Almost one year ago, the world watched the Twin Towers implode “changing life forever.” As we memorialize the first year anniversary of September 11, 2001 the many questions generated by that event continue to linger. The role of Islam and Islamic culture in the lives of the perpetrators of the 9/11 tragedy stirred deep discussions involving comparative religious ethics and the prospects for a common morality. Suddenly, many, whose self-perception was that they were enlightened and good people, were awakened to their ignorance of Islam and Islamic culture. Not only was there a need to understand the basics of Islam, but also, a need to begin to fathom how we could ever deal peacefully with “Others” whose values are seemingly so different from our own. How, in a world so deeply and painfully divided, can there ever be true consensus about even the most fundamental values? Fortunately, there are some outstanding works to which we can turn.

To even ask the question about a common morality is to, at least momentarily, hope that there is one. Many quite instinctively move to ground this hopeful intuition in some kind of human rights theory or affective sense of “fellow feeling.” One of the most useful volumes for sorting out and framing these intuitions in terms of comparative ethics is Gene Outka and John P. Reeder, Jr.‘s *Prospects for a Common Morality*. This is a collection of twelve essays that present the diverse positions of various English-speaking theologians and philosophers.

In their respective essays, Alan Gewirth and Alan Donagan take similar positions, based on the philosophy of Immanuel Kant. Gewirth holds the position that any rational person is committed by Kantian self-consistency to respect the rights of others to the basic conditions for rational agency, including noninterference and positive support. Donagan holds that there is something universally human that undergirds the mores of any religious or socio-political community, namely reason. He links his argument to the Jewish and Christian traditions, but he does not depend on theological arguments.

David Little defends the idea of a common morality and grounds his arguments in the philosophical approach known as

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intuitionism. He claims we all have a basic sense of the rightness and wrongness of certain behaviors, such as truth-telling or torture. Jeffery Stout agrees that we are capable of knowing certain moral truths even though we cannot come up with a moral theory to justify the wrong/rightness at any moment in history. He uses slavery as an example of something that was known to be wrong even as it was being justified.

Yet, the essays by another set of authors represented in the Outka and Reeder text show that they are not so convinced that a common morality is possible. In her essay, Annette C. Baier, grounding her criticisms in Humean virtue ethics, questions most claims for universally valid human rights. She does, however, support her own version of a human rights ethic. She claims that individual rights, beginning with speech, are central and all other rights are negotiated with the obligation of responsibility. John Reeder writes from a neo-pragmatist position and asserts that while we never lose our deeper commitment to our own moral tradition, it is possible to reflect on various forms of morality and agree to those areas where there is some overlap. Richard Rorty defends the role of the narratives of particular communities in establishing their own ethics; thus in secular liberal societies, all moral claims including human rights need no justification.

One major criticism of “human rights” is that those in power, who interpret various value systems for their self-interested purposes, and call them “universal,” establish such rights. The word of cultural elites and Western cultural hegemony seems to always win the day. David Little argues that there are deep differences among cultures with respect to the nature of the individual and her/his proper relation to the community. Western notions of liberty that focus nearly exclusively on the individual are the most common offenders of non-Western cultures in which the self is understood in a more communitarian sense. Certainly this argument gained added validity in light of September 11, as did the issues concerning the rights of women.

Margaret Farley addresses the reality that all too often what is understood to be “universal” is in fact what is seen from the male perspective only and that those universals are simply imposed on women. Farley agrees that without some concurrence on minimal standards there would be no basis from which to criticize practices that are oppressive and harmful to women. Thus, she suggests a cautious approach to human rights, while flagging the danger of modeling any universal standards on the values of a dominant group.

The sampling of essays gathered by Outka and Reeder is certainly rich with possibilities toward a common morality, many of which involve a consideration of some common or universal human rights. But “human rights” are often stated in such general terms as to be open to wide interpretation. Certainly there is still some value to be held onto in that regard, however. Statements, such as the 1948 United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights provide a basis for dialogue and negotiation.

The value of such negotiation is the focus of the work of several authors not included in the Outka and Reeder anthology, such as Sumner Twiss. He suggests a pragmatic negotiation strategy of seeking the overlapping consensus from the various unique traditions. William O’Neill has proposed that rhetorical analysis has much to offer a consensus on human rights. Rhetoric, as he defines it, is the art of persuading others in terms of reasons they themselves would find persuasive. Being open to hear the perspective of another,
from the other’s point of view enables one to learn what would be persuasive to the other. Taking care not to let the process degenerate into manipulation, one is able to discuss moral matters with another on her or his own terms.

While it is important to understand moral pluralism at the theoretical level, a more practical and pastoral approach is also necessary. Two excellent tools at that level are the volumes *Ethics and World Religions: Cross-Cultural Case Studies* edited by Regina Wolfe and Christine E. Gudorf; and *Comparative Religious Ethics: A Narrative Approach* by Darrel J. Fasching and Dell deChant. Of particular interest is each volume’s section on Islam. The Islamic narratives presented by Fasching and Dell deChant include the formative story of the prophet Mohammad, the cosmic story of creation, submission, and *Sharia* or Islamic Law, and the appropriation of this story by Malcolm X in the U.S. context. Throughout, comparison and contrast is drawn between Islamic, Jewish, and Christian understandings of theological and ethical notions, particularly ideas of violence and just war. The discussion questions and the bibliography at the end of each chapter make this an important resource for pastors and a viable tool for adult education.

Getting down to real cases is perhaps the best way to understand common and different moral perspectives. As it is with Christianity, Islam is not monolithic. In light of this, Wolfe and Gudorf bring together the expertise of top moralists from the wide variety that is found within Islam (and other major world religions). Addressing cases concerning family and culture, religion and the state, economics and ecology, as well as medicine and public health, each moralist presents a discussion of the moral problem(s) and the moral wisdom he or she believes relevant. This book is an important resource for inter-religious dialogue and adult education. The text is very accessible and has a rich bibliography for more in-depth study.

A strength of the Catholic moral tradition is its grounding in natural law and the understanding of the human person (universally) created in God’s image and likeness. The Catholic moral tradition has been (theoretically) open to the existence of positive rights in the form of basic entitlements, while other traditions were not. As ministers we need to tap into the wealth of this tradition as we continue to learn the lessons of September 11.

**References**


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