

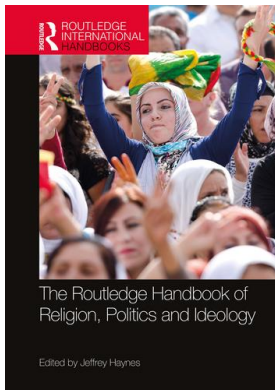
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RELIGION BETWEEN ETHICS AND IDEOLOGY

Joseph A. Camilleri

The relationship of religion to ideology has given rise to competing interpretations, none of which offers a fully satisfying explanation of what is a complex and elusive set of interconnections. Some have stressed the ideological preferences and tendencies of religious leaders and movements intent on defending doctrinal positions and institutional interests (Rachik 2009). Others have argued that religion is a crucial lever on which states and empires often rely to legitimate their rule and even military expeditions (Beyers 2015). Others still see religion as a socially and culturally conservative force serving primarily as an instrument of acculturation and assimilation into the dominant ideology of the times, not least the consumerist ideology of late capitalism (Martin 2014, 141–156).

Though the relationship between religion and ethics may at first sight appear conceptually straightforward, troublesome questions abound. At one level, the proposition that religious teachings have an important ethical dimension appears well founded. Sacred texts and the utterances of religious sages, prophets and founders devote much attention to the moral precepts that should guide human conduct. Some go so far as to suggest that ethical reasoning and the ethical impulse itself owe a great deal of their persuasiveness and traction to their religious underpinnings (Green 1988). At another level, the opposing view seems no less plausible. Religious affiliations and convictions are said to have caused, or at least triggered, some argue with predictable regularity, extreme violence and other horrendous crimes (Kimball 2008) that glaringly contradict the lofty moral principles espoused in religious ethics.

Religion and ideology and religion and ethics are therefore best understood as binary systems, in which the two components sit in uneasy tension with each other. Each binary reflects a high level of ambiguity, at times bordering on contradiction. If ambiguity lies at the heart of religion, it is in no small measure because of the conflicting pressures bearing upon religion, namely ethical aspiration and ideological seduction. As we shall see, that tension holds the key to an understanding of religion's actual and potential role in a world undergoing a profound transformation.

Definitional issues

A methodical analysis of the push-pull factors that help shape religion's response to the competing claims of ethics and ideology requires that we first clarify the definitional content of religion,

but also of ethics and ideology. Religion is the obvious starting point, given the quasi universality of the phenomenon and the diverse and variable manifestations which have punctuated its evolutionary trajectory.

Religion, it need hardly be said, is a multifaceted phenomenon that encompasses a great deal more than just teachings and beliefs. Religion finds expression in an intricate web of attitudes, emotions and experiences, which are in large measure time- and place-specific and inextricably linked to cultural and civilizational influences. Yet another important dimension of the religious domain relates to religious observances and rituals that help bind the community of believers and instil a deep sense of identity and belonging (Küçükcan 2005). A useful conceptualization that highlights the multidimensional character of religion identifies four key dimensions: a) the 'associational' dimension, which includes involvement in various forms of religious practice; b) the 'communal' dimension, which relates to primary-type relations privileged by religious affiliation; c) the 'doctrinal' dimension which refers to belief systems; and d) the 'devotional' or pietistic dimension which involves communion with the divine or the transcendent through prayer, meditation or other religious experience (Lenski 1961, 21–24). Each of these dimensions plays a part in shaping one of religion's crucial social functions, namely identity formation. As Hill and Hood have observed, this function is all the more potent in that religion places 'both personal and social identity within the cosmic or metaphysical background' (Hill and Wood 1999, 269). Religious engagement, then, reflects a range of cognitive, psychological, relational and ritualistic strands which combine and take shape in the context of the prevailing social, economic and political milieu. Religion and society, in other words, are entangled in a complex web of reciprocal influences which powerfully impact the sense of personal and communal identity.

When we turn to ideology, we soon discover that the concept is just as slippery and contentious. At the most general level, ideology has been defined as 'a verbal image of the good society and of the chief means of constructing such a society' (Downs 1957, 96). Notwithstanding the multitude of aspects or features of ideology referred to in the literature (Hamilton 1987), an adequate exposition of the concept can be condensed to three key elements: a) a set of ideas and theories which purports to explain the existing reality; b) a vision of the good society which usually draws its inspiration either from the past – a golden age of peace, harmony, stability, and prosperity – or from some kind of utopian future; c) a proposed path forward or manifesto which needs to be followed for the desired goal to be achieved. The second of these elements lies perhaps at the heart of much ideological contestation. In Stuart Hall's formulation, ideology can move in two quite different directions. It can encompass 'the concepts and the languages of practical thought which stabilize a particular form of power and domination; or which reconcile and accommodate the mass of the people to their subordinate place in the social formation' (Hall 1986, 29). But ideology can just as easily propel and steer 'the processes by which new forms of consciousness, new conceptions of the world, arise, which move the masses of the people into historical action against the prevailing system' (Hall 1986, 29). In other words, ideology can be used both to preserve and to overturn the *status quo*. Whichever direction is followed, power is a constant, as it is invariably seen as the necessary means to the ideological end. Religion is thus entangled in a constant tug of war between these opposing drives – ideologically driven power games and religiously informed ethical norms – from which, it seems, it can never fully disentangle itself. The question then becomes: to what extent are religion's ethical aspirations as expressed in its teachings able to shape its institutional practice and the conduct of the faithful.

