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Teaching Comparative Religious Ethics - A Review Essay Kevin Schilbrack

ABSTRACT - Though others have surveyed the different methods in comparative religious ethics, relatively little attention has been given to different approaches to pedagogy (exceptions include Lovin and Reynolds; Juergens-meyer; Twiss). The field of comparative religious ethics has now reached a level of maturity so that there are a variety of ways such courses can be taught. In this review I consider the approaches to comparative religious ethics found in four recent texts by Jacob Neusner, Darrell Fasching and Dell deChant, Regina Wolfe and Christine Gudorf, and Sumner Twiss and Bruce Grelle. In the essay I note the strengths and weaknesses of each text, with special attention given to how the texts might work in the classroom. I then argue that the different texts reflect different understandings of the goal of teaching comparative religious ethics, and I make these goals explicit in order to help teachers decide how they might approach the teaching in this growing field.

1. A Compare and Contrast Approach

Though the field of comparative religious ethics is still relatively new, if one can say that something represents the "meat and potatoes" of the field, this handy trilogy edited by Jacob Neusner and entitled *Comparing Religious Traditions* is it. The three volumes cover three foci: "The Ethics of Family Life," "Making an Honest Living," and "The Life of [Personal] Virtue." The volumes investigate each focus from the perspectives of the world religions of Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism, and the chapters are authored by specialists in the given traditions. Each chapter of each volume is also organized by the same five straightforward questions. Each chapter in the volume on the ethics of the family, for example, asks about what husbands and wives owe one another, what parents owe their children, what children owe their parents, what happens when the family breaks down, and unconventional, supernatural families. There is an autonomy to the books so that a class could use any one volume independently of

the others, and there is also an autonomy to the chapters so that a class, say, on Islam, could create a section on Islamic ethics by using the chapters on Islam.

The chapters draw primarily on scriptures and classical texts. The quotations are often generous, sometimes a page or two long, and give readers a taste of the originals. Each chapter then ends with short comments from the scholars of the other four traditions that note similarities and differences between the different ethical views of family, work, and selfhood (hence my section heading). Though these commentaries often bring to light surprising agreements and disagreements between the traditions, they are disappointingly short—sometimes only a paragraph or two long.

Even apart from the closing commentaries, however, the structured form of the texts makes comparisons between religious ethical traditions easy. I only saw two examples in which one contributor was not on the same page as the others. The first is Bruce Chilton's chapter in *Making an Honest Living*, which compares the worldviews of gnostic and orthodox Christianity while the other chapters in the book focus more specifically on religious teachings concerning proper vocations or wages. The second is that, while the volumes as a whole are very clear-eyed on the patriarchy of the traditions, Tamara Sonn's chapter in *The Ethics of Family Life* is at pains to stress that the Qur'an is egalitarian. The other authors do not apologize for the traditions they describe, but she explains explicit inequalities between the sexes as the result of the historical context (for example, 2001a, 72, 73, 77). In a rare critical comment, Bruce Chilton calls her to task for this, rightly saying that "[i]f there were some method for determining what the balance between revelation and history is in a particular case, it would be good to know what it might be" (2001b, 85).

2. A Narrative Approach

The landscape is very different in Darreil Fasching and Dell deChant's *Comparative Religious Ethics: A Narrative Approach*. Fasching and deChant approach the study of comparative religious ethics with the conviction that "an important spiritual and ethical path for a new millennium is emerging," a global ethic that they call "the way of all the earth" (3-4). The easy optimism of the modern age has passed, they argue, and Auschwitz and Hiroshima have become the formative religious events of our post/modern world. In this present context, they do not shy from the normative task of endorsing some religious ethical views and criticizing others, arguing that "[t]he study of ethics must be more than an "objective" survey of abstract theories taught in noncommittal fashion. It ought to convey the wisdom one generation has to pass on to the next" (4).

