

The venerable world religions are agents of morality in a world that is radically interconnected, only as far as their histories allow that their guiding precepts survive the modern experiment to contribute to postmodern conditions. All have changed in their history, but they vary in their ability to be useful contributors to the new task of religion, which should be to equip the individual for their journey in a world beyond any comfortable but illusory absolutes. Any search for some variation of an individual religion's morality from purely secular ethics based on "universally binding precepts that define non-religious human morality", however, founders on the even more obvious lack of absolutes in the secular realm. Better to start from a position that ethics is about the interaction between the individual and community that in no ways necessarily requires a religion, but may be aided or impeded by religion. It may also be useful to define the major aspect of our experience of God as our connectedness with community locally and more broadly, with all humanity, such that our ethics are a response to this – our search for how "love" behaves. Religions have been highly successful tools for the promotion of morality in closed systems in the past, but because we now live in a global community and in a diversity of arrangements that were not contemplated by the communities that created our major religions, they now can become powerful agents of immorality and unethical behaviour when they react to the modern world with dogmatism and a desire to separate into fundamentalist subcultures:

We live with the inheritance of not only one, but of a number of well-integrated moralities. Aristotelian, primitive Christian simplicity, the puritan ethic, the aristocratic ethic of consumption, and the traditions of democracy and socialism have all left their mark upon our moral vocabulary. Within each of these moralities there is a proposed end or ends, a set of rules, a list of virtues. But the ends, the rules, the virtues differ. For Aristotelianism, to sell all you have

and give to the poor would be absurd and mean spirited; for primitive Christianity, the great-souled man is unlikely to pass through that eye of the needle which is the gateway to heaven. A conservative Catholicism would treat obedience to established authority as a virtue; a democratic socialism such as Marx's labels the same attitude servility and sees it as the worst of vices. For Puritanism, thrift is a major virtue, laziness a major vice; for the traditional aristocrat, thrift is a vice.¹

Macintyre's survey merely shows the incompatibilities between the influences on Western ethics, both secular and religious; the variations multiply when the whole world is addressed. Religion had been until recently the major solution to the provision of ethical frameworks for moral action. While operating within communities that we would regard as extremely cut off from their neighbours, systems that were, after all, formed to suit the conditions of early city-states,² maintained a usefulness in a world prior to the increasing globalisation and mass individualism of the recent centuries. However, they unsurprisingly shared a suspicion for outsiders who would potentially rob them of their civilization. As we now are all in communion and communication there can be no "other" anymore. Currently it is the dogmatism of clinging to fossilised precepts that impedes ethics that can adapt to embrace the "other" in the world: women, gays, untouchables, AIDS victims. Yet since the gift of religions is the embrace of millennia of lived experience in community, and there are obvious elements within each religion that have challenged dogmatism and embraced openness, religion can still be a tool for the individual seeking stories to test against their own journey. It makes sense, therefore, to survey the world religions for such aspects and potentials that would enhance the search for a useful ethics.

¹ Alasdair Macintyre, *A Short History of Ethics* (London: Routledge, 1967), 266.

² Don Cupitt, *After God: the Future of Religion* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1997), 101.

The Chinese synthesis of the three doctrines of Confucianism, Taoism and the local brands of Buddhism has many potential fruitful aspects from this perspective. The mere fact that such traditions have more than co-existed in China for millennia gives a lived example of successful pluralism. Taoism and the Confucianism form the anarchic and regulated poles respectively of Chinese thought into which Buddhism added China's own middle way.³ The lack of concern for an external God in any of these traditions contributes to a fluidity of thought that has potential to confront the postmodern world outside China if the tradition of Chinese superiority and the reaction to colonialism is overcome. "Messy and muddled"⁴ it may be to Western eyes but that is after all the postmodern temperament.

Taoism in particular with its recognition that the "other" forms part of the whole in the Yin and Yang, and the ethic encouraged by wu-wei, suits a postmodern disposition. Both ideas lead to encouragement of tolerance as the individual attempts to live in the flow of nature. Living in the Tao leads to a life of spontaneity, gentleness, intuition and passivity.⁵ While individual qualities, they create a community where oppression is unthinkable.

Amongst the religious practices that have flowed from Taoist thought is the veneration of ancestors. As a guide to ethics, veneration of the spirits of ancestors encourages the Taoist perspective of relativity that examines individual behaviour from outside your own limited point of view.⁶ As an extension of the commonplace practice, even in the West, of talking to our departed at cemeteries, veneration of ancestors has also been suggested as a model for the religious practice of prayer to a

³ Ninian Smart, *Background to the Long Search* (London: BBC, 1977), 258.

⁴ Ninian Smart, *The World's Religions* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989), 103.

⁵ Smart, *The World's Religions*, 114.