The ethical imperative is a defining element of all religion, but considerable differences separate one religious tradition from another with respect to the way ethical norms are formulated, the cosmological frame within which they are located, and the role of revelation or sacred texts in setting ethical standards. In the Christian tradition, the Bible, while it does not offer anything

approaching a systematic ethical treatise, is nevertheless viewed by its adherents as an authoritative account of God's action in the world and humanity's response, which 'teaches morality in its stories, sermons, prayers, exhortations, proverbs, and commandments' (Gensler 2016, 3). But even within any one religious tradition, there is considerable scope for interpretation, especially when moral guidance is applied to the specific contexts of everyday life. Variation also occurs as a natural by-product of the evolutionary process. In the Christian Bible, we see a progression in the moral understanding of the scripture writers, with a clear break separating the Old from the New Testament. Under the law of Moses, often referred to as the Old Covenant, moral principles were set largely in the context of a conditional agreement between God and the Israelites, whereby God would guide and protect them while they would worship and obey him. The duties towards others captured in the last seven of the ten commandments derived from the overarching principle of obedience to God as expressed in the first three commandments: 'You shall have no other gods before me ... You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the lord your God ... Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy' (New Revised Standard Version Bible – NRSV 2001, Exodus 20: 3–10). In the New Testament, love thy neighbour, while it still complements the first and greatest commandment, namely, love thy God, is given unprecedented prominence and extended to include love of the enemy. Simply put, when exploring the role of ethics in religion we need to give due weight to commonalities between and within the world's religions, but we also need to be attentive to variation as it manifests itself across time, space and culture. Religion's approach to ethics cannot be divorced from the social context in which ethical norms are articulated and applied.

One other complicating factor is the distinction often drawn between individual and collective morality, or individual and collective responsibility, a subject of considerable contention in moral philosophy (Isaacs 2011). The core question in this debate can be put quite simply: can a community, nation, business organization or other collectivity exercise moral responsibility? The widely held view has been that collectivities cannot be assigned moral intent, and therefore cannot be said to exercise moral responsibility in the same way we ascribe it to an individual. It is those in positions of authority within collective entities, it is argued, who can be held responsible for the harm inflicted on others. Though there is much to the argument that moral agency as exercised by individuals is not readily applicable to groups or communities, it does not follow that the latter is entirely deprived of moral agency. This becomes clearer if the question is posed a little differently. When it comes to collectivities of one kind or another, does group culture lend itself to ethical decision-making? If we are thinking of a nation or state, we may legitimately ask: do ethical norms apply to its decision-making processes and, if so, what might these be? Here, it is also relevant and useful to inquire whether such influence as religion exercises in that society strengthens or weakens respect for ethical norms.

Religion's ethical bent

As noted above, religion is a multidimensional phenomenon that finds expression in highly diverse traditions and cosmologies. Nevertheless, a defining feature of all world religions has been the attempt, indeed the strong impulse, to develop a moral framework as a guide to human conduct (Göçer and Habib 2005). Given the widely varying conceptions of the divine or supernatural and accompanying metaphysical beliefs between and within the major religious traditions, it is hardly surprising that their respective ethical prescriptions should differ in both content and emphasis. Notwithstanding these differences, virtually all religiously inspired moral frameworks have a good deal in common, the most important element of which is the principle of ethical reciprocity or the 'golden rule' as it is generally known.

Concerned first and foremost with how one should treat the other, the golden rule has obvious relevance as much for the way societies function and interact as for personal relationships. And, as we shall see, the notion of reciprocity can be extended to embrace human relations with other forms of life. The golden rule informs an ethical code centred around the relatively simple, almost intuitive proposition, often formulated as ‘do not do to others what you would not wish to be done to you.’ It is found in the Abrahamic faiths, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, but also in the main dharmic religions, Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism and Jainism (Bakker 2013, Neusner and Chilton 2008, Wattles 1996). One of its earliest formulations can be traced back to *The Tale of the Eloquent Peasant*, a literary work on the theme of justice from the Middle Kingdom of Egypt, probably composed around 1850 BCE (Parkinson 1991). Another early reference to the golden rule appears in one of the two major Sanskrit epics of ancient India, the Mahabharata (13th Parva), whose origins are thought to fall between the eighth and sixth centuries BCE. The relevant maxim reads:

That man who regards all creatures as his own self, and behaves towards them as towards his own self, laying aside the rod of chastisement and completely subjugating his wrath, succeeds in attaining to happiness ... One should never do that to another which one regards as injurious to one’s own self. This, in brief, is the rule of Righteousness.

