PART IV Worlds

CHAPTER 19

Religion and Morality

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The relationship of religion to ethics (or morality – I do not distinguish between these terms) is complex, entailing such matters as whether religion is intrinsic to or necessary for ethics and whether ethics is one of the necessary features or criteria by which one establishes a set of practices as "religion." Regarding the first point, in much of the world one can easily be deemed unethical or ethically suspect if one stands outside the majority religion or outside the Abrahamic, "God-fearing" religions entirely; to declare oneself an atheist or a practitioner of animism, for example, could place one under considerable suspicion. In Europe, the Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment intelligentsia have had the task of constituting and legitimating ethics on nontheological grounds; this is surely one of the achievements of Kant and a continuing project of ethics in the analytic tradition. Regarding the second point, the late nineteenth-century evolutionists used ethics as a criterion to distinguish between so-called "magic" and "religion" and it was one of the achievements of later twentieth-century anthropology, in the work of people like Mary Douglas (1966; see also Lambek 1992), to demonstrate the ethical in such unlikely places as food taboos and hygienic practices. One of the central implications of this work is that ethics can be implicit, embedded in forms of practice no less than in explicit codes.

The entire discussion is embedded within two large historical processes. The first of these is the curtailment or retrenchment of religion, especially Christianity and Judaism in Europe, by forces or developments one could lump together as "secularist," especially in law, science, and philosophy. To this general picture one can highlight attempts to suppress or eradicate religion within communist regimes. The second historical process is one which, viewed from certain locations, appears to be a worldwide attempt to defeat animism or polytheism, especially by the two main competing traditions of monotheism, Christianity and Islam, which are hence placed in further competition with each other, and which argue their respective positions in

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part on moral grounds. This is a kind of religious rationalization but it is hardly the disenchantment that Weber depicted. There are also "counter-reformations" to both these historical processes, in which forms of purificatory "fundamentalism," in response to the first, but also of animism, if not polytheism, and religious pluralism, in response to both, return, resurge, or simply quietly perdure. If the former response entails an ethics, if not a politics, of social reform (often beginning with the family), the latter is sometimes associated with an ethics of personal self-fashioning.[1] In both these large historical processes, constituted as they are partly through debate, scholars of religion and ethics, including anthropologists, are not simply neutral observers, but writers whose choice of words and perspective has effects. Explicitly or implicitly we participate in these processes.

As these remarks suggest, the analytic ground is complicated by the fact that no agreement exists on what constitutes either "religion" or "ethics" and that the various definitions proffered for one often have direct implications for discerning or defining the other, leading to circular arguments about their "relationship."[2] Moreover, it is by no means clear that ostensibly secular and objective systems of thought like philosophy or anthropology can escape their intellectual inheritance from specific religious traditions and hence may implicitly work within their terms (Cannell 2006). In what follows I will not claim the authority to adjudicate which definitions are correct in some objectivist sense (assuming any could be). I will try to combine a rational account based on an anthropological tradition of abstraction, comparison, and deduction with a practical, inductive, historical, and ethnographical appreciation of how things play out on the ground, that is, in actual life, in human experience, and over time. This requires taking a rigorous and generous approach to (cultural) difference and coming to some kind of terms with the essential tension between relativism and universalism. In the end, what this essay can do is simply review some of the arguments to which thinking about the relation of religion to ethics gives rise.

Religion and Morality Are Not Isomorphic or Commensurable

A problem with the response to Frazer that ethics can be found in the seemingly most unlikely places is that it may leave unquestioned the association between ethics and religion, merely expanding the reach of both. But religion – in the sense of the ideas, and especially the practices, that go under its name – has no more claim to be ethical than many other fields of human activity. Indeed, it could be argued that ethics, understood as the recurrent establishment of criteria for evaluating practice (as good, just, correct, etc.), as well as subsequent practice enacted in light of such criteria, is intrinsic to all human action (Lambek 2010b). But even when ethics is understood simply as good behavior (or the profession, clarification, advocacy, or cultivation of such behavior) or as recognition of its limits, it is certainly not restricted to religion and it is questionable whether it is more prevalent there than elsewhere (despite claims by certain religious authorities to the contrary). For example, in his exemplary and courageous account of mid-twentieth-century North American Roman Catholicism, Robert Orsi (2005) demonstrates the cruelty as well as good that religion can incite.

While religion is often understood as providing traditions of ethical certainty and self-formation, Orsi's is also but one of many scholarly accounts to show that a given

religious tradition can be riven with internal ethical debate and uneven consequences. Thus, for example, the Muslim piety movement could not substantiate any claims (should it want to) that its adherents are morally superior to other Muslims or that they act ethically all the time. Moreover, the call to be ethical or to act ethically, the rewards and punishments associated with it, the dangers and fantasies – these are not to be equated with acting ethically. Ethics must surely entail self-questioning, not only about one's own claims or behavior, but about the limits of what is possible with respect to such matters as human well-being, comprehending suffering, or providing justice. Indeed, that it must not only have a theodicy, but also bear responsibility for acknowledging its limits, is a key point in Geertz's (1973) famous essay on religion.

