

**Ethics With and Without God by David W. Gill (1997)**

Published in David W. Gill, editor, *Should God Get Tenure? Essays on Religion & Higher Education* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997). Pp. 129-145

There are two reasons why ethics (morality, values, etc.) has become such a hot topic in both the academy and the larger society over the past twenty years or so. First, the inventory of difficult ethical dilemmas has been growing exponentially, largely because of the development of technology in various domains. We are faced with many new quandaries for which there is no, or inadequate, moral guidance about right and wrong. Often the stakes, in terms of potential harm as well as benefit, are extraordinarily high.

Take health care and medicine as an example. New medical technologies have raised acute questions about our tampering with human life, especially at its beginnings and endings. Genetic research and therapy pose challenging new issues. The AIDS epidemic, and the general, growing problem of basic health care for the poor and underinsured, raise questions about the just allocation of health care resources. Political and legal issues---about patient self-determination, rights, privacy and confidentiality, about public health concerns such as smoking and sexually transmitted disease, and about malpractice judgments---are laden with ethical values. Modifications in health care delivery institutions and in the roles and relationships of health care providers are also morally problematic.

What is happening in health care has parallels in the business world, in entertainment and the media, and in information technology, to mention only some of the most obvious domains. The question is "what is the right thing to do?"---not just "what is possible?" or "what is legal?" How do we decide questions of right and wrong? good and evil? justice and compassion? How do we resolve differences of moral values and convictions? Still more profound than the search for resolution of our quandaries and dilemmas are questions about our moral character. What kind of people are we? From what stance, with what vision, from within what communities---do we live out the moral life?

Much of our contemporary ethical challenge arises, then, because of this plethora of novel problems, for which we have no inherited or intuitively obvious moral wisdom. Today's moral landscape is extraordinarily complex. The sheer number of problems can be overwhelming; the consequences of our actions can be horrifying if we do not choose wisely.

The second reason for the surge of interest in ethics is the lack of consensus about basic moral values in our culture (or even in a given profession or business or neighborhood). Many of our modern issues are global and international; locally, we live and work in what have become very diverse, multi-cultural communities. Thus, our inventory of ethical dilemmas does not present itself to homogeneous communities with long traditions of shared values and agreed-upon structures and processes for moral guidance and resolution. We are not all Italian Catholics, or Russian Jews, or Kantian males, or Ivy-league-trained Democrats, or anything else. Our ethnic and cultural identities, our extended families and social or religious group affiliations still matter to many of us. But today's moral challenges usually present themselves to diverse communities which lack agreed-upon, shared ethical starting points. Diversity can be illuminating; often, though, it is an impediment to dilemma resolution. We can't apply our moral wisdom to a given problem of we can't agree on what that moral wisdom is.

There are, of course, other factors beside these two great challenges (so many new problems, so little consensus) that add to our difficulty. The speed and intensity of modern life conspire against deep study, reflection, and conversation---exactly the elements necessary for wisdom. The omnipresent messages of mass culture usually appeal to (and shape) a rather simplistic, self-centered, set of values. Geographic (and other forms of) mobility tends to detach people from whatever moral resources might have assisted them in families and communities left far behind. Moral formation of children by parents has been undermined by economic and other trends.

All of the foregoing is old news, at this stage. Vigorous efforts are being undertaken to respond to our ethical crises. In the world of business and the professions, ethics codes are being elaborated and revised, ethics committees and experts are put in place, and the character of the corporate culture and its participants is being examined. Conferences,

colloquia, and workshops address such questions and issues on a regular basis. In the academic world, ethics courses and centers have proliferated. Ethics-across-the-curriculum is now a common program in many schools. And before this there was "values clarification" to help with personal moral identity. Books and journals on ethical subjects are churning off the presses at an amazing rate.

As far as it goes, then, the current resurgence of interest in ethics is an encouraging feature of academic and vocational life today. Better to face our issues directly than to avoid them and/or simply muddle through, guided only by legal, individual, technical, economic, or pragmatic judgments.