(*Mahabharata* 2003, 13, CXIII)

In the Judaic tradition, the rule of altruistic reciprocity is first enunciated in a well-known Torah verse: ‘You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against your kinsfolk. Love your neighbour as yourself: I am the LORD’ (Tanakh 1985, Leviticus 19:18). The same verse in Leviticus appears in the Old Testament of the Christian Bible, and the same sentiment is voiced again a little later: ‘The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God’ (NRSV 2001, Leviticus 19:34).

The negative version of the rule also appears in Tobit, which forms part of the Catholic and Orthodox biblical canons: ‘Do to no one what you would not want done to you’ (Wansborough, New Jerusalem Bible, Tobit 4:15). It is, of course, in the New Testament that the golden rule comes fully into its own, especially in Luke’s Gospel, first when Jesus is quoted as saying: ‘And as ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise’ (Luke 6:31), and again in the parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:30). In the Sermon on the Mount, the rule of reciprocity is taken to an even higher level:

You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye and tooth for tooth.’ But I tell you not to resist an evil person. If someone slaps you on your right cheek, turn to him the other also; if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well; and if someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you. You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbour and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.

(*NRSV* 2001, *Matthew* 5: 38-43)

How these moral prescriptions are to be applied to highly complex and troublesome personal and societal relationships is no doubt problematic. Some commentators have gone so far as to describe this version of the golden rule as counter-intuitive in that it appears to prescribe

behaviour that is little short of heroic. But this line of argument simply underscores the idealism – some might call it utopianism – of the Christian ethic.

The notion of ethical reciprocity is equally evident in the canonical texts of Islam, notably the Qur'an, at times explicitly and often implicitly. Though the Qur'an gives priority to one type of love, namely the love of Allah and for Allah, nevertheless, the language of the Qur'an is replete with references to good deeds, good behaviour and the virtues of justice and fairness, which are meant to extend not just to believers but to all who are neighbours. In their pathbreaking declaration, *A Common Word between Us and You* issued in October 2007, 137 Muslim scholars and religious leaders stressed 'the necessity and paramount importance of love for – and mercy towards – the neighbour.' They described love of the neighbour as 'an essential and integral part of faith in God and love of God.' Without love of the neighbour, they argued, 'there is no true faith in God and no righteousness.' These sentiments find clear expression in the Qur'an:

Serve God and join not any partners with Him: and do good to parents kinsfolk orphans those in need neighbors who are near neighbors who are strangers the companion by your side the way-farer (ye meet) and what your right hands possess: for God loveth not the arrogant the vainglorious.

(The Meaning of the Holy Quran 2018, Nisāa 4:36)

The Qur'an explicitly requires justice to be pursued, even if it be against self-interest or inclination to hatred:

O ye who believe! stand out firmly for justice as witnesses to God even as against yourselves or your parents or your kin and whether it be (against) rich or poor: for God can best protect both. Follow not the lusts (of your hearts) lest ye swerve and if ye distort (justice) or decline to do justice verily God is well-acquainted with all that ye do.

(The Meaning of the Holy Quran 2018, Nisāa 4:135)

In Islam, the twin commandments, love of God and love of neighbour, are inseparable and mutually reinforcing.

An even sharper statement of the golden rule can be found in the Hadith, which is the record of the traditions and sayings of the Prophet Muhammad, and as such revered and received as a major source of religious law and moral guidance second only to the authority of the Qur'an itself. The most esteemed Hadith scholars have attached considerable weight to notions of ethical reciprocity. Muhammad ibn Ismā'īl al-Bukhārī places it in the introduction to his collection, where we read: 'None of you has faith until he loves for his brother what he loves for himself' (al-Bukhārī 2002). Among the numerous narrations that draw attention to the centrality of the principle, the following again by al-Bukhārī is worth noting for the forcefulness with which it is expressed and its direct attribution to the Prophet:

Aby Hurayrah reports that the Prophet said 'By Him who holds my soul in His hand, you shall not be admitted into heaven until you are truly Muslims, and you shall not be true Muslims until you love one another in whose hand my soul is, you will not enter the Garden until you submit. You will not submit until you love one another. Spread

the greeting of peace and you will love one another. Guard against the hatred for it is the razor. I do not say to you that it shaves hair; rather it shaves the faith altogether.'

