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THE ETHICS AND POLITICS OF RELIGIOUS ETHICS, 1973–2023

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ABSTRACT

This essay addresses the questions, "what good is religious ethics for?" and "what justification exists for the field?" in three steps. First, it canvases how religious ethicists have offered reasons for carrying out work in the field to identify an *Anti-Reductive Paradigm* that is guided by an *Egalitarian Imperative*. That imperative functions as a thin, minimal morality of inclusivity and equal respect that guides work in the field. Second, the essay considers the field's ends. Here the focus shifts from values that shape the field's *methods* to values that can describe the field's *purposes*. That shift requires us to think in terms of a thick rather than a thin morality, one with substantive rather than procedural virtues in mind. The essay offers a constructive, substantive proposal under the rubric of *Critical Humanism*. Critical Humanism justifies the study of religious ethics as an enterprise that can expand the moral imagination through its encounter with difference. It is shaped by four values: post-critical reasoning, social criticism, cross-cultural fluency, and environmental responsibility. Third, the essay brings the two parts of the argument together by explaining how to connect such purposes to the thin morality of inclusivity and equal respect. One upshot of the essay is to have us think not only about values, but also about power as it pertains to scholarship in the guild; hence the attention to the ethics and politics of religious ethics.

KEYWORDS: *justification, Critical Humanism, thin and thick morality, post-critical reasoning, social criticism, cross-cultural fluency, environmental responsibility*

1. Religious Ethics and the Question of Value

With the 50th anniversary of the *Journal of Religious Ethics*, the field of religious ethics can confidently say that it has become a vibrant and robust area of scholarship in many important respects. Several generations of scholars in North America and abroad now contribute to the field by way of innovative books, articles, chapters, anthologies, teaching resources, and encyclopedia and thus help to solidify ways of studying the relationship between religion and ethics. Reflecting the *JRE*'s inaugural vision, scholars in the field regularly contribute to three domains of inquiry: comparative religious ethics, consideration of foundational conceptual and methodological issues in religious ethics, and historical studies of influential

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figures and texts (Reynolds 1997, xvi).[1] Contributions from other areas of scholarship have been important to the journal—and to the field more broadly—but the organizing focus has been to examine, in the words of Ronald Green, "the basic question of what religion and various religious traditions contribute to our understanding of the moral life" (1997, 226; see also Reynolds 1997, xvi).[2]

But with the success of religious ethics, there is reason to pause and ask about its *value* as a scholarly enterprise. What good is religious ethics for? What justification exists for the field?[3] What purposes should we seek? What values guide work in the field and help form an intellectual community? Why transmit our intellectual habits to future generations of scholars and students?[4] Failing to address these questions, I suggest, leaves the field with fewer reasons for confidence than we might initially imagine.[5]

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[1] This is not to deny the importance of pioneers in the field of religious ethics, for example Weber, Troeltsch, Durkheim, Westermarck, and Hobhouse (see Twiss 2005b). I write this essay on the premise that we can mark the advent of religious ethics as a formal, academic area of study with the inaugural publication of the *Journal of Religious Ethics* in 1973. Comparative religious ethics, as Sumner B. Twiss notes, can be dated to 1978 with the publications of Green, Hindery, and Little and Twiss in that same year. To be sure, religious-ethical positions that were developed out of particular religious traditions, such as Christian ethics or Jewish ethics, precede these dates by several decades. But, as James M. Gustafson notes, these earlier works were aimed largely at religious clergy and laity (1997).

[2] A word of clarification: I am presuming that "religious ethics" includes what is standardly viewed as comparative religious ethics (involving more than one tradition) as well as studies of single religious traditions. Recently, some scholars have adopted the locution "comparative ethics" and the "comparative study of religious ethics" (see Stout 2005; Twiss 2005b; and Kelsay 2012). Presumably such work can include religious and secular traditions, although as far as I am aware, whether or how these locutions differ from "comparative religious ethics" has not been clarified. Perhaps these ambiguities indicate that the lines between comparative religious ethics and religious ethics are being blurred, as Thomas A. Lewis observes. My view, echoing Lewis, is that all religious ethics is comparative insofar as it frames the study of religious-ethical beliefs and practices within a larger matrix of categories of analysis, and that what is labeled as comparative religious ethics is not qualitatively different from religious ethics *simpliciter*. Interpretation is comparative insofar as it involves bringing one's own conceptual apparatus to bear on a body of data. That said, for reasons I will explain in sec. 6.c below, religious ethics contributes to the good of cross-cultural fluency, and for that reason it seems wise to retain the locution "comparative religious ethics" as a subfield within religious ethics. See Lewis 2015, 103.