However, many of today's ethical efforts are undermined by a conscious attempt to bracket out religious perspectives. "Values" courses often insist that students leave religion outside the study. Applied ethics textbooks often argue that morality is not dependent on religion. Ethics codes normally do not invoke religious authority. Political and educational leaders have urged or required us to keep church and state separate---often improperly extending that to mean a separation between religion and public life.

In this essay I wish to argue that this strategy is a mistake: ethics is best pursued alongside of religion, *with* rather than *without* God. The choice of our gods inevitably affects or even implies the choice of our goods. Bracketing out the god-question is a serious if not fatal impediment to our resolving the questions of good and right. Historically, most ethical values have been inextricably embedded in a religious texture. What was good had everything to do with what was God. Even with the philosophers (not just the theologians) this was usually so. Reason was not a sufficient basis for Plato's ethics in the *Republic*; the "myth of Er" with its reincarnational themes, provides a religious context. Philosophers since the Enlightenment, such as Kant, Hume, and Nietzsche, have diverged from this tradition and tried to ground ethical values in something human or natural rather than in God and religion. But since philosophers do not rule the world, it is all the more important to pay attention to the ways real people actually do, in practice, link their goods and their gods, their ethics and their religion. Ethics without God (or religion) is an interesting philosophical exercise; ethics with God (and religion in some form or other) is about life and reality among the people.

### **Ethics Without God**

In his recent study of religion and American education, Warren Nord sums up our contemporary position: "The conventional wisdom now is that morality can be understood and taught without religion. But the problem is not just that religious accounts of morality are ignored, it is that they are rendered suspect at best, and matters of superstition at worst, by the secular worldview that pervades modern education."<sup>1</sup> British philosopher Peter Geach has written: "In modern ethical treatises we find hardly any mention of God; and the idea that if there really is a God, his commandments might be morally relevant is wont to be dismissed by a short and simple argument that is generally regarded as irrefutable."<sup>2</sup> Ethics is typically studied in way that banishes God and religion from the discussion. But as Stephen Carter has noted, "the truth---an awkward one for the guardians of the public square---is that tens of millions of Americans rely on their religious traditions for the moral knowledge that tells them how to conduct their lives."<sup>3</sup>

At a college I recently visited, the capstone "Senior Values Studies" course specifically stated in the orientation material, for both students and the faculty teaching team, that religious perspectives were not to enter the values discussions. A widely-used business ethics textbook devotes one page to the subject "Morality Needn't Rest on Religion" and concludes: "You cannot justify a moral principle simply by appealing to religion---for that will only persuade those who already agree with your particular interpretation of your particular religion. . . so it is human reason to which you will have to appeal in order to support your ethical principle."<sup>4</sup> These are relatively tame but typical examples of what Nord, Geach, and Carter describe.

Why is ethics approached in higher education without God or religion? Certainly part of the reason is a fear of encroaching on the separation of church and state: the church can teach religion but state-sponsored or funded schools cannot. The fear of appearing to "establish" or privilege one religion over another, or over those who adhere to none, has led to the preclusion of all religion from the classroom. Further, since multiculturalism and

diversity have become both facts and values in society and in higher education, we have become more concerned than ever that partisan religious convictions should not rear their divisive head.

This reaction is a mistake, however. A distinction must be made between *avoiding the establishment* of official churchly authority where it should not occur---and *preventing the free exercise* or expression of religious conviction by the people. A distinction must be made between *teaching religion* in the sense of indoctrination or propaganda---and *teaching about* religion. Furthermore, if education is preparation for real life and work, students will be entering a world in which they and others *will* (according to the data cited by Carter and others) often bring (or encounter) religiously-based values to the table---but they will have been prepared in college only by ethics and values courses which *refused* to examine the religion/morality connections.