As the subtitle suggests, their approach is through storytelling and for each of the world religions they provide at least one classical and one contemporary story. They begin with the stories of Gilgamesh and of Socrates and then turn to the Hindu stories of Arjuna and of Gandhi, the Buddhist stories of Siddhartha Gautama and of Thich Nhat Hanh, the Jewish stories of Job and of Abraham Heschel, the Christian stories of the gospel of Matthew and of Martin Luther King,

Jr., the Islamic stories of Muhammad and of Malcolm X, and then close with stories of the feminists Joanna Macy and Rosemary Radford Ruether.

As I noted above, this text is distinctive in that it approaches comparative religious ethics as a normative enterprise. The norm the authors propose for assessing religious ethics is their quite original invention of a distinction between the traditionally synonymous concepts of "the sacred" and "the holy." Taking these concepts from phenomenologists and sociologists of religion but developing them as evaluative tools, Fasching and deChant propose that religious experiences are not all the same. On the one hand, the experience of "the sacred" leads to the sacralization of a given territory, the people who live there, and their way of life. A sacred society thus lives according to a vision of a sacred order that is typically ethnocentric and hierarchical. From this perspective, one who is like us is good; one who is unlike us—the stranger—is seen as not fully human, a challenge, and a threat. The morality that develops from this experience of "the sacred" typically focuses on one's status and honor and it gives rise to a spirituality that stifles questions and insists on an ethics of obedience. As Fasching and deChant put it, from this perspective the way things ought to be is the way things are. On the other hand, however, the experience of "the holy" is an experience of the infinite and the infinite cannot be represented. It is not "like us" but rather wholly other. For this reason, from this religious perspective, no particular place, people, or way of life is considered sacred. In fact, to bring the world into accord with the holy perpetually calls into question the status quo; the way things are forever falls short of the way they ought to be. Such a perspective gives rise to a spirituality that actually fosters doubt and questioning. Hospitality is extended to the stranger as a representative of the divine Other.

This distinction between a sacred morality and an ethic of the holy is certain to be the most controversial aspect of the book. Let us set aside (until Part V, below) the question whether the study of comparative religious ethics *should* move beyond description to the assessment of religious ways of life and for now focus on the question of *how* Fasching and deChant use this distinction to assess them. Fasching and deChant argue that their categories of "the sacred" and "the holy" are not meant to separate the religions that are truly ethical from those that are merely moral, but rather name two tendencies present in every religious tradition—indeed, tendencies present in every person. In my judgment, that is the kind of criterion the discipline of comparative religious ethics wants most. Nevertheless, the question that is sure to remain is whether this distinction can be used fairly.

Here are two ways in which the sacred/holy distinction (despite the authors' intention) might be biased in favor of certain religions and against others. First, if sacred societies tend to sacralize the cosmos and have a this-worldly orientation (18), then one wonders whether certain religions—say, indigenous religions or Chinese religions, neither of which is treated in this book—have enough of the "other-worldly" dimension to avoid being seen as anything but limited. Second, Fasching and deChant regularly say that sacred societies seek to legitimate themselves by reference to the way things are, whereas holy communities found themselves upon an ineffable experience, an experience not "of some 'thing,' but of a 'lack' or 'absence' that opens us up to seeing and acting on new possibilities" (19). The impression given is that religious metaphysical traditions naturally connect in some way to the sacred morality that is

hostile to the stranger (e.g., 146, 166) and apophatic traditions naturally connect in some way to the ethic of the holy. But surely not only sacred communities but also holy communities typically see themselves as in accord with the nature of things and, like all groups, have sought to legitimate themselves. Or should we assume that all religious teachings about the nature of things are just rationalizations of the status quo?

