# WHAT IS A RELIGIOUS ETHIC?

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ABSTRACT

One approach to the problem of differentiating a religious from a nonreligious ethic would be to formulate a definition of religion that would clearly distinguish between religious and nonreligious traditions; however, a broad definition of religion would include some moral traditions, such as Marxism, commonly thought to be forms of secular humanism. A second approach would argue that some moral beliefs are independent, both in content and justification, of religious convictions; such a set of moral beliefs could be described as a secular version of natural law. This approach would be rejected by those who argue that religious convictions go "all the way down." While the first can be debated by appealing to the heuristic value of various definitions of religion, the second involves familiar issues of moral epistemology. The author explores the consequences of holding a broad definition of religion and an "all the way down" epistemology.

KEY WORDS: *moral philosophy, natural law, ontology, religious ethics, secular humanism*

WHAT DO WE MEAN, OR SHOULD WE MEAN, when we speak of a religious ethic or a religious morality, in contrast, presumably, to one that is nonreligious or secular? Are some moral traditions religious and others not? Are some sorts of moral considerations religious and others not? Here at the outset I am not asking, What is "religious ethics" as a type of reflection? We need to ask first, if we want to know what the study of religious ethics is, whether it is worthwhile to call some moral traditions or considerations religious and others nonreligious. If we ask this question, then it seems that we are going to need a conception of what constitutes a religion.

Some conceptions of religion insist that a feature, such as an orientation to a transcendent reality or a nonconceptualizable mode of being, is at least a necessary condition of any "cultural system" that we would

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want to call religious.[1] On such a view, various forms of "secular humanism," including their moral dimensions, would not count as religious traditions. "Secular" here would signify precisely the absence of certain distinctive features in systems of belief and practice that may overlap in other respects with religions (see, for example, Greenawalt 1995, 5, 39). For example, a system could cope with suffering or guide followers to a vision of the good without orienting them to a transcendent reality or a nonconceptualizable mode of being.

In contrast, other conceptions of religion construe the defining feature or features more broadly. For example, some have held that to be called a religion, a system or tradition must (as a *necessary condition*) relate its adherents to what it takes to be the nature of reality. On such a conception of religion, any picture of the fundamental elements and powers in human nature and the cosmos could qualify as a vision of reality—for example, some forms of Marxism, as well as familiar forms, say, of Buddhism or theistic traditions.[2] In this essay, I want to sketch a conception of this second sort.[3] I will try to suggest the advantages of

1 The phrase "cultural system" is Clifford Geertz's (1973a). I will speak of both "system" and "tradition," on the assumption that the former is intended to suggest a "synchronic" and the latter a "diachronic" dimension of a set of beliefs and practices. Neither "system" nor "tradition," of course, should be taken to imply a precisely articulated logical whole; some systems/traditions are more like collages or congeries of elements. See also Geertz 1983, 1988.

2 Because Marxism, even if "cast as a religion," does not "speak to us about the ultimate facts of human existence," it "is not and cannot serve as a religion" argues Cornel West (1991, *xxvii–xxviii*). For West, Marxism is "social theory." Ninian Smart seems tempted to treat the "worldview" of Marxism as a religion, for it shares several of the structural features or dimensions of religions, including "a vision of reality as a whole" (1991, 6), but in the end he also demurs. Evidently this worldview fails to be religious because it lacks a dimension Smart regards as "crucial" (1991, 6): ". . . it is unrealistic to treat Marxism as a religion: though it possesses doctrines, symbols, a moral code, and even sometimes rituals, it denies the possibility of an experience of the invisible world" (1991, 11, cf. 15). Because he limits the concept of religion in this way, Smart has suggested that we should devise the fields of "worldview analysis" and "worldview evaluation" that would have a broader scope and include systems of belief and practice that share some but not all of the features of religions (see Smart 1983, 1987). In this article, I will argue that a reference to the unseen or invisible ought not to count as a necessary feature of religions. My general assumption is that while certain aspects of forms of secular humanism, such as Freudianism or Marxism, can be employed simply as social theory, these and similar systems or traditions have competed and do compete directly with theistic and other religions precisely because they often make claims about the good and the real (see Sturm 1985; Preuss 1987).

3 For our purposes here, I do not think we need distinguish between a definition, a concept, and a theory of religion. Each of these is different, of course: one defines terms, one employs concepts, and one develops theories. I will assume that when we talk about re-

adopting such a concept and will argue that if we do, various forms of secular humanism should be reclassified as religions.[4] My suggestion is not that we *must* conceive of religions in this way. There may be other good reasons—other advantages—for defining religion and, hence, religious moralities more narrowly.

Suppose one did want to employ a broad conception of religion such as the one I suggest here. The consequence would be that one way of distinguishing a religious ethic from a nonreligious one would not be available to us. I will also discuss a second way in which we might achieve such a distinction: a certain sense of natural law. I will suggest that *if* there is such a thing as an "autonomous" natural law, then we could refer to it as a nonreligious morality shared by various religious traditions. If we conceived of natural law as a set of moral beliefs that we can hold independently of our *religious* convictions about the good and the real, then presumably we could refer to this set of moral beliefs as a nonreligious ethic or morality. However, if the critics of such a view are correct, critics who argue that religious convictions go "all the way down," then this way of distinguishing a nonreligious from a religious ethic is not open to us either. I do not try to settle this question

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ligion and religions, we are engaging in these related activities. I offer here a familiar conception of religion as a human practice. While some such "theories" have mistaken what is merely local for what is universal and have failed to recognize "difference," their aim is to provide the most inclusive account possible. Moreover, the view that *denies* that there are underlying unities in human experience and, hence, insists on the local and particular, and the view that *affirms* that some unities exist, as I do here, are both "grand theories"; both are fallible and revisable.