One might add to this the tension between ethical persons, practice, or insight and the authority or power to make or enforce ethical judgment or to lay claim to the ethical high ground that is found in all religious hierarchies. This is not to deny that at certain moments religion can provoke or inspire people to particular ethical feats, and many religious figures ("saints') can be understood as ethical exemplars, as can ordinary people using "religious" means to extend their ethical reach (e.g., Lambek 2002a). At the same time, religion can pursue and punish witches, heretics, and immodest persons in ways that outsiders would consider unethical, and it often celebrates ethically ambiguous figures – wandering ascetics, holy fools, trickster figures, and the like. Indeed, myth has been repeatedly noted for its ethical ambiguity and this ambiguity can also be found in various forms of mythopraxis, notably in the range of practices and figures associated with "liminality," carnival, and the like (Turner 1969). A final point here is that the ethical acts and insights of ordinary people may be "religiously" informed yet outside and even counter to the precepts of "official" religion, as in popular attempts in Vietnam to appease and release the ghosts of the dead (Kwon 2008).

Anthropological circumscriptions of "religion" have shifted over time, from relatively narrow objectivist accounts in which belief in God or other "supernatural" beings was simply asserted as a definition, to broader accounts characteristic of symbolic and structural anthropology, and more recently again to narrower genealogical and skeptical ones based on the emergence into public discourse of the category or subject of "religion" and the rise to scholarly consciousness of the ferment within Christianity and Islam. One of the reasons some anthropologists painted the field broadly was to show that practices outside the Abrahamic traditions or the "axial religions" were not thereby beyond the ethical pale and hence deserving of the same intellectual and practical respect as those within them. The structural–symbolic synthesis of the 1960s and 1970s enabled such practices to be understood as being as meaningful and as ethically informed as those within the Abrahamic traditions. Indeed, it was the success of this work that gave anthropologists the means and courage to tackle the Abrahamic traditions themselves, hitherto left to scholars within those traditions. Not only that, the Abrahamic religions could be seen to be characterized by structures, relations, and tropes that were found in the culture at large no less than within the official boundaries as characterized by their respective gatekeepers. "Sacrifice" in its various formulations from head-hunting to Hindu temple offerings, rules for butchering and consuming animals, alms and charity, or Faustian bargains sealed with innocent victims is a salient example of an analytical (not "natural") category, that enables fruitful comparison across cultural, religious, and institutional lines and encourages anthropological work

within Old Testament, Christian, and Muslim contexts (though the subject of Jesus continues to be treated with some circumspection).

Sacrifice, in turn, links up to the ethical side of the literature on the gift and the various questions raised and debated about the relative and absolute values and virtues of giving and receiving, reciprocity and altruism (Lambek 2008b). Philosophical responses to Mauss (1990 [1925]) are sometimes marked by a Christian bias in which the idea of "grace" may underlie arguments concerning the "pure gift." Similar ideas of ostensibly selfless giving recur in the work and lives of missionaries and religious martyrs and their contemporary descendants, activists in philanthropy, international development, and humanitarian relief (Fassin 2011), echoing Weber's formulation of the calling.[3] Yet we know that one-sided ethical formulations of the pure gift or fully disinterested acts need to be treated with some skepticism, at the very least offset by the sense of balance characteristic of Mauss (and which he drew from both Aristotle on virtuous practice and Kant and Durkheim on obligation). The balance of interest and disinterest (and freedom and obligation) in the gift has been well explicated by Parry (1986) who derives the attraction of the pure gift less from the Christian idea of grace than as a kind of idealized dialectical opposition to the idea of the capitalist pure commodity. Moreover, in Mauss, and as taken up by Lévi-Strauss, circulation is widely seen as a social good in itself, as is reciprocity; however, these are understood as the ways in which precapitalist societies ("naturally") work rather than as exemplary acts or as explicit religious ideals impossible of achievement in this world by ordinary mortals. Finally, Mauss viewed acts of gift or sacrifice as "total social facts" rather than abstracting them as "religion" or "ethics," let alone discussing them with respect to the "relationship" between such reified abstractions. This suggests in turn that the very subject of this (my) essay is a historically particular one, possible of formulation and debate only in this manner in a secular modern epoch.

In a different kind of abstraction, human sacrifice has provided a significant religious source for reflection on the ethical. The Akedah (the story of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac) has done so for generations of thinkers, not only for religious practitioners but for philosophers and anthropologists engaged in understanding the meaning of sacrifice (e.g., Evens 2008).[4] Interpretation of this religious event or story may lead eventually to a distinction between the religious and the ethical. Notably for Kierkegaard (1985) the Akedah demonstrates that religion is a teleological suspension of the ethical. To have religious faith and to exhibit it moves radically beyond the ethical – a father ready to kill his son – at least, beyond the ethics of the ordinary. This intention to kill his offspring, to make a human sacrifice, is not selfish or ethically utilitarian (as may be the Greek sacrifice of Iphigenia by her father, Agamemnon, as depicted by Euripides), not infra-ethical, as it were, but supra-ethical; it serves no calculable ends.[5] And it is true that much of what falls under the rubric of religion pushes humans to violent extremes that may be considered beyond the ethical in any ordinary sense: head-hunting in Southeast Asia, slicing off the foreskins of Muslim and Jewish babies or children, penitential flagellation in Roman Catholicism and Shi'ism, the Hindu widow who jumps into the funeral pyre, the Buddhist protester who sets himself alight, perhaps the suicide bomber.[6] At the least, religion offers an image of the hero or martyr who sacrifices the ordinary for something higher or beyond. More broadly and less dramatically, Victor Turner argued that the liminal phase of ritual was a time when social rules and categories are done away with, hence

when anything and everything is possible, hence beyond ethics understood in most senses except the existential one of pure freedom (cf. Faubion 2010). In sum, religion is sometimes able to contextualize or circumscribe ethics, but conversely, religion itself may sometimes be circumscribed or contextualized out of ethical concerns, whether by a quiet "descent into the ordinary" (Das 2007) or by a radical overturning.

