



Comparative Religious Ethics

A Narrative Approach to Global Ethics

SECOND EDITION

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



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AND DAVID M. LANTIGUA

 **WILEY-BLACKWELL**

A John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., Publication

This edition first published 2011

© 2011 Darrell J. Fasching, Dell deChant and David M. Lantigua

Edition history: Blackwell Publishing Ltd (1e, 2001)

Blackwell Publishing was acquired by John Wiley & Sons in February 2007. Blackwell's publishing program has been merged with Wiley's global Scientific, Technical, and Medical business to form Wiley-Blackwell.

Registered Office

John Wiley & Sons Ltd, The Atrium, Southern Gate,
Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, United Kingdom

Editorial Offices

350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148-5020, USA

9600 Garsington Road, Oxford, OX4 2DQ, UK

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

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Fasching, Darrell J., 1944-

Comparative religious ethics : a narrative approach to global ethics / Darrell J. Fasching, Dell deChant, David M. Lantigua. – 2nd ed.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-4443-3133-2 (pbk.)

1. Religious ethics—Comparative studies. I. deChant, Dell. II. Lantigua, David M. III. Title.

BJ1188.F35 2011

205-dc22

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

This book is published in the following electronic formats:
ePDFs [ISBN 9781444396119]; ePub [ISBN

9781444396126]

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

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

Chapter 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.”

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 p01. 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