A deeper reason why the religion and morality connection has been severed is philosophical. Since the Enlightenment, the philosophical (and hence ethical) authority of religion has been marginalized or eliminated. A non-religious foundation for ethics has been sought in nature, in reason, in social contracts, and in the intuition, feeling, or will of the individual. Ethical values and principles must be justified by their logical relationships, by their rationality, by their universalizability. Ethical norms that are embedded in traditions, in particular communities, or in the irrational or supernatural, have been found wanting by these standards.

Probably the most aggressive modern philosopher opposed to the link between ethics and any sort of theology is Kai Nielsen, the author of *Ethics Without God*. Nielsen argues that "no reality, no force or being or world ground, no matter how powerful or eternal, would be called 'God' unless that reality were taken to be good by the agent making that judgment. . . . This shows that our concept of goodness and our criteria for goodness are prior to and not dependent on our belief in the existence of some 'world ground' or 'transcendent being.'"<sup>5</sup> How would we recognize the God who is good if we did not already have a notion of goodness? Thus, Nielsen argues, morality is prior to, and not at all dependent on, religion or theology; in fact, the converse is true---religion is dependent on morality.

Nielsen repeats the same argument over and over in his text. But his point, finally, is not just that religion is insufficient or unnecessary or secondary to ethics---it is flatly false. "The fact [is] that these religious concepts are myths---sources of illusion and self-deception." "We have no evidence at all for believing in the existence or love of God." "The plain fact is that we do not have any grounds for believing that God exists or for believing that his purposes are good."<sup>6</sup> For Nielsen everything can be, and must be, explained within a naturalistic, rationalistic worldview, and that includes our ethics.

It is fair to say that *most* philosophers since the Enlightenment have given up on any sort of divine command or theologically-based ethics. They have generally rejected both the character of God and the structure of nature ("natural law"---sometimes given a theological spin as God's "general revelation") as bases for ethics. Often this rejection is on logical grounds: even if you could describe God or nature, you cannot logically derive an "ought" from an "is" (the "naturalistic fallacy"). What we are left with is ethics as a system of duties created and accepted by a social group (a social compact or contract) to order its survival and promote its flourishing. Or, more cynically, we are left with ethics as a purely personal intuition or preference. Modern philosophers often commend rationality, logic, universalizability, coherence, and/or personal authenticity as criteria for the construction or justification of ethics.

This rather breezy sketch does not do justice to the sophistication and variety of post-Enlightenment moral philosophy. Nevertheless, it is this sort of philosophical picture that lies in the background, implying much of the modern search for an ethics without God or religion.

It is not my agenda to argue that *only* God or religion provides moral guidance. It is foolish to deny that there are secular, non-religiously-based, ethics. Nor can we say that religious commitment and ethical performance are coordinated. Many non-religious ethical arguments are admirable and persuasive; many non-religious persons exhibit salutary moral behavior. Many theological ethical arguments are weak and unpersuasive; many religious persons behave shamefully. These are not the issues.

Our question is whether ethics *must* always proceed *without* God, as Kai Nielsen argues forthrightly, and as our ethics and values courses often suggest in practice. To this the answer is No; philosophically and historically, God and ethics, religion and morality, can be, and have been, legitimately linked together. The worldview of a dogmatic philosophical naturalism is clearly one obstacle that must be addressed. But it is impossible to conclusively, logically prove to all rational persons, that God (or the supernatural) exists or doesn't exist---or that a supernatural God could (or has) in some way broken into our natural order with divine moral guidance. Any decision on these matters is a product of more than simple logic; it depends on our reason but also on our presuppositions, our temperament, and our experience.

Theories (metaphysical, theological, naturalistic, or otherwise) relate to life like shoes to feet; they need to "fit" the "facts" as carefully as possible; more than one style of shoe will fit the same foot; but ultimately the test is not logic and abstract measurement but "walking." Many (most?) people find it best to wear a "shoe" with a religious/theological dimension; it fits their life best, it is most comfortable; it facilitates their movement and work; it protects them best; they like best its aesthetics and style. Does our academic "dress code" ban "religious shoes" from the ethics classroom?