4 My conception of religion is close to the late Arthur McGill's: "Let me characterize religion as the human response to those superior powers from which man sees himself and his communities deriving life and death. In this sense, religion does not primarily pertain to a certain set of objects defined in terms of their own natures, but rather to a mode of relationship between man and that which has his fulfillment or destruction at its disposal. This characterization of religion is certainly not final or completely comprehensive, but it does identify a feature conspicuous in all religions and one that is fundamental for the problem at hand" (McGill 1970, 106–7). I differ from McGill in that I do not insist that the "powers" or "sources of life and death" be "superior" or "supernal" (1970, 106, 107); on my view, the "powers" may be envisaged as "wholly" under human "disposal" and "control" (1970, 107; cf. 1970, 119–20). I firmly agree with McGill, nonetheless, on this: "Concern for truth is therefore absolutely central in religions—concern, not for any truth, but for truth regarding the sources of life and death. In other words, in religions, truth is not a matter of satisfying the intelligence but of fulfilling existence" (1970, 116–17). I do not endorse here, however, the thesis that religious truth is never gained by "autonomous" reason, but by "the revindicating action of the sources of life and death themselves" (1970, 119–21).

here but only point out the consequences of settling it one way or the other.

## 1. The Good

How might we develop a conception of religion that would help us answer our question, What is a religious ethic?[5] In what follows, I will suggest a broad thesis: Religions search for the good in light of the limits and possibilities of the real.[6] I will begin with the idea of a search for the good and then discuss visions of the real.[7]

Let us begin with the notion that religions provide us with a vision of the good. This does not necessarily signify a monistic or precisely ar-

5 Geertz offers, I believe, what could be called a heuristic definition (compare Little and Twiss 1978, chap. 1). In contrast to a "family resemblance" definition, he seems to suggest certain individually necessary and jointly sufficient features of what should be called religions, but he is not supposing that religion is subject to a natural-kind definition. Geertz's definition is heuristic in the sense that it is designed to highlight certain similarities and is justified by its descriptive and explanatory power, its ability to convince us that certain features shared by a range of traditions are more important than their differences. Some religious thinkers arguably do offer something closer to a natural-kind definition, however. For example, John Hick goes beyond an initial "family resemblance" approach to offer a general theory of human religions as responses to the real (1989, chap. 1).

6 If Paul Tillich meant by "ultimate concern" (1956) a concern for the ultimately good, for the ultimately real, and for their relation, then my concept is Tillichian in spirit. I refrain, however, from referring to the nature of things or the fundamental nature of reality as "ultimate reality" because the distinction between ultimate and penultimate may suggest the metaphor or model of a contingent or "phenomenal" layer of things behind or beneath which there is some noncontingent or "noumenal" reality. I want instead to convey the broad idea of those elements and powers that are *fundamental* in the sense that they are constitutive of the world as we experience it (however this is pictured) and they bear in a crucial way on our flourishing. (See Little and Twiss 1978. I am also indebted to Stanley Hauerwas's linking of "vision" and "virtue" (1974); however, I want my theory to be broad enough to encompass non-Aristotelian traditions.) I am not suggesting that all believers are metaphysicians in a reflective sense, but that metaphysical conceptions and affirmations—however variable and indeterminate—play a crucial role in religious practice.

7 Michael Moore wants to describe law in a way that locates its "essence" in "law's functions (or ends)" (1992, 188). He argues that a natural-law view of law makes a truth claim about "the nature of one of the things that exists in the world, namely, law" (1992, 200). Law is not a "natural kind" like water, but a functional kind (1992, 204–8) defined by its goal and whatever is necessary to achieve it (1992, 218). I do not argue here that religion is a functional kind in Moore's sense. While I think it is crucial to identify a certain pattern of activity—seeking the good in light of the real—I propose only what Moore would call an "instrumental" concept, a type of "linguistic convention" (1992, 203, 205). I do so because even if we can identify a certain goal-seeking activity in the world, it seems to me that we employ this conviction (and other related beliefs) to shape the concept that best serves *our* descriptive-explanatory purposes. In terms of Peter Berger's contrast between functional and "substantive" definitions of religion (1969, app. 1, 175–77), mine clearly falls on the functional end of the continuum.

ticulated hierarchical view of the good, but it would at least orient us to what is supremely good or most important. William Christian Sr. says that religions are concerned with what is "more important than anything else in the universe" (1964, 60ff., see also 4, 48, 103). He allows for religions exhibiting different "patterns of subordination" (1964, 65ff.), but he seems to hold that one is not religious if one merely believes that "some things are more important than other things" (1964, 69). To be religious, one must hold that *something* is "more important than everything else" and must relate that something (for example, a god or the gods taken as a collectivity or "nexus") to everything else in some sort of "pattern of subordination" (1964, 67–70). My concept of a vision of the good is less demanding: So long as some things are ranked over others, one has such a vision. Thus, I want to provide for having a plurality of unrelated goods, each of which is more important than other things. Like Christian, however, I do exclude the view that "nothing is important" and the view that "nothing is more important than anything else" (1964, 69). At the heart of religious experience is a desire to "find our life," as the Huichol say (Myerhoff 1974).[8]

Two important caveats: One of the questions Western traditions have debated is the relation of moral virtue or moral goodness to human flourishing as a whole. Is moral virtue a *sui generis* species of goodness, as Kantians argue, or is it a dimension of the good life as a whole, as Aristotelians tend to claim? For my purposes here, this is a debate within or between traditions.[9] I have tried to avoid either a Kantian view of morality (which asserts that moral duty is not part of "sensuous" happiness, but governs our search for it) or an Aristotelian view (which argues that moral virtue is a way to seek, and indeed forms part of, embodied happiness).[10] I assume that however we analyze and rank moral goodness, it will be part of the good we seek.[11] Even Kant, of course,

8 On seeking salvation as "new life," Gerardus Van der Leeuw writes, "[I]n this respect all religion, with no exception, is the religion of deliverance" (1963, 681–82). J. Samuel Preus quotes Luther: "A god is that to which one looks for all good and in which we find refuge in every time of need . . ." (1987, 176 n. 33).