These concerns aside, this book is terrific at permitting layers and layers of analysis. The authors begin with the story of Gilgamesh in order to argue that the rise of cities led people for the first time to live among strangers, which in turn called into question traditional, tribal understandings of morality, mortality, and meaning. This opens a class to a nest of existentialist issues. There is also consistent attention given to the "cosmic story" that each tradition has to tell, so those who agree with Clifford Geertz that religions usually wed an ethos to a metaphysical world view can take the conversation in that direction. The stories of the five twentieth-century figures contrasts the nonviolent "children of Gandhi" with Malcolm X as a proponent of the just war tradition. And the closing chapter on feminist audacity and the ethic of interdependence raises Carol Gilligan's work on gender in ethics and calls into question the usually unquestioned religious theme of killing or emptying the self.

Surprisingly, the book does not really make much of the idea of telling a story (nor are the many "stories" they tell told as stories). The authors assume that "the primary way in which ethical insights occur and are communicated within religious traditions is through story and ritual rather than through theory" (5) and surely they are right. But what does it mean to think with a text, to embody a narrative, or to see oneself in a story? (On such questions, see for example Clooney, 1989,1990.) The role of narrative in ethics is barely explored. Moreover, Fasching and deChant state that "the meaning of a story is shaped by the narrative imagination of its listener and the narrative imagination of the listener is shaped by his or her own religious experience" (130), but why stop there? Why is religious experience not in turn shaped—precisely by narrative? Insofar as this approach resists making the linguistic turn and seeks to ground its norm on experiential universals, it is to that extent really modernist rather than post-modernist (see also 51 for the difference between the hyphen and the slash in "post/modern").

Another weakness is that there is a fuzziness of vocabulary. For example, Fasching and deChant want to praise what they call audacity and which they exemplify in the story of Jacob wrestling with God. But when they point out that Gilgamesh also "wrestles" with Enkidu and Jacob "wrestles" with Esau in the womb, "wrestle" seems to mean not audacity but that the two struggled to live together; physical combat represents a power struggle. And again, when they say that Abraham "wrestled" with God over the fate of Sodom, they seem to mean that he made ethical demands upon or bargained with God, which does not fit the wrestling of Gilgamesh with Enkidu or of Jacob with Esau. And again, when they say that the Buddha "wrestled" with the four famous sights of the old person, the sick person, the corpse, and the renunciant, they cannot mean either that there was a power struggle or that he made demands of them; they seem to mean that the Buddha struggled to understand their significance. Perhaps there is some sense of wrestle that is generic enough to include all these uses (perhaps "struggle to come to terms with"?), but my complaint is pedagogical: I cannot ask students to analyze

religious stories using this concept if "wrestling" (and by implication, audacity) is used this broadly.

Despite these caveats, this is an original, eloquent, and often powerful book that can take a class to important and profound issues. Many may want to combine this text with more theoretical pieces on narrative and ethics or narrative and religious ethics (for example, Hallisey and Hansen; Barbieri). Teachers who want to develop the idea of a cosmic story might want to combine it with recent work in the story of the universe (for example, Rue; Swimme and Berry). Those who want to call attention to the social, political, and economic forces that lead a society to develop one religious narrative rather than another could use Bruce Lincoln (for example, Lincoln 1989, 2000).

3. A Case Studies Approach

A completely different strategy for teaching comparative religious ethics is found in Regina Wentzel Wolfe and Christine Gudorf's *Ethics and World Religions: Cross-Cultural Case Studies*. This volume uses eighteen original case studies in order to explore ethical issues faced by people in diverse cultural and religious contexts. The case studies are each about six pages long and each one presents a "real life" ethical dilemma. In fact, as ethical dilemmas go, each of these is a gem, a tangle of obligations and consequences. To take just one example, the case study entitled "An Unlikely Donor" describes a British nurse (who is Christian) who learns that one of her patients (who is Turkish, Muslim, and speaks no English) has come to England to sell one of his kidneys in an arrangement with one of the surgeons in her hospital. Each case study lets readers eavesdrop as families, co-workers, and friends weigh their choices and agonize over their conflicts. Even better, many of the cases give the reader a sense of the powers and limitations of the relevant institutions, for example, a *chavurah* of rabbis in New York debating U.S. and Jewish divorce laws, a village meeting in Nigeria considering a new model for development, an international team of WHO physicians investigating how few mentally retarded children live to adulthood in the Andean highlands, or a panel from the Florida Foster Care Citizen Review Program discussing adopted children who may be HIV-positive.