In sum, from an anthropological perspective religion and ethics are not fully isomorphic and cannot be fully identified with one another. Yet an account of religion and ethics must address the historical consequences of abstracting them from the rest of social and cultural life as distinct contemporary regimes and hence the ostensible liberation of the ethical from the religious. Here, one of the more interesting moves would surely be the replacement of a simple binary pair with the triangulation characteristic in contemporary society of religion, ethics, and law. For example, in providing justice, the law should be (conceived as) ethical; but what happens when it comes to be seen, from a religious perspective, as violating basic ethical principles, whether in admitting or prohibiting capital punishment, abortion, blood transfusion, or same-sex marriage? How does a liberal legal language of rights translate into a religious language of obligation, devotion, love, obedience, etc., and conversely? On which side of this debate does "ethics" sit, or how can or does it serve to mediate or increase conflict?

Conversely, an anthropological account of ostensibly disembedded institutions must be equally wary of the ethnocentric assumption that our context (call it "modernity" or "postmodernity" or the (neo)liberal state) is a special case, unique in its radical difference from all the other cultural and historical differences that precede it and that continue to be found more or less hidden alongside it or within its makeup. Are not relative tensions between religion, ethics, and law found everywhere? Was it not, for example, an ethical queasiness in the face of religious injunction that led Igbo mothers of twins (considered polluting and destined for immediate death) to be among the first to convert to Christianity (Achebe 1996 [1959])?[7] Tensions between Rujia (Confucian) ethical ritualism and Legalism go back to ancient China (Yang 1994). Finally, rather than taking literally the institutionalization of religion and ethics in a historical context in a manner that presumes their commensurability with one another, it might be more interesting to think of "religion" and "ethics" as different, incommensurable ways to analytically transect the social whole or the human condition.[8]

Roughly speaking, there are two major streams or themes in anthropological accounts of the relationship between religion and ethics that may avoid some of the aporias I have described. I call these streams Durkheimian and Weberian (with their respective philosophical predecessors, Kant and Aristotle), while acknowledging that in practice there is a good deal of diversity within and crossover between them. The Durkheimian stream emphasizes submission to the authority of a single social or liturgical order while the Weberian concerns the practical juxtaposition of alternative models for living.[9]

The Durkheimian Stream: Obligation, Commitment, and Ritual Performance

In the Durkheimian stream, religion or ritual forms the foundation for ethics and ethics is foundational for, or intrinsic to, society or social life. Durkheimian models are

structural, locating ethics at arm's length from individual intention, although Durkheim (1973) begins by arguing that ethics entails the transcendence of the biological individual, characterized by primal needs and desires, by the social person who lives and acts on behalf of rules and ideals that come to him or her from the outside, that is, from society, but that become internalized. In this, Durkheim's perspective is rather similar to Freud's argument that healthy socialization entails the constitution of the superego or conscience, such that a proper balance is developed between social repression and ideals and narcissistic engagement in love, work, and play. In both authors there is the assumption that "natural" man (or human "nature") is itself amoral, if not actively immoral. At the same time, it is an intrinsic feature of the human condition that such biological nature gets transcended by humanity's social nature. In Durkheim, society, especially as it represents itself to itself as religion, and as it comes to a kind of self-understanding, enables humans to transcend themselves – to become better people. Turner's (1967) ethnographic accounts of Ndembu ritual are among the most successful illustrations of this part of the Durkheimian paradigm in the way he shows how ritual brings together "the necessary and the desirable." Through ritual people come to want to do what society (and possibly the social theorist) says is right and necessary. The good is confirmed as the social good. Voilà ethics! In Freud social transcendence (sublimation) is offset by the simpler notion of repression; internalization remains partial and conflict is central to the picture. One of the best anthropological accounts of this tension between Durkheimian and Freudian versions remains Robert Murphy's *Dialectics of Social Life* (1971).

More recently, Roy Rappaport makes explicit claims for the close connection between ritual and morality. In a complex exposition whose stages I cannot rehearse here, he argues that ritual offsets the possibilities that language provides to lie and to propose alternatives (or waver between them) by demonstrating – and indeed producing – commitment by participants to the particular acts and utterances established therein, and moreover, acceptance of the order that makes such particular ritual enactments possible, that defines, legitimates, and sanctifies them as particular instances of a given kind, affirming not only that this wedding or this blessing has particular effects on its participants but that such effects can be produced only by enacting wedding or blessing rituals of this kind (see Rappaport 1999, especially ch. 4). Ritual is thus simultaneously both performative and meta-performative. Ritual enactment establishes moral order and direction for those who engage in it. Ultimately, ritual not only founds morality and is thus intrinsic to society, but each instance of ritual exemplifies it. "In enunciating, accepting, and making conventions moral," Rappaport concludes, "ritual contains within itself not simply a symbolic representation of social contract, but tacit social contract itself. As such, ritual … is *the* basic social act (1999: 138; emphasis original).