9 It is difficult, of course, to identify the boundaries of traditions. Lutherans, for example, have internal debates (within traditions), and they also debate with Presbyterians (between traditions), yet we would also speak of a larger Protestant tradition that includes both Lutherans and Presbyterians, and a larger one still that includes all Christians. Should we speak of subtraditions?

10 For contemporary debates about the adequacy of this contrast, see Engstrom and Whiting 1996.

11 Here I have used "morality" in a heuristic sense to suggest some set of prescriptive practices that shape character and conduct and serve certain social functions, for example, providing norms for the distribution of the benefits and burdens of cooperative activity

considered happiness that is proportionate to virtue to be the highest good and postulated a transcendent force to achieve it, thus giving his version of the relation of the good to the real.

Second, I think we must also distinguish between a desire to grasp and achieve the good and a desire to achieve *eudaimonia,* that is, human flourishing, well-being, or the good life (whether this is understood in unitary fashion or whether some sharp distinction is made between nonmoral and moral goods). The latter (flourishing) usually connotes the proper fulfillment of desire, a process in which one seeks and achieves characteristic human excellences (including moral goodness). The former (a vision of the Good) could include some version of *eudaimonia,* but it could also encompass visions where it is precisely the desire for *eudaimonia* itself that is seen as the final obstacle, the source of suffering, and that is said to be transcended in some salvific state. Thus, some Buddhists seem to seek a state beyond the desire for *eudaimonia.* These Buddhists, nonetheless, in my terminology, have a vision of the good. Such Buddhists apparently desire *eudaimonia* in some spheres of life and, in this sense, seem to share with other traditions a basic desire to live and flourish (see Tambiah 1976 on the king as world conqueror and world renouncer). There is also a desire to transcend human fulfillment, understood as the proper satisfaction of desire. The valued state (since it is valued, we can call it a vision of the good) is a state beyond *eudaimonia.* One desires to transcend desire itself, including the very desire to transcend desire.

Shall we limit in some way what will count as a *religious* vision of the good? It seems better to me to focus on the question, What is most important?—and leave the field open for a variety of answers.

## 2. The Real

We have to grasp the limits and possibilities inherent in reality in order to pursue the good.[12] We do not simply adjust our view of the real to fit our vision of the good (the error of Freudian wish-fulfillment theories); our convictions about the real guide our search for the good.[13] Our

(see Little and Twiss 1978, chap. 2; Reeder 1988, 1–8). Such a conception does not entail the notion of morality as an "autonomous" segment of culture whose content and justification are independent of a religious framework.

12 On a "need to picture," to develop a view of "powers" and responses to them, see also Schweiker 1992, 281–82, 290 n. 36. By "powers" or "causes" I do not intend to suggest personal forces or indeed any particular view of how things occur. Perhaps "fundamental elements and processes" would be better (I am grateful to Jung Lee for this suggestion).

13 I intend this formulation to be broad enough to include a variety of relations between metaphysical and moral views. I have not explored here the idea that visions of the good can legitimately affect views of the real. Thanks to Sumner Twiss on this point.

view of the real may even limit what we can imagine as good; it certainly provides the parameters within which we believe the good can be realized.

What sort of vision do we require to orient ourselves *religiously?* What sorts of worldviews should we count as religious? For the purposes of his sociological theory, Peter Berger stipulates that a religious worldview is a vision of the sacred: "By sacred is meant here a quality of mysterious and awesome power other than man and yet related to him, which is believed to reside in certain objects of experience" (1969, 25). I favor Clifford Geertz, however, who insists, in contrast to Berger's more restricted concept of sacred power, only that a religious vision portray the "'really real,'" the "fundamental nature of reality" (1973b, 126).[14] What Geertz means, I believe, is that a religious worldview is one that answers basic metaphysical questions about the nature of things: it interprets the basic elements and causes of everything, within or beyond the cosmos, one or many, hidden or revealed, unified or fragmentary.[15]

On this view of a religious vision, the worldview that says that reality consists of the material cosmos known through physics (matter and energy as ultimate element and power) would count as religious, just as would a Theravāda Buddhist vision of reality as "dependent

14 At one place, Geertz seems to suggest that a worldview refers to the "transtemporal" nature of things (1968, 2), but I do not think this narrower notion is characteristic of what he means by a "general conception of order." Compare Melford Spiro's attempt to insist that religions have to do with superhuman beings that have the power to hurt or help humans (1966, 92, 94, 96). Spiro includes the Buddha in this category by defining both "superhuman" and "power" very broadly: The Buddha accomplishes something other humans cannot—attains Enlightenment—and then helps others attain it by his teaching (1966, 92). Thus, the Buddha is superhuman and has power, though it is apparently not necessary to claim (as in some Buddhist traditions) that he has some special ontological status or that his power consists in anything other than his teaching.

15 Catherine Bell finds a dichotomy between thought (worldview) and action (ethos) in Geertz (Bell 1992). A central theme in Talal Asad's criticism of Geertz is also that he seems to separate concepts or symbols (culture) from social-psychological structures (Asad 1993, 32, 35). Geertz "appears, inadvertently, to be taking up the standpoint of theology . . . when he insists on the primacy of meaning without regard to the processes by which meanings are constructed" (1993, 43, see also 36). In contrast, Asad argues that (as in the view of Augustine) ". . . it is not mere symbols that implant true Christian dispositions, but power—ranging all the way from laws . . . and other sanctions . . . to the disciplinary activities of social institutions . . . and of human bodies. . ." (1993, 35, see also 53–54). I am sympathetic to Asad's view, but I do not think that Geertz, even in his early essays, is really suggesting anything fundamentally different. Geertz might want, however, to expand his concept of "ritual" to cover a wider range of institutional practices (1993, 50). To focus, in any case, on how symbols work (model of and model for) and the needs they address is not to deny that they are ingredient in patterns of social practice.

co-origination," "impermanence," and "not-self."[16] Our deepest religious desire, in other words, is to "find our life" in relation to the fundamental constituents and powers of things.[17] We want that sort of vision, for we want to secure our good as well as possible, and only by penetrating to the heart of things can we do that.