Each case study is then followed by two commentaries that explore the case from two different religious perspectives. These commentaries present the resources that a particular religious tradition has to offer and suggest ways to resolve the problem. Here one sees the diversity of comparative religious ethics at its most impressive. Though one of almost every pair of responses is from some form of Christianity, the responses also include not just different forms of Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism, but also Native American, Baha'i, Vodou, Confucian, Yoruban, and Aymaran Christian perspectives.

Some of these commentaries are very to the point and recommend that the characters in the case studies need to take specific religious virtues or principles into account. (Gudorf's own responses to the cases fall into this category.) Other commentaries are more tender-footed or get stuck in platitudes. A Buddhist commentary, for example, gives a woman considering in vitro fertilization the unhelpful advice that "[i]n a world where lives are inexorably intertwined, like ice

and water, our concern should be extended to all beings. Essentially, we should focus our energies where we can make a difference rather than trying to embrace all lives and relationships" (329). Leaving aside the theoretical problem that the two statements contradict each other, one is struck by the practical problem that neither one seems to lead the character in any direction. Yet this too is a teachable moment, and we can ask students to be not only led by the responses but also to evaluate them. The most fascinating aspect of this book, however, may be the interplay *between* the two responses. For example, the Jewish response to a Japanese businessman who suspects that he is being asked by his company to participate in securities fraud sees a clear violation of traditional Jewish ethical norms for business, whereas the Buddhist response does not speak of violations or norms at all but focuses instead on transforming a self-centered understanding and thereby transforming one's motivations.

In my experience, the case studies and responses do a terrific job of drawing students in. Faced with these cases, students see clearly the relevance and the challenge of comparing religious ethics. Nevertheless, such an approach puts special demands on the teacher. One practical issue is that the stories are so complex that classroom discussion threatens to over-simplify them. One case study that considers female circumcision asks readers to weigh the relationships of mother to daughter, wife to husband, wife to mother-in-law, husband to employer, and Senegalese to Islam, but in class the details may fall away so one refers to just "the FGM case." For the classroom, I recommend that teachers make a habit of reminding students of the details of the case, perhaps by having the class begin the discussion by listing the names and interests of the different characters. Referring to "Awa," "Joseph," etc., will help students see that, unlike in a typical discussion in philosophical ethics, the issue is not solely the morality or immorality of a particular act but rather the solution to a moral difficulty that pulls in a variety of directions.

A more significant teaching problem is the danger that classroom discussions will get mired in the plurality and ambiguity of the case studies. Precisely because the ethical dilemmas are presented not as simple "lifeboat"-style choices but as realistic situations full of complexities, readers will get a sense of the extent to which an ethical decision is not settled simply by "what the religion teaches" but also turns on personality, cultural context, and an individual's interpretation of her situation. Some teachers of religious ethics will welcome this move away from principles. As Wolfe and Gudorf write, "The structure of this book reflects postmodernity's rejection of a deductive method of presenting religions by focusing on sacred texts, creeds, or codes" (3). It is worth noting, however, what this means in the classroom. If one person concludes that the character in the case study should do one thing and another concludes that the character should do something completely different, there is little hope that one of these will emerge as the "right" answer—or even that one of these can show itself as the right answer from the perspective of a single religious tradition. Better and worse answers will need to be judged on their sensitivity or profundity. This is not a bad thing, of course, nor need it suggest any relativism, but it is much more difficult to assess and some teachers and students may find themselves frustrated by it.

