

## Chapter 2: Religion and Global Ethics

Freedom, Cosmopolitanism and the European Enlightenment  
Religion, Civic Life and Civil Disobedience  
Ethics, Religion and Divine Command Theory  
Pluralism and the Golden Rule  
The Problem of Evil and Free Will  
Secular Ethics and Toleration  
Criticisms of Secularism and Global Ethics

### Reading

Plato, *Euthyphro*  
Gandhi, *Religion and Truth*  
Ignatieff, *Reimagining a Global Ethic*

### Key Terms

Secular Ethics	Divine Command Theory	Theodicies
Cosmopolitanism	Religious Pluralism	Secularization
The Enlightenment	Value Pluralism	Paradox of Toleration
Civil Disobedience	Golden Rule	Fundamentalism
Eurocentricism		

### Getting Started

You might begin by discussing how the diversity apparent in our increasingly integrated world both improves relationships and creates strife. The U.N.'s Universal Declaration of Human Rights aims for global agreement about basic rights, but there are outstanding disagreements

about the nature of those rights, such as the roles of women and expression of irreligious beliefs. Ask students for examples from the news about the clash of freedom of expression and religious convictions. They should start to grapple with the issue of how ethics intersects with religion, and especially with religious fundamentalism.

### **Answers to the Review Exercises in the Text**

1. According to the U.N.'s Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the nations of the world are supposed to share basic moral principles, despite our vast cultural, religious, and political differences. The Declaration upholds the inherent dignity of human beings and equal rights of men and women. This often clashes with the religious convictions of many people, who believe that free speech is contraindicated, especially in regard to religious criticism.
2. Much of the terminology about freedom of religion and morality is rooted in Western thinking. We tend to tell a Eurocentric or Western-focused story about the development of tolerance, liberty and individual rights. To people who identify with non-Western religions and cultures, this approach reflects a predominantly Christian and European worldview.
3. As imagined by Ignatieff, a global ethic would reach out to common ground where it exists, while agreeing to disagree about the claim that ethical conduct must be derived from a spiritual or religious duty. The global ethic would be based on reasoning and justification of ethical ideas and behavior.
4. One defense of the Divine Command Theory of Ethics is that if there were no God, then there would be no morality. Without God as a source for morality, there would be no eternal, absolute or objective basis for morality. Additionally, without a divine judge who gives out punishments and rewards in the afterlife, there would be no motivation to be ethical.  
An argument against this theory is religious diversity. Given the broad array of religious beliefs throughout the world, and even the diversity of beliefs within each religion, it is difficult to determine which truly reflects the divine command.  
It is inaccurate to say that if there were no God, then everything would be permitted. A number of ethical theories provide reasons and justifications for ethical principle without reference to God.
5. The advantage of a religious approach to ethics is that it describes the "highest good," and leads people to strive for highly ethical behavior. The advantage of the secular approach is that it provides an "overlapping consensus" among people who disagree about religion. It provides a system of values and fair rules that can be agreed upon by people of different religious traditions.

The secular approach can be compatible with religion, as its principles recognize basic ideas about human rights that transcend religious boundaries.

6. Socrates asks whether things are good because they are approved by the gods or whether the gods approve of them because they are good. To say that actions are good just because they are willed or approved by the gods or God seems to make morality arbitrary. Socrates believes that God or the gods condemn or disapprove of certain beliefs and actions because they are inherently bad. Therefore, we should also condemn such actions.
7. There is a goal of moving toward a cosmopolitan and pluralist point of view that would incorporate the insights of the world's great moral and religious traditions. Whether the goal can be attained is an open question. Consider ongoing racial and religious tensions across the world.
8. Consider similarities and differences among the world's religions. Are religious moderates and religious fundamentalists of different faiths similar in their thinking?

### **Questions for Further Thought**

1. Kant thought that history would develop in a cosmopolitan direction. Do you think he was correct? Given the cultural and religious differences across the world, do you think his vision is possible?
2. Religion is at the center of many applied ethical topics. Give two recent examples from current events. How did religious ethics play a part in these events?
3. For religious believers who think that God requires absolute obedience to his commandments, a secular ethic that does not explicitly embrace God as the source of morality will appear to be morally suspect and blasphemous. Do you think this strain of thought can be compatible with a global moral ethic?
4. Do you believe that there are limits to toleration? Should we tolerate those who are intolerant of the very idea of toleration?

**Answers to the Study Questions Preceding the Reading by Plato**

1. Piety is “that which is dear to the gods,” or that which is favored by the gods or approved by them.
2. Yes, even the gods disagree about what is just and unjust. This poses a problem for Euthyphro’s first definition of piety because what will be agreeable to one god will be disagreeable to another. Thus some action could be both pious and impious at the same time according to Euthyphro’s definition.
3. Euthyphro amends his definition of piety to what all the gods approve of.
4. He asks “whether the pious or holy is beloved by the gods because it is holy, or holy because it is beloved of the gods.”
5. This shows that being pious comes first. Something is first pious or holy and because of this it is loved by the gods.
6. Being loved is an attribute of holiness, not its essence. What is needed is to give the essence of holiness. This is yet to be done and is a continuing question throughout the Platonic dialogues.

**Answers to the Study Questions Preceding the Reading by Gandhi**

1. Gandhi describes the permanent element in human nature that yearns to know its Maker and appreciate the true correspondence between the Maker and itself.
2. Gandhi believes in the goodness of God, as proven by the fact that even in the midst of death, life persists, and even in the midst of untruth, truth persists, and even in the midst of darkness, light persists. His argument is debatable.
3. God is truth and fearlessness, so in order to know God, one must be willing to identify with and face every creature. Therefore, religious people should not avoid any field of life.
4. Ahimsa is necessary because God cannot be realized by one who is not pure of heart.
5. Many people of faith would agree with Gandhi’s contention, but others would disagree, saying that various religions are radically different from one another.
6. Gandhi believes that God has created all the different faiths and their religious leaders.
7. Gandhi states that belief in God is the cornerstone of all religions.

**Answers to the Study Questions Preceding the Reading by Ignatieff**

1. Global ethical discussions used to be based on the ideas of a Western, university-educated elite. Now, we no longer exclude others, but we face the challenge of conducting a global discussion on the premise of equal inclusion.
2. Since philosophers have been using the idea of natural law, they have employed the idea of universal laws to criticize ethical partiality that is rooted in attachments to class, identity, nation or religion.
3. To deal with the conflict between religious traditions, we should reach out to common ground where it exists, while agreeing to disagree about the claim that ethical conduct must be derived from religion.
4. Often, nations do not believe that the universal ethic should not trump their local interests. Examples of concrete problems that arise are the question about whether to assist other people in other countries, and whether to permit female genital cutting.
5. Ignatieff believes that as defenders of the particular claims of nations and religions encounter one another in the global arena, the fact of adversarial justification will become unavoidable. We will discard the idea that any one value trumps another, and we will need to justify our values through persuasion with reason. The particular values of each nation, and the global values, will all have to justify themselves.