We want to find our relation to the nature of things not only to maintain the positive aspects of natural and social existence. By locating ourselves, we also grasp whether, how, and to what degree we can hope to ameliorate suffering.[18] Visions of a mode of being in which, for example, we achieve a presently unattainable good depend on our sense of the possibilities inherent in the nature of things. Thus, religions do not simply provide visions of the highest good (what is most important); they relate the search for the good to a vision of the possibilities afforded by the nature of things, by the real.[19]

On this view of religion, for example, Albert Camus is apparently a religious thinker. He formulates a view of the good (roughly, happiness, justice, and love), and he relates it to a vision of the possibilities reality affords (see Walzer 1988 on Camus). He finds no hope for ultimate amelioration or moral purpose in any transhuman force or mode of being, but he has asked and answered religious questions.[20]

16 James Gustafson discusses nontheological views of how "certain things really and ultimately are" (1984, 143 n. 1; see also Gustafson 1990, 1996). As Gustafson argues, scientific beliefs can also have a bearing on, for example, *theological* conceptions of the real (1996, chap. 5). The sort of "intersection" one envisages will depend on one's "focus of attention" and one's normative "commitments"—for example, "a strong view of the authority of biblical revelation" (134–35).

17 If a historicist denies there are extrahistorical realities, then he or she is making a claim about the nature of things; those who posit some extrahistorical reality do not, of course, have to claim that unmediated access to that reality is possible (that is, they need not have a foundationalist epistemology) or even that truth consists in a relation of correspondence to it. On these issues, see Dean 1988; Jackson 1987; Stout 1988.

18 An orientation to the real encompasses both what J. Z. Smith calls the "locative" and what he calls the "utopian" (1978). See Raboteau 1978 on slave hopes for this world and the next.

19 David Little and Sumner Twiss argue that "a condition of ultimacy or primacy" should not be part of a notion of a "religious object" (1978, 60–61). Certain religious "objects" may not be, in themselves, ontologically or axiologically ultimate (1978, 60–61) although they have "special prominence . . . both in ontological and axiological terms" (1978, 59). Although I agree about religious "objects," I suggest that some notion of the fundamental nature of reality is presupposed in a religious vision.

20 Hick does not want to call anything a religion that does not offer a moral justification of suffering, and he does not accept, on moral grounds, any justification that does not promise some ultimate amelioration in which the individual participates: The potter's right to destroy the pot offers no future betterment, and "manuring the soil" for future generations treats the individual merely as a means (1976, 156–66). Note that I go beyond Geertz here by not requiring any sense of ultimate moral purpose (the third sense of the problem of meaning). Compare Camus and Richard Rubenstein; Rubenstein retains a

Note also that science can become religious when it functions as one's view of the "really real." As a worldview, it has antecedents in ancient forms of materialism, and it is found in the thought of such figures as Sigmund Freud. Indeed, Freud can be usefully regarded as the prophet-founder of a sect or denomination of the religion of science, replete with priests (psychoanalysts), lay people (patients), and authoritative rituals in which "liberation" is achieved (therapy). God as the author of the moral law is replaced by "rational morality," and God as the force that "compensates" for suffering, that secures our well-being in the face of natural and social evil, is to be replaced by human effort and, where necessary, resignation. In Freud's own view, because there is no religion without "remedy," the views (metaphysical and moral) he offers as an alternative to Western theism do not count as religious (Freud 1927/1989; on Freud, see Yearley 1985). My view is the converse: A conception of the limits and possibilities of the real counts as religious even if it offers no remedy.[21]

In sum, a worldview, to follow Geertz, is religious because (among other things) it refers to the fundamental nature of things.[22] Following the advice of Frederick Mote and others, I do not want to import a Western notion of a reality or force beyond the cosmos to other cultures where the nature of things is differently regarded.[23] Even in strands of Bud-

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nonconceptualizable transcendent (Holy Nothingness): "I believe in God, the Holy Nothingness known to the mystics of all ages, out of which we have come and to which we shall ultimately return" (1966, 154). There is "exit and return," but without ultimate amelioration or moral purpose (see also Rubenstein 1966, 67, 125, 198, 203–5, 257–58; Rubenstein 1992, 172, 208, 244, 298–99).

21 Rubenstein attacks traditional Judaic theism and offers a radically revised version of the tradition that, unlike Freud's religion of reason, retains the notion of a transcendent power (Holy Nothingness). Where Freud did not explain the sense in which both the religion of God-the-Father and the religion of reason were religions, Rubenstein—influenced perhaps by Tillich and other interpreters of religion since Freud—comments on the general nature and functions of religious traditions: Religions provide a community in which to face life crises (1966, 88, 53, 198–99, 205); we are all "thrown" into particular traditions (1966, 63); religions answer questions of ultimate concern (1966, 68, 202, 205). On the religion of Holy Nothingness, see the new material in Rubenstein 1992.

22 As part of his view of the role of the scholar as one who unmasks ahistorical and universal claims as "mechanisms of power and control," Russell McCutcheon thinks Geertz was right to say that religions furnish a spurious appearance of inevitability (1997, 461, 459). This is not always the case, I would argue, for religions often also acknowledge their finitude and revisability; more broadly, to acknowledge that religions "defend and contest issues of social power" (McCutcheon 1997, 452) is not equivalent to the view that religious claims mask the real forces at work. Among other things, religions (some more than others, perhaps) often deal with the social distribution of goods and powers.

23 See Mote 1971 for the suggestion that in Taoist strands of Chinese tradition, the Tao is not a reality or state that is somehow separate from and over against our space-time cosmos—it is somehow available within, indeed manifest in, the cosmos.

dhism, however, where no ontologically distinct transcendent or immanent reality is postulated, there seems to be a distinction made between the fabric of ordinary categories and the deeper metaphysical characterization and explanation of reality as dependent co-origination.[24] What seems theoretically most useful is a sense of the general desire to get to the heart of reality (I have tried to say why that is important) and the variety of ways in which reality has been construed.