As for including this book on one's syllabus, one weakness of this book, though hardly avoidable, is that there is so little information on the particular traditions. For instance, there are

about two pages on Hinduism in the introduction, and the two Hindu responses say a word about Hindu ideas like ahimsa and karma, but students who try to get a sense of what Hindu ethics involves from these pages alone will be grasping at straws. Teachers will therefore probably want to supplement this volume with information about the history and content of specific religious ethical traditions. Some might do this with religious texts that make explicit ethical recommendations, like the *Dhammapada* or the *Laws of Manu*. A successful class might also follow Wolfe and Gudorf's lead by avoiding an over-emphasis on creeds and codes, for example, by using texts that focus on the development of the self, like Augustine's *Confessions* or N. Scott Momaday's *The Way to Rainy Mountain*.

4. A Hermeneutical-Dialogical Approach

The insight that guides Sumner Twiss and Bruce Grelle's *Explorations in Global Ethics: Comparative Religious Ethics and Interreligious Dialogue* is that those who study comparative religious ethics and those involved in interreligious dialogue have overlooked a potentially mutually beneficial relationship. Each side possesses something the other lacks. The field of comparative religious ethics struggles to find a rationale for its practice that will persuade people that the study is more than an ivory tower pursuit; what concrete good is accomplished by comparing religious ethics? Those involved in interreligious dialogue do not have this problem; they *have* a rationale. Since at least the 1893 World's Parliament of Religions, representatives of the world's major religious traditions who have engaged in interfaith or interreligious dialogue have debated substantive moral issues. But they have the problem that they seem to impose Western modes of thought on the rest of the world. To marry these two fields would bring theoretical sophistication together with practical commitment. "So we are confronted with a problematic and provocative situation. On the one hand, we have an area of scholarly inquiry—comparative religious ethics—which, despite its sophisticated tools and methods, appears to lack a unifying rationale and purpose convincing to those within and outside the field. On the other hand, we have a community of interreligious dialogue with an enormously persuasive rationale and mission that nonetheless tends to founder in its ability to mount convincing and nonparochial positions and arguments" (2).

In Part I of the book (which is, loosely, on theory and method), Sumner Twiss surveys a variety of courses in comparative religious ethics and defends what he calls the hermeneutical-dialogical curricular paradigm (an approach to teaching that cries out for a catchier label). Bruce Grelle argues that, despite the insularity of the academy today, comparative religious ethicists are well placed to recover a sense of citizenship and a vocation as public intellectuals. Kate McCarthy provides an overview and an assessment of the exclusivist, inclusivist, and pluralist models of interreligious dialogue that is one of the clearest and most insightful pieces on the question I have read. Sallie B. King calls to the attention of comparative religious ethicists the Global Ethic written by Hans Küng and issued by the Parliament of the World's Religions in 1993 and eloquently summarizes its significance for comparative religious ethics. The section then closes with a commentary on these papers by Marcus Braybrooke.

Part II of the book (loosely, on practice) explores seven substantive, contemporary moral issues. Twiss gives a comparative perspective on religion and human rights, arguing that human rights are not solely a Western concern. James Smuri writes on Buddhist, Christian, and Muslim strategies for dealing with the problem of distributive justice. June O'Connor writes on the value of the testimonies of resistance written by Third World authors. John Kelsay writes from a personal context on the implications of Islamic teachings on war and statecraft for Christian theology. Ronald Green describes the recent emergence of a global ethic among international businesses and illustrates some of its relationships to community and religion in the case of Japan. Kusumita P. Pederson provides a handsome survey of resources for environmental ethics in world religions. And Darreil Fasching gives an autobiographical account of how he has come to use narrative ethics to negotiate discussions of genocide in a relativistic age. Part II closes with a commentary on these papers by Dennis McCann that includes some trenchant criticisms, especially of O'Connor and Fasching.

Although the papers in this volume are consistently well done, the ones that are most explicitly relevant to the question of teaching comparative religious ethics are those by Twiss and Grelle defending what they call a hermeneutical-dialogical approach. Twiss makes the case for this teaching approach by developing a typology and a critique of curricular paradigms, an overview of the field that is necessary reading for those who teach comparative religious ethics. Grelle argues for the same curricular model by placing it into a larger view of the role of the teacher of comparative religious ethics as a public intellectual.