(*al-Bukhārī 2017*)

These injunctions to love the other raise the obvious question: how far does the proposed altruism extend? Does it apply just to one's own tribe, coreligionists and others with whom one readily identifies or does it also take in the stranger, the prisoner of war, even the enemy? Here, it is worth noting that in Islam, as in other faith traditions, a certain tension or ambivalence exists between love and justice or, to put it differently, between love of the sinner and punishment of the transgressor. Defence against aggression, by force, if necessary, and chastisement of the criminal form part of the moral pragmatism expressed both in the Qur'an and traditional Islamic Law.

The moral tensions and caveats to be found in Christian theology, Islamic jurisprudence and other faith traditions do not invalidate the centrality of the ethic of altruism in the religious imagination. Even in Buddhism, a religion that does not issue moral commandments as understood in the Abrahamic faiths, the moral imperative not to do harm, whether to self or to others, is nevertheless paramount. The five precepts that are central to Buddhist wisdom spell out the principal forms of harm to be avoided: taking the life of other beings; taking things not freely given; sensual overindulgence; false speech; and the mindlessness that comes with intoxication.

Religion's ethical deficit

What emerges from this cursory review of the place of the golden rule in religious discourse is a moral conception of life, in which are embedded notions of goodness, rightful conduct, respect for life, compassion, forgiveness, justice, harmony and peace. This we may describe as the ethical foundation of religion, which, it must be said, many adherents do not fully grasp and often do not observe. In other words, we need to distinguish between the ethical injunctions contained in religious teachings and sacred texts and the actual customs, practices and institutions that give shape and content to the religious experience. Historically, most religions have found it difficult to apply their ethical vision to the concrete conditions of everyday life and to their own collective decision-making, let alone to the institutional arrangements that govern the distribution of wealth and power within and between societies (Mische 2007).

No single factor can fully explain this discrepancy. Part of the explanation lies in the doctrinal and succession disputes that have historically produced profound and often mutually reinforcing cleavages within and between religions. As religions subdivide into competing schools, denominations, sects or tendencies, what often ensues is an intense, at times violent and protracted contest for authority and influence, in which ethical principles are subordinated to the demands of religious truth claims. In pursuing these claims, the tendency of leadership structures is to assert the authenticity of their respective interpretations of sacred texts, which they contrast with the mistaken positions of their spiritual competitors, at times leading to accusations of heresy and even apostasy. The ensuing doctrinal and organizational barriers erected within and between religions may help strengthen the level of in-group identification and buttress the authority of those in leadership positions, but at the cost of heightening inter-group tensions. Such conflicts, which are acrimonious enough between different religions, can prove even more divisive and violent when conducted between sects, schools or denominations of the same religion (e.g., Catholic and Orthodox, Shia and Sunni) (Brubaker 2015).

In Europe, the Reformation and Counter Reformation triggered armed conflict between Catholics and Protestants across the continent, culminating in the Thirty Years' War (1618–1648), which ravaged much of Germany and killed one-fifth of its population. Though Catholic–

Protestant animosities have eased over the years, more than three centuries later, the bitter feud in Northern Ireland, which began in the late 1960s and ended with the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, though essentially an ethno-nationalist conflict, showed how Christian Churches were still susceptible to the manipulation of emotions based on longstanding mutual mistrust and suspicion. The Islamic world too has been riven by sectarian conflicts at several points in its history, including the most recent period, which has seen a sharpening of the Sunni–Shia divide that pits Iran against Saudi Arabia, and infects a great many other regional conflicts. Compounding this collision, as much geopolitical as religious, are the crippling fractures within the Sunni world that have accompanied the emergence of Wahhabism and different versions of Islamism (Moussali 2009). Inter-religious conflicts have proven equally if not more destructive. In the post-1945 period, the Israeli–Palestinian, India–Pakistan, Ethiopia–Somalia and Balkan conflicts, as well as the civil wars in Nigeria, Lebanon, Sri Lanka, Myanmar and the Philippines are just a few of the many instances where religion has been a source of acrimony and armed hostilities. Even when not paramount (Anthony, Hermans and Sterkens 2015), the religious factor has often exacerbated or prolonged the conflict, and in the process, diverted religion from the nobler elements of its mission.

While the preoccupation with doctrinal rectitude goes some way towards explaining religion's ethical deficit, an even more telling factor is the *will to power*, and with it the ideological lens through which it is viewed and rationalized. Leadership plays a critical role in virtually all religious institutions, whether loosely or hierarchically structured. Regardless of its institutional trappings, leadership is invariably associated, not least in the minds of leaders, with authority, status and influence, attributes commonly associated with power. In other words, the exercise of power is as relevant to leadership in the religious domain as it is in politics, the marketplace or other social settings. It finds expression in two distinct but closely interconnected arenas, one endogenous (internal to religious institutions) and the other exogenous (pertaining to the institution's external environment).