It is important to note that my emphasis on beliefs about reality does not mean that I take the formulation of beliefs in themselves—in particular, the reflective processes of theologians or other intellectuals—as the most important activity in religions: Some traditions lay soteriological emphasis on correct belief, others do not. Nor am I saying that religions consist primarily in having beliefs.[25] But all, I would suggest, rely on some underlying affirmation—however determinate or hermeneutically indeterminate—about the nature of things.[26]

24 As my reference to such Buddhist conceptions indicates, the notion of "fundamental elements and powers" is not intended to suggest only those ontologies in which some *discrete* set of elements and causes somehow underlies all phenomena. I want to include *any* metaphysical or ontological vision. Note also that I am not using "metaphysical" here to signify a particular complex of views about reality, language, and knowledge that are often linked together and criticized as the "metaphysics of presence." Under the terms "metaphysical" or "ontological," I include the views of those who defend a "metaphysics of presence" *and* those who attack it. If the critics say that they have no view of reality (not even one shorn of the epistemic illusions of the metaphysics of presence) and that it is a mistake to try to have one, then I would argue that the more plausible explanation is that they have offered up simply one more view of how certain things fundamentally are in the world (for example, language and self).

25 See Lindbeck 1984 for a "cultural-linguistic" view of religion, in contrast to a "cognitive-propositionalist" or an "experiential-expressivist" theory. My view here is broadly cultural-linguistic (all experience is conceptually interpreted), but I depart from Lindbeck in the role I assign to propositions (beliefs or affirmations). I will not argue the point here, but I think that what Lindbeck calls "doctrines" (the conceptual "grammar" of religious languages) incorporate or presuppose propositional beliefs. (See Jackson 1985. I am grateful to Stephen Wilson on these matters.) Note that I do not intend to suggest that having beliefs is divorced from having desires or emotions; roughly, I would want to argue for the role of emotion in cognition, and vice-versa.

26 Asad argues that Geertz's anthropological definition of religion is in fact a reflection of early modern Christian conceptions of "natural religion": "From a concrete set of practical rules attached to specific processes of power and knowledge, religion has come to be abstracted and universalized" (1993, 40–43, at 42). Thus, "Geertz's treatment of religious belief, which lies at the core of his conception of religion, is a modern, privatized one because and to the extent that it emphasizes the priority of belief as a state of mind rather than as a constituting activity in the world" (1993, 47). The view of religion as a response to the problems of meaning "is a product of the only legitimate space allowed to Christianity by post-Enlightenment society, the right to individual *belief*. . ." (1993, 45). Here I would offer a different historical "genealogy." First, the strand of theory of religion that began as "natural religion" is perhaps more manifest in Otto 1958 (in romantic rather

## 3. Heuristic Force

I have tried to sketch a concept of religion that emphasizes some aspects of what traditions have in common.[27] Moreover, this concept, which insists that religions utilize *some* concept of the real in the search for the good, is intended to show how people who are often said to be nonreligious or secular should instead be said to have an alternative religion. This is not to say that everyone need be religious; it is possible, at least in some cultures, to live in the "immediate," to avoid the questions of depth, or not to have found an answer in one's search. Also, of course, even the nominally religious vary in their degree of devotion.[28] I have argued, however, that insofar as we seek the good, we desire to interpret "the fundamental nature of reality."[29]

My basic point, then, is this: A tendency to define religion substantively in terms of a concern with an ontologically distinct reality (transcendent or immanent) or a nonconceivable mode of being can obscure the very important sense in which those who claim to have no religion are deeply religious. Just as Jews, Christians, or Buddhists should recognize their similarity to the Huichol, so the followers of Freud and Camus should see that they, too, attempt to "find their lives" through a vision of the real.

Why should someone adopt such a concept as mine, instead of relying on a "family resemblance" definition? One adopts such a concept presumably because of its heuristic power, its descriptive and explanatory

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than rationalist form); I would speculate that Geertz's antecedents lie in, for example, Max Weber, Susanne Langer, and various strands of functionalism. Second, Geertz clearly says that sacred symbols (worldview and ethos) are constitutive of social structure to one degree or another and in one way or another, depending on the cultural circumstances in question. It simply does not follow that a recognition of the place of affirmation reflects a privatized or secularized role for religious belief. In contrast to Asad's attempt to explain Geertz's view as a "product" of privatized Christianity, we should not project this religious situation onto any theory that holds (as I do) that affirmation is essential. To hold this role for affirmation is not at all incompatible with the recognition that religion in one fashion or the other, depending on the historical circumstances, is a "constituting activity in the world."

27 There are other features equally necessary for my conception that I have not examined in this essay: religions as "metaphor and model" (McFague 1987), religions as ways of life or practices, religions as traditions appropriated in succeeding generations, religions as lived in communities and the experiences of individuals.

28 See Geertz on "religious noncommitment" (1973a, 108 n. 33) and on the "force" of convictions (1968, 111ff.); he distinguishes the zealot, the fellow-traveler, and the hypocrite.

29 I agree with Christian that religious predicates cannot be linguistically reduced to ontological and axiological ones (1964, 227–29); my claim is only that these two are fundamental in religious experience and discourse. On the use of the distinction between "the setting of human life" and "the conduct of life in that setting," see Christian 1987; on religious valuations in particular, see Christian 1972, chap. 5.

force, its ability to locate similarities we feel are more important than differences. Conceptualizing religion in the way that I suggest accents what those who are often called nonreligious or secular share with those who are usually called religious, allowing us to see the unexpected and to focus our attention on what we might not otherwise grasp. It points to a deep similarity that unites not only various traditions usually called religious, but those traditions and others often excluded from the religious camp.