What does this hermeneutical-dialogical model entail? As both Twiss and Grelle put it, the hermeneutical-dialogical approach "seeks to cultivate an accurate and an empathetic understanding and appreciation of religious ethical traditions as the basis for the more primary goal of developing students' disciplined thinking about a topic of existential or *practical moral significance*⁷⁹ (45, emphasis in original; this sentence is repeated almost verbatim by Twiss, 17). In other words, the primary goal in such classes (not unlike a philosophical course in applied ethics) is disciplined thinking about a specific moral problem like racism, the environment, or homelessness, but the resolution of the problem involves an accurate and empathetic understanding of diverse religious positions. The idea in short, then, is that classes in comparative religious ethics might emulate those interreligious dialogues in which members of different religious ethical traditions come together to study a problem and work out a solution that is acceptable to all sides.

In my judgment, such courses would help students develop a powerful combination of intellectual skills and could offer them invaluable practice for conflict resolution in a pluralistic world. One of the strengths of such courses is that, unlike many courses that imply or assert that there is no way of adjudicating conflicts between religious ethical ideals, such courses make the shared problem and the need for adjudication the starting point. Though I am persuaded by the case made for the hermeneutical-dialogical approach, I do have what might be called two recommendations for it. First, the idea of bringing people together from different religious traditions—along with the language of dialogue and mini-parliaments—is great. But the Gadamerian language that the members of different religions aim at "fusing their horizons" is vague at best and may suggest that on this model the different religions become one, a

suggestion that (as King, Grelle, and McCarthy point out) is likely to alienate many religious people. Twiss offers some alternative formulations for this process of fusion: "normative appropriation" in that the model encourages students to appropriate aspects of the traditions with which they dialogue or "transformation of view" (17; cf. 29, fn. 3). But to my ears these formulations exacerbate the problem. It may be true in one sense that to enter into dialogue with another is necessarily to be transformed, but (to borrow a phrase from Kate McCarthy) such formulations suggest that the hermeneutical-dialogical approach fails to grant the particular religious identities a priority over dialogue (108). There is a need to describe the nature of coming-to-dialogue in such a way as not to suggest a "globalist" or "one world" religious or political agenda (cf. 51).

My second worry is that the hermeneutical-dialogical approach (at least in the context of this collection of essays) can encourage a onesided view of the nature of religion. Recall that the approach asks those involved to identify a shared problem and then to investigate the different religious resources for addressing it. The implication is that "the world" has problems—perhaps in large part because of its materialism or lack of spirituality—but that religions, though ignored, have different means to combat the problems. The authors of this book, including the authors of the papers that have exactly this structure, no doubt have no illusions about the potential in religions for evil. But there is not enough discussion of the ways in which religions are implicated in power and as such may be a cause or continuing source of such problems. One thinks, for example, of religious justifications for economic injustices or religious complicity in ethnic or racial violence. This volume, of course, seeks to show the relevance of comparative religious ethics and interreligious dialogue to each other, and perhaps in that context the working assumption is that the parties in dialogue may be religious representatives who are seeking to solve problems and therefore the important thing is to get them to appreciate each other's viewpoints and solutions. But the classroom should have a greater appreciation of the darker aspects of religions as represented, for example, in the volume by Fasching and deChant.

5. Pedagogy

The comments above were intended to distinguish these four approaches to comparative religious ethics and to shine some light on some of the strengths and weaknesses, especially in regards to their teachability. But these books represent different choices for teaching comparative religious ethics not solely because they include different facts or employ different methods, but also—I want now to argue—because they reflect different pedagogical goals. I do not want to exaggerate this point. All of these books share the defining goal of comparative religious ethics: to help students think more clearly about religious diversity on moral matters. Moreover, all of these books share to a greater or lesser extent each other's goals of providing accurate information, developing students' powers of moral empathy, fostering critical ethical thinking, and encouraging practical engagement. Nevertheless, these books rank these goals differently and I believe that it is fair to say that the differences between these texts reflect decisions the authors have made about what kind of students they want to see come out of

comparative religious ethics classes. In short, the books hold implicit pedagogical goals. I now turn to these goals and will try to make them explicit.