The endogenous arena encompasses the institutional infrastructure, laws, rules, rites and decision-making processes that govern the interpretation of sacred texts, organization of rites and rituals, application of the teachings of founders and prophets and more generally, the running of religious educational institutions (seminaries, monasteries, theological colleges, universities, schools, madrassas, study circles in churches, mosques and temples, bookshops, libraries, websites), all of which play a vital role in shaping religious faithfulness. The question here is the extent to which these institutions, through their ethos, curriculum and pedagogy, equip the community of believers to practise the ethic of altruism and so live harmoniously and creatively not only with each other but with people of other faiths, ethnicities and nationalities.

This brings us to the exogenous arena. People of faith relate in one way or another to the wider social order, that is, to the political and economic norms, institutions and policies which shape the structure and distribution of authority, power, status and wealth locally, nationally and internationally. All of which raises a simple but challenging question: are people of religious faith, whether as individuals or communities, able to relate to these norms, policies and structures with ethical discernment? To put it another way, can they develop a praxis that privileges the dignity of the human person, the satisfaction of basic human needs, the peaceful settlement of disputes and importantly, respect for nature?

Perhaps the single most powerful constraint bearing upon religion's capacity to apply ethical wisdom is its relationship with the state, not least the coercive apparatus that underpins much of the state's domestic and external policies. To illustrate, despite the calamitous loss of life in World War I and again in World War II, the actual or threatened use of force has been a constant feature of the political landscape. In both industrial and developing states, political repression has been

widespread, with ethnic and religious minorities often the victims of wholesale discrimination. Yet, by and large, religious institutions and their leaders have been reluctant to address the ethical shortcomings of the modern state. This is not to say that people of religious conviction have not engaged with many of our contemporary ailments, be it poverty, unemployment, housing, indigenous rights, other forms of discrimination, humanitarian crises and war, but they have generally been in the minority. Seldom has the majority religion in any country been prepared to confront its own state head-on, even where the latter's actions entailed egregious violations of the most basic ethical principles. Religion, it seems, has, for the most part, allowed itself to be swept along by powerful ideological currents, either because it expected to profit from doing so or because it judged resistance too high a price to carry.

In this context, three ideological currents have proven especially potent: nationalism and other forms of tribalism, secularism and its corollary privatism and religiously sanctioned or led statism, which in its most radical form can mean the effective fusion of state and religion. The first current comprises the many and varied exclusivist ideologies that have dominated national and international politics for well over a century. Notwithstanding the exemplary responses of a good many religiously motivated groups and individuals, the general tendency has been for majority religions to turn a blind eye to authoritarian ultranationalist ideologies, especially once they have gained control of the state. The generally positive response of the German Evangelical Church to the rise of Nazism is not entirely surprising given that it had traditionally viewed itself as one of the pillars of German culture and society, with a theologically grounded tradition of loyalty to the state. While several Catholic bishops pressed for a critical stance vis-à-vis Hitler's policies, they were unable to gain the support of the German Catholic Bishops Conference (Li 2015). For his part, Pope Pius XII preferred to pursue a public stance that oscillated between conspicuous silence and diplomatic neutrality. Catholicism's relationship to the other brands of fascism that mushroomed across much of Europe in the interwar years was similarly compromised, generally ranging from studied reclusiveness to active complicity (Nellis, Morelli and Praet 2015). Nor has flirting with radical nationalism and various forms of extremist populism been the preserve of Christian Churches. In India, as in other parts of Asia, radical religious-national movements have had no compunction sanctioning deadly attacks against Muslim minorities (Banaji 2018; Beech 2019).

The second ideological current, loosely associated with notions of secularism, is often taken to mean that God and politics do not mix, that religion is basically a private matter. The corollary of this view is that religious beliefs and religiously defined ethical standpoints should not enter the public sphere or in any way shape the attitudes and policy preferences of those holding public office. Taken to its logical conclusion, such ideological compliance, which has largely governed the functioning of mainstream religion in the West, has, among other things, required acceptance of the neo-liberal consensus in economic policy and nuclear deterrence as providing the ultimate guarantee of national security. In these and other areas of policy, religion's capacity to advocate ethically informed positions that call into question the prevailing political orthodoxy has been significantly constrained.