⁶ Yuri Koszarycz, *Theo 545-644: Religion, Ethics and Pluralism – Module 9: Confucianism Taoism*

non-realist God.⁷ Such Chinese practice would prove useful as an example of well thought through religious contribution to ethics, which requires no acknowledgment of an external God.

Indian religion under the many faiths described as Hinduism is so plural as to defy encapsulation. From an ethical perspective it can encompass the inequities of the caste system and growing Hindu nationalism with its consequent oppression of Muslims. However, religious tolerance has been a feature of Indian history. The original tradition of Vishnuism from two thousand years ago saw other Gods as a manifestation of Vishnu in any case and accepted that converts to other faiths still had the grace of Vishnu.⁸

When Hinduism was first popularized in the West by Vivekananda its ethical base was presented as the need to act disinterestedly in the world by freeing oneself from selfish thought.⁹ As an ethic of personal responsibility it is certainly adaptable to a world without absolutes:

When we have nobody to grope towards, no devil to blame, no personal God to carry our burdens, when we are alone responsible, then we shall rise to our highest and best. I am responsible for my own fate, I am the bringer of good to myself, I am the bringer of evil... I am not bound by either virtue or vice, by happiness or misery.¹⁰

One's ethics as a Hindu will depend on dharma, behaving appropriately to the natural law. Reincarnation as a concept related to the accumulation of good and bad karma in life certainly acts as an ethical imperative for the believer in their quest for release. However, as opposed to religions that posit one life followed by damnation or bliss or even secular ideas of nothing more to our lives beyond our

⁷ Cupitt, *After God*, 125.

⁸ Hans Kung et al, *Christianity and the World Religions* (New York: Doubleday, 1986),144.

⁹ Don Cupitt, *The Sea of Faith* (London: BBC, 1984),175.

¹⁰ Vivekananda in Cupitt *Sea of Faith*, 175.

present existence, life within Hinduism's belief in reincarnation gives a perspective that is less competitive and rushed: "the possibility of rebirth gives a wider horizon to life and a different sense of time."¹¹

As an offshoot of Hinduism, Buddhism solves the ethical problem of the caste system by simply removing it. It is a rational faith of personal responsibility and effort, concerned with life here and now. As befitting a "middle path", it is a religion of moderation where despite rules and practices to guide the Buddhist, the intentions are what really count.¹² Buddhism takes a justifiably pessimistic view of life as permeated with suffering and seeks an ethic that minimizes it. The hope in this harm minimization scheme is practices that lead to renunciation of desire and the possibility of Nirvana. Again, we have here a spirituality and consequent ethic that requires no God as such:

If religion is indeed a way of inner transformation that seeks to overcome evil, ignorance and futility then Buddhism is ... one of the purest of all religions, for it presses the demand for inner clarity and non-attachment so far that much of the metaphysics of religion falls away... We must give up all forms of futile, quasi-erotic craving or yearning. Attachment is dependency is spiritual dissipation is futility and misery. True religion is pure selflessness, and you cannot pursue pure selflessness for the sake of anything else beyond it.¹³

Whether Abrahamic religions can adapt to postmodern ethics depends on their ability to transcend being "People of the Book" and their tendency to rely on a personal God. Powerfully, all have a tradition of mysticism that has provided a creative counterpoint to this danger of complacency and inflexibility, the error of creating God in our own narrow image.¹⁴

¹¹ Kung, *Christianity and the World Religions*, 146.

¹² Smart, *The World's Religions*, 63.

¹³ Cupitt, *Sea of Faith*, 179.

¹⁴ Karen Armstrong, *A History of God* (London: Mandarin, 1994), 243.

Islam has the hardest task as it is based on the Koran rather than a corpus of books and tradition as does Judaism and Christianity. This can lead to inflexible application of laws and consequent injustice to Western eyes. Islamic ethics becomes merely the application of Koranic principles and room for change seems limited.¹⁵ It also has no distinction between religion and State and appears to have people trapped in a world akin to the past evils of Christendom. Kung, however, sees in Islam the potential for transformation from this situation where the substance can be maintained while losing the medieval worldview.¹⁶ Islamic communities as minority cultures in Western countries already act in this way. From the Sufi tradition, historically a more mystical and open branch of Islam, Imam Feisel Abdul Rauf espouses an Islam that is working through what it means to live in the modern world as harking back to the tolerant era of Cordoba in Moorish Spain.

The Abrahamic ethic is in fact most cogently expressed in the notion of one God, one creator, who created all of humanity... and therefore all of humanity, in spite of our differences in the colour of our skin, ethnicity, culture, languages, are fundamentally brothers and sisters.

And this implies a number of things: it implies that every human being has similar rights before God and before each other. Also God gave humanity a fundamental freedom to accept or reject God. So part of the Abrahamic ethic is religious freedom.

