

Chapter 2: Religion and Global Ethics

Learning Outcomes

- Describe the challenge of developing a global ethical perspective.
- Explain the idea of universal human rights.
- Define key terms: cosmopolitan, civil disobedience, pluralism, secularism, humanism, and Eurocentrism.
- Evaluate the divine command theory of ethics.
- Differentiate between humanistic and religious approaches to ethics.
- Apply the argument made in Plato's *Euthyphro*.
- Defend your own ideas about ethics, religion, and global cultural diversity.

Associated Readings

1. Plato, *Euthyphro*.
2. Harris, "Letter to a Christian Nation" (2006).
3. Gandhi, "Religion and Truth" from *All Men Are Brothers*.

Getting Started

You might begin by discussing how the diversity apparent in our increasingly integrated world both improves relationships and creates strife. The U.N.'s *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* aims for global agreement about basic rights, but there are outstanding disagreements about the nature of those rights, such as the roles of women and expression of irreligious beliefs. Ask students for examples from the news about the clash between freedom of expression and religious conviction. They may then begin to grapple with the issue of how ethics intersects with religion and, especially, with religious fundamentalism.

Key Terms

Cosmopolitanism: the idea that there are (or ought to be) universal norms that unite people across the globe.

Enlightenment: a period of fertile development of Western culture and philosophy, during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

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Civil disobedience: breaking a law in a civil manner that retains fidelity to the system of justice and accepts punishment as an act of protest.

Ahimsa: term meaning nonviolence; associated with South Asian traditions such as Hinduism and Buddhism.

Divine command theory: the idea that ethical norms are ultimately based upon the authoritative decrees of God.

Religious pluralism: the idea that diverse religions provide multiple paths toward a common truth (associated with Gandhi).

Value pluralism: the metaethical idea that there is more than one objective value (associated with Ross).

Golden Rule: the idea that one ought to love one's neighbor as oneself or do unto others as we would have them do unto us.

Problem of evil: argument against the existence of God that claims that a good God would not permit evil but since evil exists, God must not exist (versus *theodicy*).

Theodicy: theoretical explanation of why a good God would permit evil; response to the *problem of evil*.

Original sin: Christian idea that human beings inherit a tendency to do evil from the original sin of Adam and Eve.

Secular ethics: approach to ethics that locates ethical norms in nonreligious principles acceptable to people from a variety of religions (versus *divine command theory*).

Toleration: attitude of forbearance or permissiveness for attitudes or behaviors that are disapproved; an open and nonjudgmental attitude.

Secularization: movement away from religious culture and toward a nonreligious public sphere.

Paradox of toleration: problem of whether one should tolerate those who are intolerant or who reject the idea of toleration.

Fundamentalism: the idea that truth is grounded in religious texts, traditions, and prophets.

Eurocentrism: attitude or practice of interpreting the world from a perspective that focuses primarily on European interests, values, and history.

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Answers to End of Chapter Review Exercises

1. An important challenge to the idea of a global ethic is how to reach common ground where it exists, while agreeing to disagree about the claim that ethical conduct must be derived from spiritual or religious duties. A global ethic may be based on rational justification of ethical ideas and behavior. This cosmopolitan hope has deep roots in Western history.
2. According to the U.N.'s *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, the nations of the world are supposed to share basic moral principles, despite our vast cultural, religious, and political differences. The *Declaration* upholds the inherent dignity of human beings and equal rights of men and women. This often clashes with the religious convictions of many people, who believe that free speech is contraindicated, especially in regard to religious criticism.

Much of the terminology about freedom of religion and morality is rooted in Western thinking. The Western historical narrative tends to tell a Eurocentric story about the development of tolerance, liberty and individual rights. To people who identify with non-Western religions and cultures, this approach reflects a predominantly Christian and European worldview.
3. Students' answers may vary.
4. One defense of the Divine Command Theory of Ethics is that if there were no God, then there would be no morality. Without God as a source for morality, there would be no eternal, absolute or objective basis for morality. Additionally, without a divine judge who gives out punishments and rewards in the afterlife, there would be no motivation to be ethical.