To be sure, one can formulate other heuristic concepts: Tradition X and tradition Y both search for the good and the real, but their visions are radically different; tradition X posits, for example, a nonconceivable mode of being as ultimately real and ultimately good, whereas tradition Y finds no such mode of being in its ontology; let us call X religious and Y nonreligious. Perhaps there are advantages to conceiving of religion in this more restricted way. If one is going to use a heuristic concept, then I assume one will favor the one that has the most advantages in a particular context of inquiry.

If one did accept the heuristic concept of religion that I have suggested, what would be the consequences? First, the moral traditions of, say, Christian communities and those of so-called secular humanists (such as Camus) would both fall under the rubric of religious ethics. On this view, therefore, we would no longer be justified in dividing moral traditions into those that are secular and those that, in Michael J. Perry's phrase, are "religious in character" (1991, 52).[30] We would no longer say that a person was nonreligious when he or she moved from being a Buddhist or Baptist to being a follower of Camus. The nonreligious would signify only those who live in the "immediate," or perhaps those who are searching and presently uncommitted. This is no idle consequence, for we have come to depend in various social contexts (political and academic) on distinguishing religious traditions on some

30 Perry stresses orientation to ultimate reality but also requires that reality be trustworthy, that our connection with it provide a "final and radical reconciliation" (1991, 70). Thus, a "morality religious in character" is a view of how to live a fulfilling life in relation to such an ultimate reality (1991, 77). As I have argued, I do not include amelioration ("reconciliation") as a necessary condition. I agree with Perry, however, that our conception of morality should extend beyond "obligation" to the "good life" (1991, 181 n. 45). My category of "the good" tries to include Kantian and Aristotelian theories. I also agree with Perry (1991, 187 n. 49) that the question of the good life cannot be fully answered independently of one's vision of the real. Three important caveats: (1) I suggest here that a broad definition may be desirable for the academic discussion of "religious ethics," but even on this front I have not tried to reply to objections or offer a full defense. (2) Going the broad route for some academic contexts would not entail using such a definition for all academic purposes. (3) Whatever approach or concept seems best academically would not settle how to proceed in a legal-political context (see Perry, 1991; Greenawalt, 1995).

narrower basis, such as their reference to a distinctive reality or a nonconceptual mode of being.

There may, however, be another way in which we can distinguish moral traditions that will enable us to accomplish some of our purposes.

## 4. Natural Law

If the conception of religion that I have suggested is persuasive, then we would abandon a view of religion that is often used in political and academic contexts—namely, the view that makes a reference to a hidden transcendent or immanent reality, or to a nonconceivable mode of being, a necessary feature of what will count as a religion. I have argued instead that what is significantly similar across traditions is a vision of the good and its relation to the real.

Suppose we live in a setting where there are adherents of several religious traditions, and suppose it seems desirable to find some basis of moral agreement that does not require religious unity. We could accomplish this social purpose if we adhered to a certain sort of moral tradition, which we can call by the familiar title "natural law."

What do I mean by "natural law"? For our purposes, a natural-law tradition is one that does not require religious premises for its content or justification.[31] How is this possible? Presumably this tradition builds its view around a certain limited array of human goods, in contrast to a full religious view of the good, and around certain facts about human experience, without reference to a full religious view of the real. Such a tradition holds that a basic form of morality can be established with these limited premises of value and fact. Such a moral tradition permits a variety of religious interpretations. Such a natural law can be affirmed, therefore, by a variety of religious traditions and used to construct the framework of society.

A natural-law tradition in my sense is, therefore, a basic morality in the sense that it deals with an important yet limited range of goods and facts.[32] I have in mind here the sort of tradition that identifies a set of

31 On the secular, see Christian 1987, chaps. 7 and 8. Note that my concept of natural law is different from one that asserts only that there is a type of moral knowledge that is accessible independent of a special source, such as revelation or grace. Such knowledge could still involve religious content and justification—for example, natural law as a reflection of one's status as a creature of God. On such a view, and for a contrast with the views of John Rawls, see Beckley 1992, 23, 346–50. See also Herdt's (1997, 17–18ff.) distinction between "classical" and "modern" conceptions of natural law.

32 Note two senses of "basic": (1) not logically dependent on more fundamental reasons or values (George 1992, 34) and (2) minimal or necessary elements of human well-being (Hittinger 1992, 42–43, 49–50). I have both in mind here.

principles and virtues which is at the core of the moral life, and that has its own content and justification independent of the various religious canopies that may be used to interpret it.[33] Such a category of natural law morality is broad enough to include, for example, both neo-Kantians (such as Alan Gewirth) and neo-Aristotelians (such as John Finnis, Germain Grisez, and Joseph Boyle), who disagree about content and justification.

The possibility of such a natural law is controversial, of course. Some say its plausibility rests on a foundationalist epistemology and that since such an epistemology is not available, the notion falters. Defenders say there is sufficient commonality in human experience to allow us to identify a range of norms not only applicable but justifiable across cultures, without assuming some ahistorical ground.

Boyle, for example, tries to accommodate a sense of historical rootedness and cultural contingency while still insisting that our basic grasp of the moral content of the natural law is not "essentially dependent on the lived values of a moral community" (1992, 11). The "actuality" of lived values is not a "necessary condition of moral knowledge" (1992, 16). Although we are all dependent on linguistic and cultural "contingencies" (1992, 16),

> . . . access to human goods and other basic moral considerations cannot, on natural law grounds, be simply a matter of experiencing them in so far as they are lived within a particular community and embodied in the character traits of a community's members. There is an awareness of and an interest in these goods which are prior to and principles of their realization in human action [1992, 15].

This is not the occasion to debate the epistemology of natural law, but whatever epistemology we employ (foundationalist, antifoundationalist, Boyle's attempted mediation), we might be able to locate a minimal morality that stops short of a full religious interpretation (a view of what is supremely important in relation to what is fundamentally real).[34] To the extent that adherents of various religious traditions can debate and decide moral questions in terms of this limited set of norms, it would function as a secular tradition—that is, a tradition that can

33 "Basic values" does not connote "rules" in contrast to "virtues" but would include norms of both conduct and character. In this sense, I agree with Russell Hittinger that virtue cannot be removed from "our public business of policies" (1992, 58–59). In the sense that "virtue," however, refers to the completion or perfection of ends, natural law would reserve such interpretations for religious visions (see Hittinger 1992, 53–56, 64–65).

