewish way of life (*halacha*). Our example focused on Judaism, but what we said is true of the myths and rituals of all religions, whether Hinduism or Buddhism, Christianity or Islam, etc.

The dialectical tension between morality and ethics

If twentieth-century historian Rudolf Otto focused on the psychological aspects of religious experience (i.e. fascination and dread), another great historian of religion in the twentieth century Mircea Eliade showed that the experience of the sacred is always accompanied by a sense of sacred space articulated in myths and rituals about the origin of the sacred order of the cosmos. In his comparative studies of primal (tribal) and archaic (early urban) societies, Eliade noted that invariably their stories and rituals of creation functioned to explain how divine beings and/or sacred ancestors overcame the forces of chaos and created a sacred cosmic social order within which humans could safely dwell. These myths and rituals divided the world into two realms, the sacred and the profane – the sacred order of the cosmos in which one's people live and the profane realm of chaos which lurks beyond the boundaries of one's world and constantly threatens its sacred order.

Anthropologists tell us that the inhabitants of such sacred worlds tend to have names for themselves which mean "the human beings" while the identity of others remains a puzzle. All who live in "our" sacred order are human, the identity of all others (those who live on the other side of the mountain, for example) is open to question, for the stranger comes from the realm of chaos – their ritual patterns are different and these differences threaten the life-sustaining stability of "our" sacred order.

Eliade showed that around the world, ancient, pre-literate, or tribal societies imagined themselves to be living at the center of the cosmos. In such societies, to enter certain sacred places was to stand at the center of the world, the very place where,

at the beginning of time, the gods and ancestors brought things into being. Thus to stand in such a sacred place was to draw close the awesome power or powers that determine life, death, and human destiny. In such societies ritual and ethics are the same thing – the "right" way is the "rite" way – the way of ritual. The answer to the question – "Why do we do things the way we do?" is "Because in the beginning the gods and the ancestors did it this way, thus showing us the right (rite) way to be human." Therefore, for every activity in such a society – whether laying out a new village, building a hut or a canoe, or recognizing the transformation of a child into an adult – there is a ritual accompanied by a myth or story about how the sacred powers and ancestors established this practice in the beginning.

In such a world, society is not an arbitrarily-created human order, but a part of the divinely-created cosmic order. Society reflects the sacred order of the cosmos in miniature – it is the cosmos writ small. In such societies: "Is" = "Ought." The way things are done (as established by sacred powers and ancestors) is the way they ought to be done. The Latin root (*mos*, *mores*) from which we get our word "morality" means the "customs" of the people. In such societies the customs or mores are sacred and unchangeable: they are beyond question. To violate them is sacrilegious.

Morality is an inherent dimension of the sacred order of society. In large part, what gives a society social stability is the sense that its way of life is sacred and unchangeable. Moreover, every society seems to be ordered by some sense of the sacred, so that even modern "secular" or "non-religious" societies that do not explicitly appeal to established religious stories tend to exhibit a sacred morality. For the secular to be sacred seems like a contradiction in terms, but if we remember that we are talking about "ways of life" and that all "ways of life" are held sacred by their participants, then a "secular way of life" will also qualify as a way of life that is held sacred by those who live it. Sometimes, in order to recognize the presence of religion, we have to begin with the sense of sacred order expressed in a society's customs, even if, at first glance, the stories told to justify these customs seem quite non-religious or "secular." In this sense, there is a religious dimension to every morality no matter how secular or non-religious it appears.

For most Americans, to observe someone burning the American flag would be deeply offensive. An attack on the flag is an attack on what is sacred – what matters most to them. It is experienced as an attack on their way of life and the lives of those lost protecting the American way of life. To desecrate a cross would be equally offensive to most Christians. They would view it as impugning the saving power of Jesus Christ and the Christian way of life. Both of these are examples of things held to be sacred, even though on the face of it, one is "purely political" and the other is more obviously "religious" in the eyes of most. Things become even more complicated when we realize that different embodiments of a sense of the sacred can coalesce. Thus, for example, for many citizens America is sacred because they view it is a "Christian nation." But the two need not be mixed, for even Americans who do not think of themselves as "religious" are still likely to hold the American way of life as sacred, and therefore worthy of both living for and dying for. So we see that religion is about more than "the gods" – it is about whatever people hold sacred, especially their way of life. For them what is truly sacred is the highest good – that which provides them with

meaning even in the face of suffering and death so that they are willing to die for it and even to kill for it. Consequently, going to war to protect one's people's way of life is typically understood to be a sacred duty.

Everything we have said up to this point suggests that religion, morality, and society are different faces of a single reality – a society's way of life expressed in sacred customs. Indeed for one of the great founders of sociology, Emile Durkheim, religion is to be understood as a human response to the overwhelming (and therefore sacred) power of society upon which we depend for our existence. Without being fully conscious of the reason for their actions, he would say, tribal peoples revere their sacred ancestors or *totems* (both human and non-human) as symbols of the sacred order of their society. For Durkheim the singular purpose of religious myth is to sacralize society so that its customs can be considered sacred and bring social stability to human life.