An argument against this theory is religious diversity. Given the broad array of religious beliefs throughout the world, and even the diversity of beliefs within each religion, it is difficult to determine which interpretation of religious doctrine truly reflects the divine will.

It is inaccurate to say that if there were no God, then everything would be permitted. Many ethical theories provide reasons and justifications for ethical principle without reference to God. This may explain why atheists usually agree that there is ample moral justification for why, as an example, murder is impermissible.
5. Students' answers may vary.
6. Socrates asks whether things are good because they are approved by the gods or whether the gods approve of them because they are good. To say that actions are good just because they are willed or approved by the gods or God seems to make morality arbitrary. Socrates believes that God or the gods condemn or disapprove of certain beliefs and actions because they are inherently bad. Therefore, we should also condemn such actions.

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This reasoning renders the morality of an action as being independent of the gods' judgment. Thus, Socrates' suggestion in *Euthyphro*, when he questions whether "the holy or pious is holy or pious because it is loved by the gods," may be read as a rejection of the divine command theory.

7. Students' answers may vary.
8. Students' answers may vary.

Questions for Further Thought

1. Kant thought that history would develop in a cosmopolitan direction. Do you think he was correct? Given the cultural and religious differences across the world, do you think his vision is possible?
2. Religion is at the center of many applied ethical topics. Give two recent examples from current events. How did religious ethics play a part in these events?
3. Do you believe that there are limits to toleration? Should we tolerate those who are intolerant of the very idea of toleration?

Answers to the Study Questions for Plato's, *Euthyphro*

1. According to Socrates, yes: even the gods disagree about what is just and unjust. This poses a problem for Euthyphro's first definition of piety, which says piety is "that which is dear to the gods," i.e., that which is approved by the gods. But, because what will be agreeable to one god will be disagreeable to another, some action could be both pious and impious at the same time according to Euthyphro's first definition. As a result, Euthyphro amends his definition of piety to be that which "all the gods approve of."
2. When Socrates asks "whether the pious or holy is beloved by the gods because it is holy, or holy because it is beloved of the gods," he suggests that being pious comes first. Something may first be pious or holy and, because of this, it is loved by the gods. Recalling the definition of a valid argument, given in Chapter 1, does Socrates' reasoning strike you as being valid? Why or why not?
3. During his discussion with Euthyphro, Socrates concludes that being loved is an attribute of holiness, not its essence. From this understanding, Socrates determines that what is necessary, to give an adequate definition of piety, is an explication of the essence of holiness. This is yet

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to be accomplished in *Euthyphro*, and remains a continuing question throughout the Platonic dialogues.

**Answers to the Study Questions for
Harris', "Letter to a Christian Nation" (2006)**

1. Harris suggests that it is a "ludicrous obscenity" to raise children to believe that they are Christian, Muslim, or Jewish because he believes the respect that humans "accord religious faith" is the greatest discouragement to "a public discourse that encourages critical thinking and intellectual honesty."
2. Harris claims that biological research suggests that religion "may have played an important role in getting large groups of prehistoric humans to socially cohere."
3. "Is religion an impediment to building a global society?" Students' answers may vary....

**Answers to the Study Questions for
Gandhi's, "Religion and Truth"**

1. According to Gandhi, there is a "permanent element in human nature which counts no cost too great in order to find full expression and which leaves the soul utterly restless until it has found itself, known its Maker and appreciated the true correspondence between the Maker and itself." Thus, Gandhi suggests a pluralistic understanding toward all of the world's religions. This type of understanding is fundamentally directed toward an ethical "core" in the world's religions.
2. Gandhi says *ahisma* is necessary because God cannot be realized by one who is not "pure of heart." Furthermore, for Gandhi, "purity of heart" is realized through a "faith which transcends reason."
3. The "permanent element in human nature" described above presupposes a "Maker" with which it seeks some kind of reconciliation. Thus, Gandhi suggests that a belief in God (the "faith which transcends reason") is the cornerstone of all religions.