Performative acts and effects need not be described specifically, exclusively, or unilaterally as "religious," and they are not even all specifically or explicitly "ritual" acts (though they all contain what for Rappaport are the two main features of ritual, namely a degree of formality and embodied performance). However, as noted, ritual acts are not only performative but meta-performative and thus establish the grounds for morality more generally. Rituals are embedded in, and manifestations of, what Rappaport calls liturgical orders, which is an analytically precise way of conceptualizing something central to religion. Liturgical orders are generally enacted in temporal sequences and cycles, but consist also in a hierarchy of entailment. You cannot

meaningfully swear to God as a Christian unless the existence of God and your acceptance of that fact and identity as a Christian have been established in temporally but also foundationally prior rituals. A key feature of ritual is what Rappaport calls ultimate sacred postulates. These are often the primary tenets of what from a Christian perspective (or Christian-influenced anthropology) could be called religious belief. They are established in the most formal rituals, characterized by invariance and certainty (like the Mass), but then used to sanctify other, more contingent performative acts such as jural proceedings or a family meal. Ultimate sacred postulates are not themselves ethical precepts, since they are relatively informationless. To say "There is no God but God" is semantically and pragmatically quite different from saying "Thou shall not kill." For Rappaport, however, it is the former utterance that grounds, sanctifies, and legitimates the latter. In other words, insofar as ritual is metaperformative it is also metaethical. Put another way, the relationship of ritual to ethics is primarily one of formal entailment rather than of substance (specific content). Once grounded in religious sanctification ethics can develop at arm's length from religion.

Rappaport's approach can be compared with that of Maurice Bloch (1989, 1992; cf 2007), who also approaches religion by means of its constitution in ritual. Neither author retains the model of the socially transcended amoral natural man although, interestingly, both thinkers are naturalists, interested less in distinguishing the level of social facts from the biological, as in Durkheim's project, than in understanding them as part of a single order. Bloch does describe the seizing and even ostensible taming of vitality and the "wild" (including sex and aggression) in and through ritual, but he does not moralize about it. Indeed, he critiques rather than celebrates repression, which he sees carried out less for the needs of society or for ethics writ large than for the imposition of an alienating transcendent world on ordinary human life and for the legitimation of social hierarchy. If the product of ritual is a transcendent world, for Bloch this is not identified with society but, on the contrary, at arm's length from it. Implicitly the ethical subsists outside the transcendent or in the attempts to escape from its shadow. Indeed in his later work Bloch is explicit that morality is a matter of "innate predispositions (the product of evolution) and the nature of social interaction" rather than of religion.[10]

Although both Bloch and Rappaport draw from Austin's (1962) concept of performativity, they differ sharply in how they evaluate illocutionary effects. Whereas Bloch sees ritual language as imposing constraints on action, a vehicle of power, and a means to construct a transcendental world that is somehow antihuman, for Rappaport, as for Durkheim, ritual founds society and completes the human rather than preying upon or opposing itself to it. As I have elaborated the argument (Lambek 2010b), the performative acts and effects of ritual are closer to those of ordinary language than to metaphysics; speech act theory illustrates the ordinariness of ritual rather than its distinction from, or transcendence of, the human.

Bloch and Rappaport partially rejoin each other insofar as Rappaport recognizes (though perhaps does not sufficiently emphasize) the mystification of performative acts. If ritual achieves its conventional effects through human action, these effects can be considerably enhanced if that mechanism is concealed, and particularly if participants' own roles in the process are mystified to them. The effects are then said to be caused by the acts of the gods, spirits, or other forces that are actually the product of the ritual. The mystification of human agency in ritual action has a strong

kinship with Marx's analysis of the mystification of the value of human labor and the fetishism of capital and commodities. This raises then another kind of question about the relationship between ethics and religion, namely the ethics of both mystification and demystification, whether to perform the masquerade or unmask the performers, so to speak. The ethics of mystification is of concern to priests and healers,[11] while the ethics of demystification is a feature of purifying movements, whether they come from within religion or from outside it. The question of where anthropologists are to stand is ambiguous. What is surely ethically problematic is to unmask the mystification of others without stopping to consider the sources and effects of one's own mystification. It is one of the features of Rappaport's approach, in contrast to Marx, that some form of mystified performativeness is intrinsic to the human condition; life would be unbearable and unworkable without it. A corollary of this view is that neither natural or social scientists nor genealogists or deconstructionists necessarily hold the ethical higher ground in comparison with religious subjects (but, conversely, this is not to romanticize the pious and religiously adept either).

Neither Bloch nor Rappaport claim that ritual produces hegemony; both leave open the possibility for skepticism or resistance. Although Rappaport argues that in performing or submitting to a ritual a person intrinsically accepts the order of which it is a part and even becomes a part of that order herself, he also claims both that ritual does not directly shape subsequent behavior and that the effects of ritual are quite distinct from whatever the participant may be thinking or feeling (that is, irrespective of subjective "belief"). What ritual produces is less specific (moral) behavior or consciousness, or even constraints on behavior, than the criteria for construing behavior as being of one kind rather than another and for evaluating its quality and appropriateness. In other words, it is ritual that makes value – and specifically ethical value – possible, and less for repressing the biological or psychological individual or the everyday social world than for defining specific kinds of persons, acts, and conditions integral to that world, hence for establishing the distinctions of social life and enabling the ethical evaluation of behavior. In defining the criteria for judgment and delineating and discriminating between actors and acts, ritual does not preclude ethical judgment or constrain human freedom (as it might seem to do from Bloch's perspective, where it clashes with ordinary cognition, morality, and common sense) but rather sets up the conditions for them.