Another way to approach arguments like Nielsen's is to point out that the moral reasoning does not normally occur as he specifies (and it rarely will except in certain ivory tower enclaves). This is the historical argument. The moral life does not consist of a series of discrete logical exercises, abstracted from life. We do not begin with a major premise, add a minor premise, and seek a logical conclusion. We are not isolated, a-historical atoms confronting a *tabula rasa* on which we sort through abstract statements. Our premises are connected to the messy-ness of life, to persons and communities; our logic or reasoning is affected by our interests and our stories. Nielsen's argument is interesting and important; it is not, however, an adequate account of ethics---or of the complex relations of religion to morality. In an adequate account of how people's moral lives actually are lived, religion will often play an integral role.

Philosopher William Frankena has argued: "Those who think that morality is dependent on religion need not and do not always mean that it is logically dependent on religion. They may mean only that it is *causally* or *historically* dependent on religion, or that it is *motivationally* or *psychologically* dependent on religion."<sup>7</sup> While, for Frankena, the *logical* dependence of morality on religion is unproven, "it may still be that no adequate ethics can be developed without the help of religious beliefs as premises in addition to certain basic ethical ones . . . [and] for the development of its working rules and conclusions, or at least some of them."<sup>8</sup>

The philosophical door that Frankena shows to be open has been walked through by moral philosophers such as Iris Murdoch, Richard Mouw, Robert Merrihew Adams, Peter Geach, and Dewi Z. Phillips---each of whom, in their various ways, has proposed philosophically responsible accounts of a constructive relation between God and ethics. Banishing God from our discussions of ethics and values is not a philosophical requirement.

### **Ethics With God**

Perhaps the best known way of representing the religion/morality option has been to speak of "divine command" theories of ethics. In this model, ethical principles concerning right and wrong, obligation and prohibition, are supplied their authority and their content by God's word to us. The Ten Commandments are a famous example. It will surprise no one that for multitudes of people today, God's commandments (generally meaning those given in sacred scripture although other variations are possible within this theory) remain crucial, foundational, and even decisive for the moral life.

It is unlikely that very many adherents to the "Divine Command" approach will give it up because of Kai Nielsen's arguments! What is possible, and I believe necessary, is to assist such moral agents to explore their traditions more carefully and deeply, to consider how their various commands may relate or even conflict with each other, to practice the application of their commands to specific cases, and to discuss how their moral perspective would interface with the convictions and practices of others not sharing their perspective. These are not negligible tasks and it is tragic to think that such work is excluded from the academic study of ethics, leaving such moral agents to go it alone outside of class.

A second way God and religion are related to ethics is in terms of the formation of moral character. Stanley Hauerwas, Gilbert Meilander, Peter Kreeft, and others, argue, I think rightly, that the relationship to God and to the story and contemporary experience of the community of faith transforms moral character. God and religion affect one's disposition and stance, one's vision and orientation, one's traits and habits. Edmund Pincoffs criticizes the reduction of the moral life to "quandary ethics." "If my personal ideals and my conception of myself as a moral agent are to be excluded from consideration as merely personal; if nothing is to remain but considerations which have to do with the situation as it would appear to anyone regardless of his former character; then the decision-process has been distorted in the interest of a mistaken conception of ethics. The legal analogy has been taken too seriously."<sup>9</sup>

Thus, religiously-based ethics do not just provide principles for deciding what to do; they often affect even more vigorously who we are and what our communities are like. Despite the "quandary-," "dilemma-," or "case-orientation" of so much ethical study today, there is a growing movement to restore some emphasis to personal character and to corporate culture. For many of our students, such moral identity is closely related to their relationships to God and communities of faith. How tragic if we insist that this go unarticulated and unexamined in our universities because God-talk is prohibited.