Yet another of the great founders of sociology, Max Weber, argued that this is not the only social function of religion. Weber argued that while religion functioned much of the time to sanction the "routine order" of society (i.e. the sacred customs) as Durkheim claimed, still sometimes religion manifested the dramatic power to desacralize and disenchant society, and in so doing bring about dramatic social change. It does this by calling into question the supposed sacredness of the old order. Indeed the same religious tradition can at different times do both. Sometimes religion sacralizes society and sometimes it secularizes it. Thus Weber argued that Roman Catholic Christianity functioned to sacralize the social order of the Middle Ages while Protestant Christianity functioned to secularize that social order, contributing to the emergence of the modern secular society. Sometimes, says Weber, "charismatic" figures emerge in the history of religion, like Martin Luther, who began the Protestant Reformation in Christianity, who serve to destabilize and transform society. The term *secular* comes from the Latin, *saeculum* meaning "worldly". For Luther, it did not suggest "non-religious" but being religious in the world rather than in withdrawal from the world. Luther, who was once a monk living in a monastery apart from "the world," came to understand that he could leave the monastery and still be religious. One could have a "secular" vocation or calling from God. A baker or a blacksmith's work could be just a religious as that of a monk. In this sense, Luther gives a religious sense to the term secular.

Only with the emergence of modern sociology did the term secular become "secularized" and defined as meaning "non-religious." From our perspective, "secular" is a term that is always defined by either the sacred or the holy and is never strictly "non-religious." When "secular" defines a way of life that excludes religion and diminishes those who are religious we understand it to be expressing a sacred way of life that excludes or demeans the religious stranger. When the "secular" defines a way of life that is hospitable to all strangers (whether religious or non-religious) we understand the secular realm to be an expression of the experience of the holy. The French sociologist, Jacques Ellul, agrees with sociologists like Weber who see some forms of religion as secularizing, but argues that such sociologists are wrong to see secularization as permanently replacing the sacred and religion. Rather, the sacred is a permanent feature of all societies (even modern secular ones) and so must continually be desacralized or secularized in the name of the holy. In this text, we shall be using

the term "secular" in the religious sense of an expression of the holy unless we explicitly indicate its popular sociological meaning as "non-religious."

As we shall see in the chapters ahead, when Gandhi practices "soul force" or non-violent civil disobedience, he exemplifies the power of religion to secularize the sacred order of society in order to defend the dignity of the stranger; likewise, Martin Luther King, Jr. and the others we shall study. The Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh calls his Buddhist form of secularizaton "socially engaged Buddhism." For these figures, religion and the secular are two sides of the same coin – the holy desacralizes and so secularizes the sacred. For them secularizing society is a process of opening society to religious and cultural pluralism in order to protect the dignity of strangers.

While Ellul's view that the experience of the holy has the power to desacralize or secularize the sacred is shaped by his understanding of the biblical traditions, nevertheless his insight can be applied to other experiences of the holy across religions and cultures. He argues that in the ancient world people believed that they depended on the forces of nature for their existences and therefore treated these forces as sacred powers (i.e. as gods and goddesses) which governed the sacred order of society. Then ancient Judaism came along and began to desacralize the world, insisting that God alone (the creator of the universe) is holy. The prophets of Israel, such as Jeremiah in the sixth century BCE, insisted that this God demanded a life of holiness which called into question the sacred order of society in the name of justice for the widow, the orphan, and the stranger (those neglected by the sacred order of society). Ellul proposed, therefore, that we need to understand that the requirements of sacred morality are different than those of an ethic of the holy.

In a parallel fashion, we argue, (as we shall see in Chapter 6), that the Buddha (who lived in India about the same time as Jeremiah lived in ancient Israel), called into question the sacred order of the caste system and welcomed lower castes and the outcaste into his holy community (the *sangha*) as equal with persons from all higher castes. Some three centuries later, in ancient Greece, Socrates repeated this pattern with his "invention" of ethics as a category in Western philosophy. The Greek roots of our term "ethics" (*ethos, ethike*) like their Latin parallels (*mos, mores*) "morality" once meant the "customs" of the people – the sacred customs. However, after Socrates, ethics came to mean "the questioning of the sacred customs" by asking: *Is what people call "good" really good?* As we shall see (in Chapter 4), this is a dangerous question. Socrates was put on trial and executed for "impiety towards the gods" and "corrupting the youth" because he dared to question the sacred way of life of Athenian society.

The paradox of Socrates' criticism of the sacred morality of Athenian society was that it was rooted in religious experience – an alternative form of religious experience. Socrates insisted that he was neither irreligious nor an atheist. On the contrary he said he was commanded to doubt and to question by his own "daimon" or god-sent spirit. His daimon, he said, sent him as a "gadfly" to the citizens of Athens, to teach them to lead virtuous lives and seek justice. His goal was not to demean the Athenian way of life but to raise it to a higher level. As we shall see in Chapter 4, Socrates insisted that a good society can never be one which is only the "cosmos writ small" (mirroring its sacred order). It must also be the "human writ large" – where the measure of the human is an "Unseen Measure" – the Good.