Rappaport departs from previous Durkheimian analyses of ritual as asserting, idealizing, and internalizing the obligatory to understanding ritual as establishing the criteria by which ethical judgment can take place. What Rappaport shows, in effect, is how the performance of ritual produces the criteria by which practice is defined and evaluated (Lambek 2010b). It puts behavior or practice, as philosophers say, "under a description," such that the persons who have undergone a given ritual are now persons of a certain kind, bearing specific commitments: as wives, priests, converts, Christians, devotees of a particular Hindu god, and so on, whose subsequent comportment is to be evaluated with respect to the criteria associated with the respective descriptions.

Rappaport draws out the implications of Austin's discussion of truth to show that the relation of words to world is reversed between the locutionary and illocutionary functions of speaking. In the locutionary aspect, if my words do not conform to what they purport to describe or refer to, the words are false and I am mistaken or lying. But in the illocutionary aspect, if my words have been correctly ("felicitously")

performed, it is subsequent events or behavior that are at fault if they do not conform to the utterance (Rappaport 1999: 133). Insofar as discriminations of truth and falsity or fault are at the heart of ethics, the argument is deeply significant. Performance of specific illocutionary acts shapes subsequent practice not by producing good or bad behavior but by establishing the criteria by which we know the difference, and hence the standards to which people commit themselves and to which most people will try to conform. However, the analysis does not explain the intervention of subsequent performances, especially ones that might shift the relevant criteria. By what values or concerns, with what judgment, are new illocutionary acts instantiated, promises made (or broken), particular commitments taken up (or abandoned) or preferred over others? What is their timing and how are they to be evaluated? For this we need to turn to practice theory.[12]

The Weberian Stream: Practice and Religious Values

The second major stream is broadly Aristotelian, in which the ethical is posited as providing horizons and goals for living and is realized in practice and social action. Thinkers located within this stream include Foucault and MacIntyre but insofar as this essay is focused on religion rather than other forms of virtue or practice, I take as the exemplar Max Weber.[13] In contrast to Durkheim, Weber emphasizes the intentional rather than the obligatory dimension of action, hence thought (or meaning) over ritual. The discussion of alternative means and ends (and means–ends relationships), and hence of specific cultural values, becomes critical; these values are located by various analysts within or overlapping with religion and certainly with theodicy and eschatology. Weber also replaces Durkheimian functionalism and his assumption of a relatively homogeneous social order with historical causality, social heterogeneity, and elective affinity.[14]

A central component of Weber's argument in *The Protestant Ethic* (1958 [1904–5]) is psychological, namely the role of anxiety and its relation to anomie. Weber is unusual among anxiety theorists insofar as instead of arguing for religion as a product of anxiety (including ethical anxiety) or as primarily a means to alleviate it, he sees religious formulations or religious worlds as generating their own specific forms of anxiety, which then get alleviated in particular kinds of social action and their accompanying ethical formulations or rationalizations. Weber's famous example is the way that Calvinism created a context generative of a certain work ethic and capital accumulation. This has the historical irony that ethical and religious concerns lie at the root of the essentially nonreligious and amoral or immoral system of capitalism and the "iron cage" of bureaucracy. Theories of religious change or renewal (revitalization, millenarianism) also often start from ideas of ethical anxiety generated by particular historical circumstances, like subjection to colonial rule. Similarly, it can be argued that religion forms a creative means to address or transform guilt, whether understood as an intrinsic part of psychological maturation or as the "secondary guilt" that some individuals experience more than others (Obeyesekere 1981).

Obeyesekere's conjunction of Weber and Freud was elaborated in a mixed Hindu and Buddhist context, but anxiety is also central to Christian ideas of sin, expiation, and redemption (Ricoeur 1967; Burridge 1969; Robbins 2004). Nevertheless,

Weber's point was that Christian ethics are themselves internally diverse. In Calvinism there is no chance of absolution by means of intentional human action, undergoing confession, taking the sacraments, showing devotion to Mary, and the like. Divine grace is direct, absolute, and unreachable. This provides a quite particular context for ethics (and politics: Walzer 1965). Compare it to Ethiopian orthodoxy as recounted by Tom Boylston:

> The power of begging in the name of a saint is illustrated by the story of Belay the Cannibal, which is known across Orthodox Ethiopia, and which is painted in episodic form on the door to the inner sanctum of Ura Kidane Mihret church. The story has it that Belay ate every person he met including his parents, amounting to seventy-five, or seventy-five thousand depending on which version you hear. The exception was one leprous beggar who was begging by the roadside for water, in the name of Mary. Belay, hearing the name, takes pity and gives the beggar a single handful of water. The final, largest panel of the mural depicts Belay's final judgement. St Gabriel weighs the seventy-five murdered people against the single handful of water. In the panel Mary can be seen casting her shadow over the side of the scale containing the water, causing it to outweigh the murdered people, and so by having answered one request in the name of Mary, Belay is saved. (2012: 232)

A central feature of an Aristotelian approach is that in practice ethics entails not simply following one's obligations or values, but choosing or judging between alternative means and ends and cultivating the capacity to do so wisely.[15] Life entails difficult decisions (to whom or what I should commit, how far to follow through with a calling, how to balance my needs with those of others, etc.). A Weberian approach might show how a certain set of religious practices settles among a certain segment of society into a kind of habitus of moral commitment and conformity, but also how practical judgments are made in the face of minor contingencies and major issues, and equally how the conservative complacency of the mainstream, the middle or priestly class, comes to be challenged, overturned, or otherwise got around.