34 Note that my treatment of natural law offers a thesis about moral judgments, not law, but does not take sides in the debate between realists and antirealists about moral truth. On these matters, see Stout 1992; Waldron 1992.

operate according to its own content and justification independent of (differentiated from) religious interpretations.[35] Hence, we could refer to such a natural law as a *nonreligious* or secular ethic.

## 5. "All the Way Down"

There is a powerful objection, however, to the idea of natural law as I have sketched it—namely, that there is no such separable, religiously neutral range of judgments about values and facts. Views of what is supremely important and what is fundamentally real will inevitably shape *all* moral convictions; religion goes "all the way down." I mean more than that religious interpretations add an additional layer of content and/or justification to injunctions: I may not only value and seek mutual love for its own sake but also value and seek it as a gift of God for which I should be properly grateful (see Christian 1964, 141; 1987, 189ff.). The sense of "all the way down" I have in mind is stronger: Mutual love *is* the love of those who see themselves as children of God. The religious interpretation is constitutive of the moral relation; the relation is not detachable from its religious content and justification (see Jackson 1991).

Michael Walzer can help us construct an "all the way down" view: ". . . the moral minimum is not a free-standing morality. It simply designates some reiterated features of thick or maximal moralities" (1994, 10, also 3, 9–11, 16–19).[36] "Minimal" moral injunctions (1994, 5–6, 10) are "abstracted from" particular "maximal" moralities (1994, 13, 15): "Minimalism . . . consists in principles and rules that are reiterated in

35 I am inclined to think that believing in such a realm of values and facts counts as a theory of sorts, whether or not one adds more complicated metaphysical, epistemological, or normative interpretations (see Yearley 1990, 175–82). I am also inclined to see as theories *both* those who seek the "highly general, systematic, and the simple" (Stout 1992, 85ff.) and those who focus on particularity, diversity, and complexity. Stout does not reject "theory as such" (1992, 89), so long as it is understood only as "reflective understanding" (1992, 94); he does reject the "quest for system" or for an explanation of "moral truth" (1992, 97).

36 The idea of a "maximal" morality seems to suggest that it reflects a full view of the good and the real; it is another step to assume, as I continue to do here, the broad definition of religion that makes such a view religious. There are four rough alternatives: a broad concept of religion, with or without natural law (in the stipulated sense); a narrow concept of religion, with or without natural law. A narrow concept of religion with natural law would presumably look something like this: Religions refer to some "transcendent" or some nonconceptualizable mode of being (among other features); systems of belief and practice that do not share this distinctive feature should not be called religions; but both religious and nonreligious systems share access to a separable realm of fact and value on the basis of which a minimal shared morality can be constructed.

different times and places, and that are seen to be similar even though they are expressed in different idioms and reflect different histories and different versions of the world" (1994, 17–18). When we appeal to a minimal morality, we do so in the "idiom" of our own maximal morality in which it is "embedded" (1994, 9–11). On the assumption that maximal moralities reflect full views of the good and the real, and that such views are religious, then religious content and justification go "all the way down."[37]

There is a puzzle about this version of "all the way down," however. It is hard to see how "abstraction" is possible if, indeed, moral views are shaped in determinate ways in local settings. If "murder" or "deceit" (Walzer 1994, 10) are locally constructed, how is it possible that there is some similar meaning that is "immediately accessible" across moral borders? If the "very idea of 'justice'" (Walzer 1994, 5, 26) consists in, for example, a condemnation of murder, then will its "meaning" within one maximal morality be sufficiently *similar* to another? How can Walzer's "minimalist" morality itself meet the "all the way down" objection?[38]

In any case, "all the way down" is an important objection to natural law in my sense, and only natural law gives us a secular nonreligious ethic. For Walzer, one still always *speaks* in the "idiom" of one's own thick or maximal view, even if one finds strong cross-traditional similarities and agreements on public policy.[39] Now, of course, one could accept the point that views of the good and the real go all the way down, and hence that natural law in the stipulated sense is an illusion, but still reject the broad definition of religion I sketched earlier. In effect, one would argue that natural law in this sense is a spurious notion

37 On Walzer's sense of how one begins from the local, see Walzer 1990; Meilaender 1990; Johnson 1990. Gilbert Meilaender cogently argues that "temptations to conquest" can issue both from "ethnocentric commitments" and from the conviction of a "truth that applies to all human beings. . ." (1990, 198). See Long 1986 on "signification."

38 On Walzer's notion of "reiteration," see Roberts 1994, 347, 347 n. 5); see also Bounds 1994 on difference and conflict. For an interpretation of Walzer's view of minimal morality as widely shared cross-traditional principles and rights, see Stassen 1994. On these authors, see Walzer 1994. For another proposal that relies on the notion of cross-cultural similarity and is vulnerable to the "all the way down" worry about sufficient similarity, see Reeder 1993. On the "all the way down" metaphor used of historicity, see Outka 1996, 98, 103, 109.

39 It seems to me that Rawls's "political liberalism" (1996) could be read as a more narrow form of the "reiteration" that Walzer suggests obtains between moralities in general (Rawls is interested in an overlap only for the "basic structure"). But Rawls—cf. John Courtney Murray (1966)—would insist that the "overlapping consensus" comes to have its own independent content and justification in the minds of its adherents. Cf. Walzer 1987, 11–18.

which provides no basis for the idea of a secular or nonreligious ethic, but one would propose a narrower notion of religion in order to allow us to distinguish religious from nonreligious moral traditions: There are religious maximal moralities and nonreligious maximal moralities. My point in this section is only that if one did adopt the broader sort of definition, then one needs natural law in this sense to do the job; if Walzer and others are right, however, this road is also closed.