A third way God and religion are related to ethics has to do with justification and motivation. The questions are "on what grounds, by what authority, for what reasons, are these values (virtues, duties, etc.) morally obligatory and true?"---and "why should I be moral, why should I cultivate these virtues or follow these principles of right and wrong?" These are two distinguishable but related sets of questions. Even if Kai Nielsen were right that the content of our ethics cannot be derived from God and religion, the latter might well be what justifies and motivates ethical behavior.

Most religious people believe in some sort of accountability to God, sometimes expressed in terms of punishments and rewards. Often they also believe in accountability to a community of faith. Our discussions of why we accept certain moral values, and why we choose to live according to them, need to make room for the justifications and motivations brought to class by religious students. Alongside other answers to these questions, the religious answers deserve some critical attention.

Glenn Tinder's *Atlantic Monthly* article, "Can We Be Good Without God?" raises the justification and motivation questions in a provocative way: "The question that secularists have to answer is whether these values can survive without these particular roots. In short, can we be good without God? Can we affirm the dignity and equality of individual persons---values we ordinarily regard as secular---without giving them transcendental backing. Today these values are honored more in the breach than in the observance."<sup>10</sup> Iris Murdoch argues the motivation issue in her *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*: "Religious belief may be a stronger motive to good conduct than non-religious idealism. . . High morality without religion is too abstract, high morality craves for religion. Religion symbolizes high moral ideas which then travel with us and are more intimately and accessibly effective than the unadorned promptings of reason. Religion suits the image-making human animal."<sup>11</sup> Whether one agrees with Tinder and Murdoch or not, they raise an important point for discussion. If we don't have God or religion, what or who will motivate our goodness?

### **Substitutes for God and Religion in the Moral Life**

Another, more controversial, angle of vision on the subject of religion and morality has to do with our definition of religion and God. David Little and Sumner B. Twiss, Jr., argue that "religion 'functions' to resolve certain distinctive problems in the lives of individuals and social groups. . . anxieties about certain 'boundary situations' in human life and experience." This includes trying to make sense of the natural world, its existence, purposes, processes, and events, trying to cope with suffering and death, and trying to manage the ambiguities and puzzles inherent in human conduct. "Religion copes with these problem in three ways: conceptually, emotionally, and practically." While a specific notion of "God" cannot be required (Buddhism has none) in the definition, they like the notion of "sacred authority" to distinguish religion from other personal and social philosophies of life.<sup>12</sup>

Social philosopher and critic Jacques Ellul argues that human beings always have or create a more-or-less integrated combination of (1) something treated as "the sacred," (2)

moral duties that spin off from that sacred, (3) a system of explanatory myths, and (4) religious rites and practices. In our secularized post-Christendom epoch, Ellul argues, technology and the nation-state are the most prominent loci of the sacred, although many other religious phenomena continue to be popular.<sup>13</sup>

Robert Bellah and others have made the term "civil religion" common in our vocabulary. In this context, we could say that the nation serves as the sacred; historic texts such as the Declaration of Independence, the Gettysburg Address, or the Communist Manifesto serve as the "Bible" to which appeal is made for ultimate values, for mission, and for authoritative direction. Great patriots or revolutionary heroes of the past serve as saints, national holidays become holy days for festivals, political leaders serve as a priesthood, and hymns like the "Internationale" and "The Star-Spangled Banner," help us voice our worship and give us the requisite chill up the spine.

Thus, a functional/structural definition of religion raises provocative questions: what do we worship? i.e., to what do we do sacrifice and treat with holy respect at the center of our lives? What receives our praise? To what do we look for salvation from our problems and perplexities? What inspires in us both awe and fear, attraction and devotion? What gives unity, meaning, and direction to our lives? This, one can argue, is whatever occupies the "god-place" in our existence. Some are polytheists, with several gods in their pantheon. And certainly, in traditional religions as well as their substitutes, we sometimes disagree with or disobey our gods. We profane our sacred from time to time; but all the same, each of us has something that functions as our sacred.