Religion can also be seen as providing a sort of archive, tradition, or primary resource for ethical thought and understanding. Religion from this perspective has been, virtually by definition, the heart of ethics, conceived as wisdom. Some notable examples aside (Radin 1957; James 1988), the repository of ethical wisdom is generally understood by scholars of religion to lie in the written texts of specific religious traditions, so that one can speak of Buddhist or Jewish or Islamic ethics (and so on) and an ethical pedagogy based on reading and recitation. Ethnographers of non- or partially literate societies have generally located ethical pedagogy and cultivation in ritual, most explicitly in so-called initiation rituals (e.g., Richards 1995 [1956]), but also in divination, proverbs, oratory, and in ritual understood more broadly as the formal dimension of practice and hence embedded in such things as the articulation of persons by means of gender, age, generation, and kinship categories and relations (Fortes 1987), in sum, by means of respect and dignity. For both literate and nonliterate societies ethnographers have come to locate ethics in religiously shaped bodily disciplines and dispositions (Asad 1993; Mahmood 2005). Ethics in this sense shifts between foreground and background. Once cultivated as disposition, it becomes part of the habitus, where, for Aristotle, to "go without saying," in the sense of being able to do what is right in the circumstances without first standing back

and thinking about it, is understood as a singular achievement of excellence, not simply a manifestation of social status or the blind following of a rule. Yet in some contexts people do reflect on what otherwise goes without saying and perhaps challenge convention on what they consider ethical grounds. Indeed, some would argue that ethics entails the giving of reasons for one's acts, and that religion is one place, at least in modernity, where this is expected (Keane 2010).

Society is frequently characterized by a tension between an ethics of tradition ("it is right to do as our parents and grandparents did"; "what our parents and grandparents did is right and good") and an ethics of reform ("it is right and good to question authority, to improve, to correct past mistakes"). In the course of history this can emerge more strongly as a conflict between what has come to be seen as empty ritualism or as obedience and more direct social engagement. This was the case periodically in the course of Chinese history (Yang 1994) and in the Protestant Reformation, as well as in the emergence of a body of thought distinct from religion in Western philosophy, perhaps most acutely in the crisis expressed by existentialism over the death or absence of God. Analytically speaking, the tension here is between, on the one hand, the urgency to maintain a firm (metaethical) foundation for ethics, which perhaps only ritual or theology can provide and which often draws upon mythic acts of violence and the mystification of performativeness to legitimate social and political conservatism, and on the other hand, the need to enable and articulate a practical reform of ethics that responds to contingency, disquiet, skepticism, contradiction, and new social events or conditions (witness the successive challenges of events in biology and biomedicine), as well as human freedom, political activism, social dissension, and personal transformation.[16] Religious traditions are never static but always entail intergenerational conversation and sometimes transformation. These may be sharply articulated or go relatively unmarked. Thus, within south Asia David Pocock observed some time ago that "'The all-pervading relativism of the traditional Indian universe' was giving way to a 'more authoritarian moral absolutism.' It was a 'radical innovation' that amounted to a 'revolutionary' change in mentality" (1973; quoted in Parry and Simpson 2010: 348). Similarly, Jain understandings of the ethics of nonviolence shift substantially between south Asia and the diaspora (Vallely 2008 Laidlaw 2010).

There are also periods of social crisis in which the anchoring functions of religion appear to be discredited, dissolved, or unavailable, leading to heightened anxiety that is not readily discharged in positive directions. Articulated and abetted by charismatic Christian discourse, the epidemics of witchcraft diagnoses and accusations in parts of Africa are one expression.[17] Evans-Pritchard's (1937) argument about the rationality of witchcraft at an earlier phase of African life is intrinsically also about its ethical basis. Anthropologists have spent less time on witchcraft's irrationality and unethical qualities. This has partly to do with the ethics of anthropology itself, which is to help make sense of what we see, to understand it, and hence often to keep our personal disapproval in check. (This is not the same as the argument for cultural relativism.) In any case, witchcraft forms a field in which to think about ethics. As the imagination of the immoral, witchcraft serves an ethical function. But when the imagination is overwhelmed by actual accusations, interrogations, and punishments of suspected "witches," the situation is one in which ethical judgment is submerged in a kind of moral panic. As a form of social

breakdown, such a setting forms the exception that proves the Durkheimian rule. A particularly compelling case is the epidemic of violence against children suspected of witchcraft in Kinshasa (De Boeck 2004).