## 6. Conclusion

I have presented a rather old-fashioned view: Beliefs about the relation of the good and the real are fundamental in religious experience.[40] My view begins in desire and emotion, in the search for the good; but our concern for the good impels us to attain a vision of the real, a conception of the elements and powers that enable and limit our striving. Thus, our convictions about the good and the real, or more specifically our view of their relation, is fundamental.[41] They are a necessary feature of any tradition we will want to call religious, even though, as I have also argued, being religious is not simply or even primarily a matter of *having* beliefs, nor are beliefs necessarily the most *important* feature of religious experience.[42]

40 Gregory Schopen argues against a widespread assumption that the essence of a tradition resides in normative texts or scriptures, as opposed to what people actually did or said (as evidenced in archaeology and other material remains) (1991, 15, 19). He calls this assumption a "nonneutral . . . Protestant assumption" (1991, 19, 19 n. 49); the "Word" is where true religion is to be found (1991, 20). I agree that we should not identify an emphasis on normative texts as ubiquitous, much less the central feature of religious traditions, nor am I arguing here for what some might call a related Protestant assumption—namely, that an act of believing is crucial for salvation and hence for religion. My thesis is simply that having some conception (determinate or amorphous) of how things are and how we ought to live is a necessary or fundamental feature of being religious.

41 Spiro claims that in the "first instance," religions "consist of . . . propositions" claimed "to be true" (1966, 101). In 1970 (6, 128), he makes the general claim that religious ideas do not serve a purely intellectual or classificatory function; rather, they serve instrumentally the gratification of other desires. Note his distinction (1966, 110) between meaning in the general sense of explanation and meaning in the sense of remedies for suffering.

42 I agree, therefore, with William Paden and others who argue that religions should not be conceived only or even primarily as sets of beliefs or propositions. In Paden's vocabulary, a "religious world is something lived in, acted out, embodied" (1988, 57). He does not intend to deny, nonetheless, the foundational function of truth claims: ". . .mythic symbols declare what the world is based on, what its oppositional forces are, what hidden worlds lie beyond or within ordinary life" (1988, 53), and ". . . myth . . . is a definitive voice that names the ultimate powers that create, maintain, and recreate one's life" (1988, 73). Contrary to Paden, however, I argue that science can function as myth in his sense (see 1988, 74). We need here a distinction between science as a particular type of human inquiry with limited aims, scope, and function, and science as a religious worldview.

Moreover, since beliefs about the relation of the good and the real are fundamental, I argue a corollary thesis: Religions are not limited to those traditions that posit some invisible reality or that suggest that there is a way of attaining a nonconceptualizable mode of being. Rather, views that go by the name of secular humanism are also visions of the relation of the good and the real and hence should be classified as religions. Some would say that such a view of religion is too inclusive, that it does not sufficiently demarcate the religious from the nonreligious. My response is that I prefer inclusiveness, for the concept I defend has the virtue of linking a host of traditions across space and time, from nonliterate traditions, to traditions such as Judaism and Buddhism, to what are sometimes called "secular" visions.[43] My conceptualization of religion allows us to focus on our common human concern for the good and the real and their relation, and it thus reveals to us at least this fundamental kinship.

I have argued, then, that the conception of religion that I favor (for now!) does not give us firm grounds for a distinction between religious and nonreligious moralities. This conception of religion would not support the notion of a distinctive field of "religious ethics."

I have also argued that if one accepts the "all the way down" objection, the alternative route of natural law (in the sense stipulated) is closed as well. One cannot identify some independent set of facts and values out of which one can fabricate a differentiated or secular morality in contrast to fully developed religious visions of the good and the real. If natural law is not possible, then we are left only with Walzer's reiterations.

What are the implications of a loss of natural law for the academic study of religion? If one believed in natural law, then one could envision a division of labor (and, indeed, this has been widely assumed by moral philosophers of various persuasions): natural law would be common territory for academic reflection, just as it is in ordinary life, but perhaps "philosophy" would take a special responsibility for natural law. Full religious views of the good and the real (building on, but going beyond natural law) would be the province of "religious ethics"; perhaps religion or religious studies would have a special responsibility for religious ethics. With my conception of religion, these arrangements would have some interesting results; for example, some forms of secular humanism would fall under religious ethics. Nonetheless, a reasonably clear division of labor could obtain.

43 Thomas Lawson and Robert McCauley follow Spiro (1966) in arguing that "if everything is religion, then nothing is" (1990, 166). See also Asad 1993, 45–46. In my view, we can offer a good deal of "explanatory theorizing" about religion without limiting religions to systems that postulate superhuman beings or some "unseen."

However, if one does not believe in natural law, if religions go "all the way down," then it seems to me that the distinction between moral philosophy and religious ethics collapses. If religions go "all the way down," then they arguably shape epistemology as well as normative ethics. There is no limited sphere of value and fact whose content and justification can be debated independently of religious canopies of meaning. Issues about moral justification and truth are impregnated with religious assumptions (for example, is there some transhistorical real to which moral judgments can in any sense "correspond"?), no less than issues of normative content (such as conceptions of justice). On this view, then, there would be no real difference between ethics in philosophy and ethics in religious studies. Indeed, the sense of a distinctive field and discipline of religious ethics (whether seen as a tradition-by-tradition enterprise or one that is cross-traditional or both) may be a function of the widespread assumption that there is a basic natural law, over and above which there is "something more" that it is the job of religious ethicists to handle. But if there is no natural law, then this sense of distinctiveness vanishes, and there are simply various traditions to which we attend in various ways.[44]

44 On religious ethics and the broader question of the sorts of normative inquiry appropriate within the university or college setting, see Miller 1996, 1997. I do not intend to say that as a mode of inquiry religious ethics should be principally "philosophical" (in the sense of critical and constructive *argument*), in contrast to historical, literary, or comparative approaches. The question of methods and their relation is for me one for another day (see other essays in this issue). I am grateful to Richard Miller and Jean Porter for suggesting I clarify this point.

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