And if religion consists of doctrines (and myths) as well as practices, don't we all in effect have, in greater or lesser degrees of development, religious doctrines and practices? We make sacrificial offerings, develop rituals, consult sacred literature, revere saints, revile devils and the reprobate, and, often enough, enjoy something that serves as sacred music, dance, and festival. And we have "church"---we belong to communities of "fellow-believers" where we can share our life-transforming commitment to the same sacred, teach one another, experience approval and discipline, share our sorrows and comfort one another, and renew our hope.

It is in such a frankly "religious" context that our moral values and identities are formed and shared. Our values spin out of our religion, our ethics from our god. The point is that *functionally* and *structurally* human beings are religious, that something occupies the places of the sacred, myth, and ritual, and that our fundamental moral and ethical values are directly related to this. Therapeutic and "recovery" groups, such as Alcoholics Anonymous, often take on this religious role. Any ideological "ism" (feminism, environmentalism, racism and sexism in their multiple forms, etc.) can fill the void left in the absence of traditional religion. The technophiles of our era are one of our most religious groups. All one has to do is pay attention to the value-laden judgments of members of these various groups to see how morality is linked to religion.

In this perspective, refusing to call these phenomena religious gets us nowhere. Refusing to acknowledge our gods is disingenuous. If something or someone is treated as the sacred center of existence, the object of devotion, the focal point of knowledge, salvation, truth, and meaning, the inspiration and guide of life---it is a god. Just "take its name in vain" in the presence of one of the true believers---just debunk it, doubt it, or profane it, and see what happens. Listen to its "evangelists" and "prophets" earnestly come after you (you pagan unbeliever!), if you doubt its worthiness. As the saying goes, "If it walks like a duck, quacks like a duck, looks like a duck . . ."

Against this perspective, philosopher William Frankena rejects the argument that "every ethical system or moral code depends on some set of ultimate beliefs about man, the meaning of the universe, and his place in it; therefore every ethical code or system depends on a religion of some kind." It is a "ploy" to be "claiming that any such basic commitment or postulate is *ipso facto* an act of religious faith, concluding that therefore every ethics rests on religion." Frankena's problem is with "defining 'religion' in a very wide sense---in such a wide sense that any basic ethical or value commitment is by definition an act of religious faith."<sup>14</sup> Frankena wants to retain a "theistic" connotation to religion.

Interestingly enough, atheist philosopher Annette Baier argues the opposite of Frankena. "I shall suggest that the secular equivalent of faith in God, which we need in morality as well as in science or knowledge acquisition, is faith in the human community and

its evolving procedures---in the prospects for many-handed cognitive ambitions and moral hopes. . . It will be faith, not knowledge, which will replace religious faith . . . faith in a community of just persons."<sup>15</sup>

In summary, it is, I think, unacceptably arrogant and imperialistic to *require* that those who reject conventional or traditional religion accept the label of "religious" in the ways permitted by the definitions of Little, Twiss, Ellul, Bellah, Baier and others. If someone wants to be recognized as "secular" or "non-religious" or "atheistic" we must respect those choices. Nevertheless, there is a rich and potentially productive and illuminating discussion possible about what sorts of ultimate commitments and values, what kinds of practices, and what kinds of communities fulfill the human needs met for others by God and religion. This discussion bears powerfully on the way we do ethics and construe our moral identities.