The primary goal of Neusner's trilogy on *Comparing Religious Traditions* is simply to share accurate information about the ethical traditions. These books do not explicitly raise the practical, hermeneutic, or normative issues with the force of the other volumes considered here. A drawback of this trilogy is that its lecture-like style and repeated structure may lead students to treat each religious tradition as monolithic. But the dissemination of accurate information is not only a legitimate goal of comparative religious ethics classes; it is a condition for the success of any other goals. The other texts discussed in this essay consider other goals primary and for this reason they are limited in the information they give students about particular religious traditions. Thus if teaching comparative religious ethics is not to be superficial, it will typically require the kind of sustained attention to the particularities of religious traditions that is supplied by this trilogy.

Fasching and deChant's approach seeks to encourage teachers of comparative religious ethics to see their proper tasks in the classroom as not only description and analysis but also constructive, normative argument. The primary goal of their volume is to get students to ask the question of how we ought to live. Put more strongly, their goal is not simply to help students appreciate or empathetically understand differences between traditions, but to provide them with tools to help them distinguish religious ethical teachings that are healing from those that are poisonous. Thus this book raises the question whether teachers of comparative religious ethics should engage in advocacy. The question is not new, but Fasching and deChant emphasize that today we teach in a context of cultural and ethical relativism. "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 one another" (4; see also the chapter by Fasching in Twiss and Grelle).

If I can say a word in support of this understanding of comparative religious ethics, it is worth noting that in a typical class on philosophical ethics, students not only compare and contrast the positions of Mill and Kant and Aristotle but also evaluate them and argue that some help us flourish while others are flawed or inadequate. This is not merely "advocacy," but rather an intellectually valuable aspect of studying ethics in the sense that the students of ethics who engage in normative argument learn skills (like the evaluation of the cogency of religious ethical positions) that those who eschew evaluation do not. In fact, unless the teacher assumes that the religious ethical positions really cannot be argued for (a presupposition often held in religious studies), it seems strange to exclude discussion of how one might do this.

Moreover, in considering Fasching and deChant's proposal that we should construct classrooms that challenge relativism and enable normative argument, it is important to see how academia is an institution that plays an integral role in reproducing capitalist practices of production and consumption. As Mark D. Wood has argued, corporations today commodify diversity, including religious diversity, and they seek employees who are able to expand and manage markets across cultures. Ancient religious practices, so the catalogues in my mail tell me, are good for

relieving stress and for heightening my sexual enjoyment. In this light, classes that compare religious ways of life that encourage relativism, religious pluralism, and multiculturalism can represent "an education appropriate for empire" (Wood 148; cf. Surin). If such classes are to contribute to campaigns for social justice, they "must break with corporate-sponsored, liberal-pluralist versions of multiculturalism that abstract the study of religion and culture from struggles over power and reduce the ethical project of religious studies to learning how to appreciate different ways of being spiritual" (Wood 130). Lee Yearley's observations about relativistic styles of teaching comparative religious ethics nicely support this claim from a psychological point of view, as he argues that such courses help college students who are or hope to become members of the bourgeoisie to justify "a 'status quo' in themselves" (Yearley 166). In sum, then, Fasching and deChant's pedagogical goal of helping students assess religious ethical claims may be, to use their own term, "audacious." But the actual evaluations that they offer are not imperialistic but tentative (for an example, see their use of Gandhi to critique Thich Nhat Hanh [161-3]), and can serve students as fine illustrations of how to engage cross-cultural ethical arguments.