In so far as religion enters the political sphere, such intervention is normally driven by the pursuit of self-interested objectives. The causes they have espoused, often vociferously and at times with notable intransigence, generally fall into two categories: political pressure designed to maximize government support for the material infrastructure of religious establishments (be it places of worship, schools, hospitals or fundraising arrangements), on which depend their authority and prestige, and advocacy of certain laws and regulations which usually pertain to the realm of personal morality, and in particular sexual ethics. Straddling these two categories is the tendency of majority religions to defend their privileged positions vis-à-vis minority faiths,

usually with respect to their extensive physical or financial assets or to the particular moral code they uphold on such issues as abortion or gay rights. Such self-promotion has inevitably eroded religion's credibility as an advocate of religious and cultural pluralism and, more generally, of the rights of the 'other.' It has tarnished religion's image and fed the widespread perception that religious activism is no less self-interested or more ethically informed than other self-indulgent pressure groups.

A contrasting but no less ethically prejudicial dynamic is at work when the dominant ideology renders the state and religion virtually inseparable. The fusion of state and religion can assume different guises. The classic theocratic model, as in the case of contemporary Iran, envisages a religious or clerical class being placed directly in charge of the state. Since the 1979 revolution, Iran's supreme leader, the highest-ranking religious and political leader in the country, exercises ideological and political control over a system that requires 'all civil, penal, financial, economic, administrative, cultural, military, political, and other laws and regulations' to be based on 'Islamic criteria' (Article 4). The role of the religious establishment in Saudi Arabia is equally pervasive, though more opaque and variable over time. It offers the House of Saud power and legitimacy in return for a system of governance that is aligned to the teachings of the Prophet Muhammed and the Islamic principle of *tawhid* (the principle of monotheism). As a consequence, the official place of religion in Saudi Arabia's public life, as enshrined in its 1992 Basic Law, stipulates that the Qur'an is the foundation of the country's constitution, Islam the official state religion, and sharia (Islamic law) the official criminal law in the country. Though open to periodic friction, the political-religious alliance remains a *sine qua non* of regime stability (Guillemain-Puteaux 2018). Iran and Saudi Arabia are the best known but by no means isolated examples of the coalescence of religious and political authority. If anything, the recent period has seen a marked upsurge in support for the principle of theocratic governance in diverse parts of the world, including Afghanistan, sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East (Hirshl 2018, 1079–1080).

Quite apart from its intrinsic importance, religion's relationship to the state bears upon two other distinct yet closely related fronts, where religious institutions have been singularly ineffective in articulating, let alone giving effect to, a well thought out ethical position. The first relates to the failure of most religious establishments to recognize the inroads of the market into virtually every facet of everyday life and, in particular, the insidious logic and far-reaching psychological, cultural and political consequences of the unfettered globalization of market relations. Secondly, religious institutions, though periodically deploring the corrosive effects of mass consumption culture that has been the hallmark of late capitalism, have found it difficult to set out the ethical framework that might inform the construction of an alternative set of economic and political arrangements.

Some promising signs

Powerful ideological currents may have clipped the ethical wings of the religious imagination, but they have not entirely blunted its ethical impulse. Amidst the mounting hazards of economic breakdown, environmental degradation, cultural dislocation, terrorism and armed conflict, signs have emerged over the last several decades of a rising, though still far from generalized, consciousness of the immensity of the ethical challenges which presently define the human condition (Society of Christian Social Ethics 2018). Many are calling into question the idea that religion is first and foremost a private experience and affirming instead the need for thoughtful, religiously grounded responses to the politics of mistrust, intolerance and chauvinism. The sustained efforts of the World Council of Churches to raise awareness of the evils of racism,

caste-based discrimination and other exclusionary practices have been a highlight of its work, as was the Decade to Overcome Violence (2001–2010), which combined an extensive study and reflection process with a series of creative projects challenging the churches ‘to overcome the spirit, logic, and practice of violence; to relinquish any theological justification of violence; and to affirm anew the spirituality of reconciliation and active nonviolence’ (World Council of Churches 2011, 8). Notable developments in Catholicism include the contributions of liberation theology and base communities in parts of Latin America, and importantly the *aggiornamento* or renewal movement ushered in by the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), widely regarded as the most significant event in the life of the Church in the Modern era (Neuhaus 2008). Though the pontificates of John Paul II and Benedict XVI stymied and to a degree undid the theological and pastoral advances decreed by the Council, the new opening to the world most graphically expressed in the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World promulgated in December 1965 has remained a rich source of ethical reflection and inspiration.

Another notable instance of the same trend is the emergence of Engaged Buddhism, a term that entered parts of the Buddhist world in the latter part of the 20th century. In response to the social and ecological realities of the times but also building on precedents in Buddhist history, a conscious attempt is being made in different social and national settings to reframe Buddhist practice in ways that combine sustained social engagement with radical personal transformation. For engaged Buddhists, the aim is to make notions of social change, human agency, responsible citizenship and historical consciousness integral to a compassionate life (Loy 2004).