### Teaching Ethics With, and Without, God

As Warren Nord has recently written, "we are deeply divided about how to think about and justify moral judgments; a good education should take the alternatives seriously. Students must be taught something of religious positions on controversial issues and, more important, religious ways of making sense of morality just as they are (inevitably) taught something of secular positions and ways of understanding morality." "Contemporary American education betrays a want of moral seriousness. . . [E]ducation is first and foremost a moral enterprise. . . The idea that students can be educated about how to live, what kind of a person to be, and how to act, *without* taking religion seriously is at last illiberal and quite possibly absurd."<sup>16</sup>

Three recent introductory textbooks on ethics exemplify a more adequate approach. Lawrence M. Hinman, in his *Ethics: A Pluralistic Approach to Moral Theory*, argues that "one of the central moral issues that we all face, whether we espouse religious beliefs or not, is how we ought to deal with the diversity of religious beliefs."<sup>17</sup> Hinman makes four suggestions for our teaching goals: (1) respect (not necessarily approval) for others' religious beliefs, (2) understanding of religious worldviews and comparative clarification of our own, (3) seeking common ground, and (4) exploring how we will deal with possible conflict and disagreement.

Christina Sommers and Fred Sommers, in *Vice and Virtue: Introductory Readings in Ethics*, have assembled a great collection of brief readings on good and evil, virtue and vice, moral education and motivation, moral doctrine and theory, character and society---from not only philosophers such as Aristotle, Kant, Nietzsche, Singer, and Foot, but from the Bible, Melville, Augustine, Tolstoy, Camus, the Bhagavad-Gita, and other sources of ethical reflection and insight.<sup>18</sup> Gabriel Palmer-Fernandez's *Moral Issues: Philosophical and Religious Perspectives* argues for a robust pluralistic approach to ethics, and brings together an outstanding, diverse collection of essays on foundations (Kai Nielsen gets his say along with others!), and on topics ranging from abortion to euthanasia, sex, war and peace, hunger, and justice.<sup>19</sup>

In classroom settings, therefore, I am arguing that we should *invite* students, even *require* students, to reflect on the religious question, understood in the broadest possible sense of what is treated as sacred, what is at the interpretive and meaning center of worldviews and lifestyles, and what basic presuppositions and faith assumptions are held. First of all, how are these questions answered by students in their own personal existence? What do they treat as god in their life---and why? What, in other words, is their ultimate purpose in life? Who or what do they wish to serve with their life, energy, and talents? Some may say Jesus Christ. Others Allah. Still others may say humanity or their ethnic community or their family or even their self. Why do they make this choice? And how will they prepare themselves to best serve this god? What are the moral principles, virtues of character, and methods of moral discernment and action that grow out of these fundamental stances? These are questions of faith as well as reason, of theology as well as philosophy. They are fundamental to an adequate education in ethics.

Since we do not live and work in religiously homogeneous communities, it is then essential to raise these "religious" questions with respect to those of different perspective from our own. Learning to listen to how others in class answer these questions is a start. Reading and encountering representatives of other faiths and other philosophies extends

this learning process in preparation for the real world. A basic understanding of Islamic ethics, for example, is just as important as an understanding of Kant or Mill.

When we discuss cases (quandaries, dilemmas) in ethics, we need to hear how these might be analyzed and resolved within a Jewish or Buddhist or Christian moral framework---as well as how we might approach them with a deontological or utilitarian or egoist perspective. Our discussions of public ethics, of moral education in the public schools, of ethical challenges in business, health care, law, politics, and the mass media, need to address the possibilities for common ground and united action. They also need to discuss how we can best deal with our differences of opinion, especially those differences that are deeply-held and appear to be non-negotiable.

The role of an ethics teacher is not to indoctrinate a captive audience. But neither is it to deny one's own religious/moral identity and pretend to be above all normative conviction. Much better for the instructor to share his or her own perspective when appropriate and engage in careful self-critical analysis as a model for the students. We need to educate students to be self-critical, to articulate their convictions and reflect on their grounding and consequences. We are not just sponsors and referees in class, we are models.