[3] Similar justificatory questions in the humanities have been taken up in the U.K. by Helen Small 2014, and in the U.S. by Geoffrey Galt Harpham 2011. On justificatory questions as they bear on the academic study of religion, see Richard B. Miller 2021.

[4] Throughout this essay, I am presuming the college or university as the primary social setting of religious ethics rather than (say) a religious community, labor organization, political party, arts organization, professional membership (for example, journalism or health care), or voluntary organization. Non-academic locations might indeed be important to many religious ethicists for their insights and identities, but the primary institutional context in which religious ethicists now work is the academy. I am thus assuming that religious ethics, while nonetheless being a practical discipline, is a scholarly, reflective activity as distinct from one ordered exclusively to praxis. (I do not deny that prophetic and other insights are made possible in the dialectic between thought and praxis; see, for example, Gutierrez 1988; Jenkins 2009). I would also note, following William W. Everett 1977, that professional organizations might provide a context in which those working in non-academic locations have a place to exchange ideas with scholars of religious ethics. On social locations other than the academy for scholars of religion to make an intellectual impact, see William Dean 1994. On the rise of an "academic guild consciousness" in religious ethics and religious studies, see Gustafson 1997, 14. On the value of connecting scholarship in comparative religious ethics with citizenship, see Bruce Grelle 1998.

In this essay, I will address these questions in three steps. I will first canvas how religious ethicists have proposed or modeled one or another reason for carrying out research in the field. With that body of data in hand, I will identify two values that license and discipline work in religious ethics—namely, the values of inclusivity and equal respect. These two values have us insist upon including religion in the study of ethics along with avoiding ethnocentrism and religious apologetics in the study of religious ethics. I will clarify these ideas by describing an *Anti-Reductive Paradigm* in religious ethics that is guided by an *Egalitarian Imperative* (secs. 2, 3). That imperative functions as a thin, minimal morality that guides the aspirations of work in the field. Bringing that imperative and the methodological pluralism of the guild into focus enables us to see religious ethics as a form of *Critical Pluralism* (sec. 4).

These observations largely concern values that guide the field's research methods. Such procedural matters focus on matters of the *right* that leave relatively untouched questions about the *good* toward which the field can aim. With that fact in mind, I will turn to the second step in the argument, in which I examine various efforts to consider the field's ends as a segue toward proposing one myself (secs. 5, 6). Here the focus will shift from values that shape the field's *methods* to values that can describe the field's *purposes*. That shift will require us to think in terms of a thick rather than a thin morality, one with substantive rather than procedural virtues in mind.

I will organize my substantive argument under the rubric of *Critical Humanism*. Critical Humanism justifies the study of religious ethics as an enterprise that can expand the moral imagination through its encounter with difference. For critical humanists, the central objects of such scholarly inquiry are cultural expressions—artifacts and texts—of what I call "moral subjectivity." The central idea is that human beings are persons with depth—free and responsible for expressing, interrogating, and changing their desires against a background of options, which provide their lives with reasons for action. Attention to human agency must therefore study the dynamics of subject-formation—ways in which human beings come to generate, attempt to understand, and revise their various ways of being, knowing, and acting. With these ideas in mind, Critical Humanism has us study and evaluate the many processes, idioms, and contexts of moral subjectivity as well as the interpersonal, political, cultural, and environmental contexts in which such processes take shape. For that reason, as I will make plain, Critical Humanism is shaped by four values: post-critical reasoning, social criticism, cross-cultural fluency, and environmental responsibility (secs. 6.1–6.4). Religious ethics, insofar as it contributes to our understanding of human agency and action in light of these values, can be a natural ally of critical humanistic intellectualism. On these terms, Critical Humanism can offer religious ethics a thick morality to justify its practices, connect religious ethics to wider currents in the humanities, and expand the imagination about moral possibilities and problems in personal life and public affairs. This is not to say that Critical Humanism is necessary as a basis for justifying religious ethics, only that it can suffice as a way of doing so.