It can be argued that highly disruptive and exploitative historical experience leads to the sense that a chain has been broken; ancestors have withdrawn their protection and witches can now reign freely. Where, for a variety of social reasons, family relations have also broken down, access to positive figures with whom not simply to identify but to introject (as mediated by strong, positive "religious" figures, like spirits, saints, mythical heroes, and apical ancestors, but also public figures like politicians, musicians, healers, and athletes, as well as fictional characters) may be restricted, leaving the field open to excessive projection, the introjection of negative (weak or destructive) figures, and hence further anxiety and ethical and epistemic murk. In other words, where religion, kinship, and the political order fail to provide figures for positive intergenerational introjection, ethical worlds may break down and the cultivation of ethically positive selves rendered more difficult.[18] These anomic situations can be contrasted with those characterized by the cultivation of an ethics of memory (Lambek 1996, 2002a, 2002b; Kwon 2008), itself often given religious form and doubtless as cognizant of human tragedy as of comedy.

A Brief Ethnographic Invitation

Because so many of the arguments about religion and ethics have been caught up in discourses generated by or about the Abrahamic or other religions of the book, I invite consideration of the embodied practice of spirit possession in the western Indian Ocean. Traditions of Malagasy and African spirit possession subsist alongside Islam and Christianity, in practical and imaginative relations with but distinct from them. While it is questionable whether to define possession as "religion," and ostensibly counterintuitive to see it as ethical, I have seen it as replete with ethical opportunity and insight, providing a means for ethical self-formation and enlarging the context for the exercise of, and reflection upon, ethical capacity.

I mention three general features. First, the healing and initiation rituals of spirit possession performatively constitute spirits as persons with the ethical obligations intrinsic to personhood and focus on moving each particular spirit from exploiting the host to engaging in a commitment to help the host and her family. During the course of treatment moral injunctions are clearly specified and all parties could be said to realize and cultivate a moral disposition in the process. Yet, the explicitly amoral nature of spirits, whether expressed in public spectacle or in private pain, forces people to confront the limits of the ethical. Overall, possession could be said to be constituted by a tension between the progressive move to socializing or humanizing each manifest spirit and the recognition of a contrast between spirits and humans that can never be resolved, a contrast between social obligation, confirmed criteria, and caring for others – and the power and freedom to do otherwise. When, after a ceremony at which the spirits had blessed the assembled humans, I asked what had been said, a spirit chuckled in response that I could hardly expect them to wish that people remain healthy and untroubled by spirits when that was how they drew

their sustenance … Thus, whether observing the performance of spirits in public festivities or supplicating them in relatively private contexts, ethics is always in practice yet also in question (Lambek 1981).

Second, as spirit mediums, healers engage in ethical practice and develop an extended scope and means for ethical action. Which spirits one comes to be possessed by over the life course entails tacit ethical judgments concerning identification with and separation from others as well as the acceptance of a calling. Mediums are faced with demands by kin and clients that cannot be adequately met or compensated, suffer in their craft, become vulnerable to suspicion as sorcerers, are privy to personal secrets, need to develop empathy, manage the transference, and so forth – all these challenges and contingencies both require ethical integrity and help to reflect upon and produce it. Being a healer requires continuous practical judgment, including such implicit judgments as when to enter trance and speak as a particular spirit rather than as another spirit or as oneself, and what to say or do differently, so as to produce a distributed yet forceful and consistent polyphony. The Aristotelian concept of phronesis is indispensable to elucidate all this and to offset arguments that attempt to explain possession instrumentally, mechanically, or pathologically. The management of extremes is itself a form of phronesis in the sense of forging a virtuous balance and developing and enacting maturity, insight, and wisdom in personal relations (Lambek 1993; cf. Boddy 1989).

Third, strong mediums display virtuosity in deploying and extending the imaginative, communicative, and performative means that spirit possession provides and can thereby become ethical exemplars in their communities. In particular, they exemplify both a consciousness and a conscience of history; in speaking in and for particular voices, they offer an appropriate or provocative balance of remembering and forgetting, acknowledging the past, addressing the present, and looking to the future (Lambek 2002a, 2002b).

Overall then, spirit possession provides an enlarged field of play, in which ethical disposition can be cultivated, ethical concerns expressed and possibly satisfied, and in which the human capacity for ethical judgment and practice (Macpherson 1973) can be given full exercise. Similar developments can be found within other religious traditions and the practices they establish and legitimate but one of the central features of possession is the highlighting of irony (Lambek 2003b). The facts of multiple personhood and multiple voicing have the effect of acknowledging uncertainty and ambiguity, hence of privileging continuous contextual judgment over absolute rule-following, modesty over self-righteousness, and the ordinary and this-worldly over the transcendental and otherworldly. In the inspired performances of the spirits, Islam and Christianity themselves are not rejected but gently ironized.

Conclusion

In distinguishing between Durkheimian and Weberian traditions it has not been my intention to suggest it is necessary to choose between them. On the contrary, fruitful approaches to the articulation of religion and ethics will draw judiciously upon each. From the former perspective, ritual is the foundation of the ethical; it establishes,

validates, and sanctifies the criteria by which ethical judgments are made and founds the basis of value. From the latter perspective, religion specifies and substantiates distinctive values, fields, and forms a field of moral practice, in which means and ends inform historical action and, conversely, the exercise of the virtues is informed by social and historical circumstances.