If the "gods" and ultimate "goods" of our colleges and universities are such things as truth, knowledge, skills, personal growth, and social justice and peace, then it is unethical for us as professors to disallow an appreciative and critical examination of the ultimate commitments that in one way or another undergird all morality. *As a Christian* I can say that, for me, ethics without the God of Jesus Christ, seems a pale and weak substitute for the Jesus-centered approach. That's my viewpoint and I think it is true. But *as a professor* who teaches students of all types and persuasions, I always stress that many people disagree with my personal perspective---but that everyone has *something* that functions in much the same way Jesus does for me. And we cannot study ethics without paying attention to, and critically examining, what this is.

---

<sup>1</sup>Warren Nord, *Religion and American Education: Rethinking a National Dilemma* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1995), p. 341.

<sup>2</sup>Peter Geach, "The Moral Law and the Law of God," in Paul Helm, editor, *Divine Commands and Morality* (Oxford, 1981), p. 165.

<sup>3</sup>Stephen L. Carter, *The Culture of Disbelief: How American Law and Politics Trivialize Religious Devotion* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), p. 67. Carter says that "roughly half of Americans" report that their "religious tradition is very important in reaching moral decisions." p. 56.

<sup>4</sup>William H. Shaw and Vincent Barry, *Moral Issues in Business* (Belmont CA: Wadsworth, 6th ed., 1995), p. 11. Shaw and Barry, whose otherwise fine textbook I have often used, are arguing against the necessity and sufficiency of religiously-based ethics for a pluralistic business environment. They have a point but it needs to be nuanced to allow that for many individuals in business, and for some companies, religiously-based ethics is relevant and even indispensable within this pluralistic mix.

<sup>5</sup>Kai Nielsen, *Ethics Without God* (Buffalo NY: Prometheus Books, revised edition, 1990), p. 31.

<sup>6</sup>Nielsen, pp. 84, 98-99.

<sup>7</sup>William K. Frankena, "Is Morality Logically Dependent on Religion?" in *Religion and Morality* eds. Gene Outka and John P. Reeder, Jr. (Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1973), p. 296. Outka and Reeder's collection of essays remains an outstanding resource for this discussion.

<sup>8</sup>Frankena, p. 315. Frankena does not argue that religion *is* necessarily connected to ethics in these ways, but that it *may* be. Such openness is the point of my chapter.

<sup>9</sup>Edmund Pincoffs, "Quandary Ethics," in Stanley Hauerwas and Alasdair MacIntyre, eds., *Revisions: Changing Perspectives in Moral Philosophy* (Notre Dame, 1983), p. 100. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, 2nd ed., 1984) and *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* (Notre Dame, 1990) is the moral philosopher leading the rediscovery of character/virtue ethics.

<sup>10</sup>Glenn Tinder, "Can We Be Good Without God?" in *The Atlantic Monthly* (December 1989), p. 70. Actually Tinder's article would be a good class reading in ethics and values classes.

<sup>11</sup>Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (New York: Penguin, 1992), p. 484.

<sup>12</sup>David Little and Sumner B. Twiss, Jr., "Basic Terms in the Study of Religious Ethics," in Gene Outka and John P. Reeder, Jr., editors, *Religion and Morality* (Garden City NY: Anchor, 1973), pp. 60-62.

<sup>13</sup>Jacques Ellul, *The New Demons* trans. by C. Edward Hopkin (New York: Seabury, 1975).

<sup>14</sup>William Frankena, p. 310-11.

<sup>15</sup>Annette Baier, "Secular Faith," in Hauerwas and MacIntyre, eds., *Revisions*, pp. 204-5.

<sup>16</sup>Warren Nord, pp. 342, 351.



---

<sup>17</sup> Lawrence M. Hinman, *Ethics: A Pluralistic Approach to Moral Theory* (New York: Harcourt Brace, Jovanovich, 1994), p. 99.

<sup>18</sup> Christina Sommers and Fred Sommers, eds., *Vice and Virtue in Everyday Life* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 3rd edition, 1993).

<sup>19</sup> Gabriel Palmer-Fernandez, *Moral Issues: Philosophical and Religious Perspectives* (Upper Saddle River NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1996).