Though Wolfe and Gudorf's text certainly includes a wealth of information about different religious ethical traditions and also can help students develop their cognitive abilities in the analysis and argument of ethical issues, the book has a different primary goal. Their book is the most pluralistic of these four approaches, the least likely to lead students to think of any tradition as monolithic. I believe that this reflects their primary goal of helping students develop empathetic understanding of what it is like to confront moral dilemmas as a member of another religion. Better than any other approach considered here, the case studies approach encourages students to imaginatively step into another's situation and to think through ethical issues from the perspective of people in circumstances unlike their own. Because the case studies do not simply present information but introduce characters who get into dire straits, Wolfe and Gudorf actually employ story-telling in a way that Fasching and deChant do not. The use of case studies, as I noted, also runs the risk of leaving readers with the sense that everything about comparative religious ethics is ambiguous and that conclusions turn largely on one's personality. But there will be some teachers for whom a decreased attention to moral codes, an increased recognition of the interdisciplinary nature of comparative work, and, yes, an appreciation of ambiguity will be welcome.

The goal of Twiss and Grelle's book is to connect the academic work and methods of reflection found in comparative religious ethics to actual communities working to listen to marginalized people, to relieve poverty, to protect the environment, and in general "to call the world to shared responsibility for the alleviation of suffering and oppression" (2). Though all the texts considered here seek to have an effect on students' moral practice at least implicitly, that is this book's primary aim.

In this context it is worth returning to Grelle's proposal that comparative religious ethicists can and should develop themselves as public intellectuals. Grelle criticizes the professionalization and specialization that has led to the decline in public intellectual activity among academics, and he argues that comparative religious ethics can become a new, socially responsible field (like women's studies, environmental studies, and African American studies) where academic and

public goals intersect. He proposes first that, within the university, the activities of teaching and writing can contribute to the search for practical strategies for addressing moral issues in the contemporary world. One's teaching can contribute *if* teachers "think more explicitly about how the content and style of their teaching is related to their own and their students' responsibilities as citizens" (41), for example, by employing the hermeneutical-dialogical approach described above. One's writing and research can also contribute, if academics can find the ability and the will to speak in a language that is intelligible to their fellow citizens. Second, Grelle proposes that, outside the university, comparative religious ethicists can contribute to the interfaith movement and they can help to integrate the study of religion into the public schools in a responsible way by helping schools become familiar with the relevant constitutional principles, by teaching teachers about religions and how they are studied, and by helping to develop curricular materials. Others have claimed that the study of religious ethics can itself be a moral praxis; Grelle's reasonable and clear proposals show what that claim can mean in concrete terms.

Grelle is right that professors often fail to see that their work as teachers can serve a common good, and his vision of comparative religious ethicists as public citizens can be a powerful source of renewal. If I can add to this vision, however, there is little discussion by Grelle of the value of explaining religions in terms of their social or economic causes. As Judith Plaskow has said, "students should be encouraged ... not only to bring 'religious resources to bear on important social problems' but also to bring critical theory to bear on religious ideas, institutions, and practices that conflict with the practical realization of democracy, equality, and justice" (quoted in Wood 157). This lack of critique of religion is inappropriate for public intellectuals, including religious public intellectuals. Moreover, Grelle's model of "citizenship" can in some situations blunt one's moral imagination and praxis—as Grelle himself might agree. "The goal, in other words, ought not to be one of [becoming or] helping students become 'good citizens', a goal that guides many of the scholars associated with the service learning movement, but, rather, to become, to borrow [Martin Luther] King's more productive formulation, 'creatively maladjusted', 'transformed non-conformists'" (Wood 152). In the end, however, the greatest strength of Twiss and Grelle's hermeneutical-dialogical approach to teaching comparative religious ethics is that it does not exclude those who are creatively maladjusted. On the contrary, it provides a procedure for the most diverse communities to overcome their lack of understanding of their neighbors in order to think and act together on the problems they share.

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