Within the Christian tradition, public theology, with its renewed conception of the common good, has gathered considerable momentum (Bradstock and Russell 2017). Though the theological arguments advanced to support the notion of socio-public engagement vary, they share a common understanding of the principal elements of which are commitment to ‘public goods,’ engagement in the public sphere, and an implicit, at times explicit, critique of neo-liberal ideology (Elsbernd 2005). A key feature of the theology of engagement is a sharper understanding of solidarity as the basis of a social ethic tailored to the needs of an increasingly interdependent yet deeply fractured world (Hollenbach 2002, Ogletree 2002). Another notable strand in current theological reflection is the attempt to develop the Christian principle of forgiveness as a basis of reconciliation, especially in societies that have experienced war, genocide and other mass atrocity crimes. Reconciliation – and its corollary restorative justice – are posited as central to the process of conflict resolution and post-conflict peacebuilding and reconstruction, of which truth and reconciliation commissions are seen as a valid practical expression (Vorster 2009).

It is, however, the ecological turn that best characterizes religion’s most far-reaching reassessment of the nature and scope of the contemporary human predicament. One should hasten to add that the relationship with the Earth’s living systems has been an enduring feature of the perceptions and beliefs of the world’s religions (Taylor 2005, vii–xxi, Gottlieb 2009). Yet, it is only in the late 20th century that ecotheology has emerged as a distinctive and increasingly influential stream in theological discourse, primarily in response to the deepening global environmental crisis and importantly as a critique of the long-held Christian view that God has entrusted humans with dominion over nature. This reinterpretation of the Genesis story has come to be seen as the necessary corrective to the mindset that would underpin the industrial transformation of Western civilization, in particular its addiction to the economics of growth and the manipulation, even exploitation, of nature on which it was premised. Some contributors to this new theological current found inspiration in Francis of Assisi’s legendary respect for nature and all its creatures, others in the rich theological insights of the two leading Protestant reformers of the 16th century, Luther and Calvin, both of whom affirmed God’s presence in nature. But it was not until the middle of the 20th century that theological reflection began to

shed its anthropocentric worldview. Teilhard de Chardin helped pave the way with his exploration of the human phenomenon, which he located in the ongoing emergence of the cosmos, or cosmogenesis (Teilhard de Chardin 1968, Turner 2005). He was followed by other less well-known contributors, and then came the pioneering Lutheran and ecumenical ecotheologian Joseph Sittler (Pihkala 2017), for whom the world of nature was ‘God’s other living creation which has its own integrity and which defines the human place in the world’ (Sittler 2005, 2). Many others followed in quick succession, notably Catholic cultural and Earth historian Thomas Berry, Protestant theologians Jürgen Moltmann, John Cobb and James Nash, and Eastern Orthodox theologian Paulos Gregorius, to which must be added Rosemary Radford Ruether, Sallie McFague, Heather Eaton and others who have enriched the new ecological consciousness with a feminist reading of theology and scripture.

Though each of these contributions brings to the table a distinctive understanding of the relationship between religion and ecology, several recurring themes nevertheless characterize the ecotheological project:

- The divine is immanent in the whole cosmos.
- The relationship between the divine, the cosmos and humanity can be best understood holistically.
- The Earth and all its creatures have an intrinsic worth and are meant to serve a greater purpose.
- The Earth is a community in which all living things are interconnected and interdependent.
- Humanity’s role is not to exercise mastery over the Earth, but to engage with it in a spirit of custodianship and partnership.
- With creation ‘groaning in travail,’ humanity’s responsibility is to speak with a new and powerful voice on behalf of the whole creation and address the injustices which afflict it.

Ecotheology represents a significant advance in Christianity’s attempt to chart an ethical response to the deepening ecological crisis. But, for all its potency and resonance, it remains, first and foremost, an intellectual exercise which, if it is to bear fruit, needs institutional legitimacy and leverage. This has been one of the important functions of Pope Francis’s second encyclical *Laudato Si’*.

Ecumenical in inspiration and widely acclaimed as much outside as inside the Catholic Church, the encyclical’s analysis rests on two pillars: theological and spiritual reflection on the one hand and scientific evidence on the other. Though the challenge posed by climate change is addressed at length, it is viewed as another symptom of a deeper ailment, which has as its underlying cause the ideology of exclusion. The exclusion of people and nature, of the marginalized and vulnerable, it is argued, is the natural outcome of the spirit of domination and profound indifference to the harm it inevitably brings in its train.

The remedy proposed by the encyclical is to place the care of creation, our ‘common home,’ at the heart of Christian theology. It categorically rejects the theology of human domination and seeks to replace what Pope Francis calls ‘tyrannical anthropocentrism’ with respect for all living things. He advocates ‘a sense of fraternity that excludes nothing and no one,’ an understanding of the Earth as a ‘shared inheritance,’ a ‘collective good,’ the ‘patrimony of all humanity,’ the ‘responsibility of everyone.’ The ethically-driven rejection of exclusivist ideologies is the overarching message of *Laudato Si’*. In this and other pronouncements, Pope Francis has called for a cultural revolution that replaces domination with responsible stewardship and paves the way for an ‘integral ecology.’ He offers a framework that connects spirituality, nature, culture, economy

and governance and sets ethical benchmarks which enable us to evaluate the performance of our political, economic and legal institutions and decision-making processes.