Ritual and religion support the constitution of ethical persons characterized by the dignity they are owed and the respect they owe others. Personal dignity and responsibility are anchored in the performance of rituals (from ordinary greetings to the correct disposal of the dead), in the cultivation of the virtues and virtuous practice, and in the introjection of strong figures. Where the conditions for dignity break down, whether at the collective or individual level, an ethical crisis ensues. The situation may either unravel further in witchcraft accusations, racism, and other self- or socially destructive forms of behavior or be resolved by healing, pastoral, and disciplinary forms of religious activity, the rise of ethical prophets, conversions to new forms of religious practice, and the establishment of new criteria.

While in some respects ethics is a human universal, there is also a dialectical movement in human social life and history between ethics conceived and practiced as submission to, and judicious action within, a given order understood as originating outside the individual and even outside society, and ethics understood as the freedom and initiative to escape the constraints, criteria, routines, and negative effects of such order. Presumably at some historical moments it will feel to the majority of adherents that a good balance has been achieved, in which some set of practices (call them "religion") provide the means for both certainty and restraint *and* creative hopeful action (call them "ethics"). But social life does not stand still and debate over the good life for human beings will never be fully resolved (were it to be resolved, the quality of life would be lesser for the loss of debate). Therefore one might add that ethics always needs to provide a space for argument, if not simply conversation, which religion may sometimes appear to enhance and at other times to close down.

Ethics in the tradition of ordinary language philosophy entails the linguistic means for fine discriminations between actors, acts, reasons, excuses, character, and interpretations. To add a more dynamic component, one could include the social possibilities for making and following through on these discriminations. One could say that human beings thrive when this field is rich, variegated, and accessible, but experience dissatisfaction when the means for the full exercise of their ethical capacity is limited, constrained, or denied. Religion in its various social and historical formations can be examined with respect to how it both enables and frustrates ethical exercise. Ethical practice in this sense concerns judgment between valued means and ends, generally conjoined, rather than either strict rules and their observance or strategies and their calculation. It includes space for contemplation or reflection as well as for the virtuous practice that "goes without saying." And it entails the establishment of a range of criteria that produce original kinds of persons, relations, contexts, and actions, hence specific possibilities for judgment, acknowledgment, recognition, and engagement; the enlargement and refinement of discriminations and commitments and the means for their fulfillment; and the movement between the passionate, the extraordinary, and the calling – and the ordinary work of daily action, observation, and care.

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NOTES

1 Consider the expansion of "new age" practices in North America or the United Kingdom, the resurgence of spirit possession in Vietnam (Fjelstad and Nguyễn 2011) and of Daoism in China, and the thriving forms of spirit possession in Brazil and the western Indian Ocean. However, possession is on the retreat or defensive in parts of Africa (Masquelier 2001, for Niger; Boddy, personal communication, for Sudan), as is shamanism from Buddhism in north Asia (Bernstein 2011). The case of Hinduism is different yet again, as proliferating Hindu deities nevertheless occlude or destroy tribal ones (Nandy 2001).

2 On defining religion from multidisciplinary perspectives see De Vries 2008. On ethics from anthropology see Lambek 2010a.

3 On the politics of "sacrifice" and violent "sacrificial" acts there is now a burgeoning literature (e.g., Kahn 2008).

4 For culturally distinct examples of sacrifice see Lambek (2007, 2008a) and Obeyesekere (1984).

5 Sacrifice might also be said to establish the foundation or ultimate standard of value (Lambek 2008b) and self-sacrifice to catch people in unfulfillable obligation (Lambek 2007).

6 On the ethical limits of this argument, see Hasan-Rokem 2003.

7 Although Achebe's portrait is fictional, he offers an explanation for the first Igbo conversions to Christianity. This is not to argue that Christianity is ethically superior to Igbo ancestral practice.

8 By "incommensurable" I do not mean contradictory but simply not mapping fully onto or alongside each other (Lambek 1991; 1993: ch. 12).

9 For full discussion of Durkheim and Weber see Chapters 1 and 2 in this volume.

10 Personal communication, Mar. 14 and 16, 2011. Bloch is equally clear that this is not a matter of unmediated instincts. See also Bloch 2007.

11 See, for example, Lévi-Strauss (1963) on the shaman or my account of a healer who removes sorcery (Lambek 1993: ch. 9). Famous examples are the strategic deception of initiates (e.g., Barth 1975) and of women by men in Melanesia, Amazonia, and elsewhere.

12 For a more extensive attempt to integrate them in a dialectic of performance and practice, see Lambek 2010b.

13 On Foucauldian ideas of discipline and self-formation, see Chapters 4 and 13 in this volume.

14 Ruth Benedict and those she influenced draw, like Weber, from the German idealist tradition and share an interest in values, but they lack a strong sense of social differentiation; hence their portraits tend to be homogeneous and ahistorical (like some Durkheimians').

15 For an attempt to distinguish between simple "choice" and ethical "judgment," see Lambek 2008b.

16 These positions can be marked, respectively, by Weber's ideal types of priest and prophet, understood not as characteristic of different kinds of societies or different kinds of religion but as the most vocal or visible proponents of distinct ethical stances under specific historical conditions.

17 Racist and anti-Muslim hysteria in North America and Europe may be another.

18 This model has been briefly proposed in Lambek and Solway (2001) and Lambek (2003a) and draws on our reflection on accounts of witchcraft by Ashforth (2000) and others as filtered through psychoanalytic models of Loewald (1980) and Mitchell (1988). It seems superior to the simple invocation of "trauma."

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