What is needed in order to heal the relationship between the Muslim world and the West is something which is a quantum leap ... It's like what I call the "man in the moon" project. What is required today, in order for us to achieve this objective by the end of this decade, would be an equivalent level of deployment - of intellectual resources, of conflict resolution specialists, of economists, of constitutional jurists, to identify each of the particular line items that face the misunderstandings that exist between the Muslim world and the West, be they on issues like separation of church and state, whether it be on issues of how do we develop Islamic institutes of finance which are consistent with our own ethical ideals. These are just a

¹⁵ Moiz Amjad, *The Ethical Philosophy of Islam*, Al-Mawrid Institute of Islamic Science, 2000.
<http://www.understanding-islam.com/related/text.asp?type=article&aid=75>

¹⁶ Kung, *Christianity and the World Religions*, 56.

couple to show the range of ideas that need to be addressed so that we build the appropriate infrastructures within Islamic societies so that we provide these growing young people with jobs and financial opportunities and economic freedom and empowerment.¹⁷

Judaism has a history of disputation over behaviour that dates back millennia and even more importantly a very recent history of engagement with the modern world. The recent creative moves of Reform Judaism have begun to permeate Jewish culture and offer an alternative to the current inflexibility of orthodox Judaism. The history of Judaism has also always had a mystical aspect. The Kabbalah requires disciplines not unlike Eastern religions and provides an insight into the ineffable that guards against judgmental ethics.

Mystical religion is more immediate and tends to be more help in times of trouble than a predominately cerebral faith. The disciplines of mysticism help the adept to return to the One, the primordial beginning, and to cultivate a constant state of presence... The classic texts of Throne Mysticism, which were edited in Babylon in the fifth and sixth centuries, suggest that the mystics, who were reticent about their experiences, felt a strong affinity with rabbinic tradition... They revealed a new extremity in the Jewish spirit, as they blazed a new trail to God on behalf of their people.¹⁸

Christianity too, has had its mystical movements. A powerful tool has been the via negativa of Pseudo-Dionysius, expounding an unknowable God and prescribing contemplative exercises to achieve union with God.¹⁹ With respect to ethics, a mystical approach is an alternative form of revelation and as such a challenge to fixed traditions that claim a definitive positive knowledge of God's will.

¹⁷ Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf, *Encounter ABC Radio*, 25.4.2004.

<http://www.abc.net.au/rn/relig/enc/stories/s1091176.htm>

¹⁸ Armstrong, *History of God*, 245.

¹⁹ Anonymous, *The Cloud of Unknowing* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961), 21.

Since the absolutes of the major religions are incompatible both with each other and the postmodern world, the loss of absolutes allows pluralism to reinvigorate religious input into ethics. With Buddhism and Taoism demonstrating an ethical religious life without being specific about God and the mystical tradition in the Abrahamic faiths offering union with God that has nothing necessarily to do with dogma, religion can be freed up to be a positive force for the formation of an individual's ethics. Changing the locus of mystery from somewhere "out there" to what happens between you and me right now reveals a God that is in our human interactions. I am eternally blessed or equally eternally damned at each instant by my relationship with you because it will then effect your way of future living just as your behaviour to me effects mine. Within each of the faiths described there are stories and practices that would guide our journeys in this chaotic network of interaction. Whether it is meditation or seeking to free oneself of desire or the stillness of wu-wei, an individual is training in these techniques and stories to be in a frame of mind that can respond most ethically to situations as they arise. The fact that I am a Catholic and I am interacting with a Muslim, a Jew, a Buddhist, a Taoist or an atheist will not be functionally relevant. If I am looking to the reign of God as lived by Jesus as the story guiding my ethics I will not be in conflict with any of these other faiths. Critically, the success of the secular global experiment will mean that all faiths will become minority faiths and all the more attractive for the loss of their triumphalist trappings. The fruits of these speculative guides to ethics will doubtless be tested against the all the "words" of tradition but only flexible tools can transcend what is carved in the tablets to guide us to what we are becoming.

Bibilography

Anonymous. *The Cloud of Unknowing*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961.

Amjad, M. The Ethical Philosophy of Islam. Al-Mawrid Institute of Islamic Science, 2000. <http://www.understandingislam.com/related/text.asp?type=article&aid=75>

Armstrong, K. *A History of God*. London: Mandarin, 1993.

Cupitt, D. *After God*. London: Weidenfeld & Nelson, 1997.

Cupitt, D. *The Sea of Faith*. London: BBC, 1984.

Johnson, P. *A History of Christianity*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976.

Koszarycz, Y. Theo 545-644: Religion, Ethics and Pluralism – Module 9: Confucianism Taoism.

Kung, H. et al *Christianity and the World Religions*. New York: Doubleday, 1986.

MacIntyre, A. *A Short History of Ethics*. London: Routledge, 1967.

Rauf, F. A. *Encounter*, ABC Radio, 25.4.2004.

<http://www.abc.net.au/rn/relig/enc/stories/s1091176.htm>

Smart, N. *Background to the Long Search*. London: BBC, 1977.

Smart, N. *The World Religions*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989.