The ecological turn, it should be stressed, is by no means confined to the Christian world. Parallel developments in other faiths, notably in Buddhism and Islam, point in the same direction. That the key tenets of Buddhism should be conducive to the development of an environmental ethic is hardly surprising. The principle of non-harming (*ahimsa*), the existential centrality of suffering, the positing of compassion as the only valid remedy and importantly, the emphasis on holism and the interdependence of all forms of life have provided teachers and practitioners in all branches of Buddhism with the inspiration and intellectual and moral equipment to rethink the relationship between humanity and nature. It is, however, the severity of the ecological crisis which has prompted the rediscovery of classical texts and a flood of new writing and discussion based on historically and philosophically informed but contextualized explications of traditional Buddhist thought (Kaza and Kraft 2000, Thich Nhat Hanh 2008, Darlington 2019, 2017, Lim 2019). Using Buddhist teachings and rituals, a growing number of monks and Buddhist environmental groups are working with community organizations, farmers, educators and representatives of other faiths to foster the attitudinal and behavioural shift needed to sustain a range of educational, advocacy and land care projects (Bu and Chi 2014).

Much the same pattern is evident in Islam, though what is distinctive about its response to the ecological impasse is the emphasis on the divine origin of all life. Indeed, the whole of creation is viewed as a sign (*ayat*) of Allah, the Creator. In the words of the Qur'an, 'Allah sends down water from the sky; and by it brings the dead earth back to life. *There is certainly a Sign in that for people who hear*' (16:65; *italics added*). Four precepts are said to underlie Islamic ethics in general and the environmental ethic in particular (Khalid 2010, 710–711):

- The 'unity' principle (*Tawhid*) – because all that exists flows from God, the unity of the Creator is reflected in the unity of his creation;
- The 'creation' principle (*Fitra*) – everything in creation has a potential for goodness, which it is for humanity to express;
- The 'balance' principle (*Mizan*) – creation has an order and a purpose and is in dynamic balance, which it is for humanity to discern;
- The 'responsibility' principle (*Khalifa*) – the Creator has appointed human beings to be *khalifs* or trustees of his creation; that is, creation is entrusted in humanity's safekeeping.

On the basis of these general precepts, Islamic jurisprudence has formulated specific principles that are to guide lawmaking, three of which have direct relevance for environmental policy: people may hold land, but there are no absolute rights of ownership; abuse of rights is prohibited and penalized and the benefits derived from natural resources are to be held in common. Where resources are scarce, utilization must be carefully controlled, and at all times, the common good must be protected and any detrimental effects avoided or strictly limited.

The reality on the ground, it is true, tells another story. Virtually all states in Muslim majority societies, including Iran and Saudi Arabia, have been integrated to a greater or lesser extent into the global neo-liberal order, which means that Islamic principles of governance are more honoured in the breach than the observance. Nevertheless, Islamic scholars have, since the late 1960s, paved the way for an Islamic ecotheology movement comprising Islamic ecological jurisprudence, Sharia-based environmental law and Islamic environmental activism (Zbidi 2013). An extensive consultative process led by IFEES/EcoIslam and Islamic Relief World Wide culminated in the adoption of a substantive Declaration on Global Climate Change in Istanbul

in August 2015. With rising environmental awareness has come many environmental campaigns and projects (Grossman 2019), but all this is but the beginning of a long and difficult journey.

This cursory survey of religion's efforts to affirm ethical guidelines relevant to our epoch suggests rich possibilities and daunting limitations. That the world's religions have accumulated over time a rich reservoir of wisdom that can help humanity navigate the turbulent seas ahead may be a contentious proposition. What is less open to argument is that we are witnessing an uneven but widespread ethical reawakening of the religious imagination. Not surprisingly, many obstacles stand in the way, not least the ideological currents that serve to normalize and legitimize the addiction to power and privilege within both the religious and secular realms, often in mutually reinforcing ways. It is difficult to see the ethical enterprise making much headway until such time as ethical pronouncements and advocacy are supported by the full weight of religion's institutional infrastructure. Especially important in this context is the complex of educational institutions and practices, which by virtue of their ethos, curriculum and pedagogy, can inspire and equip the community of believers to engage with the defining issues of social, economic and political life. Much will also depend on whether those of religious persuasion are able and willing to engage in sustained intellectual and practical dialogue across religious and ideological boundaries. If not, the ethical imperative will remain little more than a pious aspiration.

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