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[5] Echoing these reservations are Bruce Grelle 1998, 39 and Eric Gregory 2016, 166.

In the third step of my argument, I will bring the two main parts of the essay together by explaining how to connect such purposes to the thin morality of inclusivity and equal respect (sec. 7). One upshot of my argument is to have us think not only about values, but also about power as it pertains to scholarship in the guild. Hence my attention to the ethics and politics of religious ethics.

The argument that follows will identify procedural and substantive excellences in the field—matters concerning the right and the good as these concepts bear on scholarly habits in religious ethics. My overall optic is retrospective, introspective, and prospective. I will have us look back at previous work that makes manifest the guild's values as a step toward proposing a comprehensive rationale that offers a way to imagine future directions in the field.

2. The Anti-Reductive Paradigm

To begin, let us return to my opening questions about the field's value. I pose them knowing well that religious ethicists have presumed answers to them in the pages of this journal as well as in numerous other publications. Canvassing that material provides considerable data, or *phainomena* as Aristotle would have it, by way of an initial response.

Religious ethics has value, one could say, given the need to show members of religious communities what their loyalties imply for the moral life across a range of personal, political, and professional contexts (Gustafson 1997, 19).[6] In a related vein, religious ethicists can draw on religious-ethical teachings to tackle grave moral problems in personal life, social relations, and global affairs (see O'Connor 1979; Grelle 1998; Stalnaker 2006; Lloyd 2014; Twiss 2005b; and Ilesanmi 2019).[7] Given that religion makes a practical difference in the lives of many individuals, moreover, studying ethics without attention to relevant religious beliefs, traditions, and practices would leave us with a considerably truncated picture of morality (for example, Yearley 1993; Johnson 1997; and Schweiker 2005). And, in order to capture the richness and complexity of religious-ethical traditions, it is necessary to study their histories, relationships with social and political formations, and philosophical bases (see Toulmin and Jonsen 1988; Herdt 2008; and Kavka 2012).

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[6] Gustafson labels this work a form of "advocacy" whose aim is to "affect the moral communities of various traditions or ecumenical agencies," as distinct from work by "academic-guild religious ethicists" that is more scholarly (1997, 14). Gustafson goes on to identify recent work that blurs this distinction. See n9 for examples.

[7] Introducing her volume on comparative environmental religious ethics, Laura M. Hartman provides one clear articulation of this reason: "If, say, Muslims and Hindus can agree on the importance of clean water, or if Daoists and Confucians can agree about respect for animals, or if Christians and Muslims in Nigeria can agree on the need to drastically clean up and repair the biotic community in the Niger Delta—then this consensus offers hope for overcoming the political delays that seem to stymie environmental reforms on every continent" (2018, 22).

To be sure, religious traditions are hardly innocent, and for that reason it is important to interrogate religious beliefs and practices to speak about systemic evils and individual wrongs authorized as sacred obligations (for example, Gutierrez 1988; Robb 1981; Farley 1993; Schilbrack 2002; Miller 2010; Dávilia 2017; and see also Rorty 2003). In a descriptive register, religious ethicists can track patterns of reason-giving within a tradition's ethical teachings that provide resources for its own self-understanding, immanent self-criticism, and possible self-correction (see Stout 2004; Kelsay 2005; Bucar 2016; and Kellison 2014). It is also the case that religious ethics examines a wide range of traditions and practices, making possible ways to learn from others and experience alterity as a potential gift to human understanding (see Yearley 1993; Stalnaker 2006). Typically such knowledge has the potential to relativize one's own ideas and offers the possibility of borrowing from others to improve one's moral commitments (see LaFleur 1992; Stalnaker 2006; Oh 2007; and Miller 2016). And, because "religion" is such a capacious category, studying religious ethics enables one to examine a diverse range of cultural data—literary, aesthetic, visual, material, and the like—to examine their ethical dimensions (see Yeager 2009; Bucar 2016).

At the level of metaethics, studying religious ethics might enable us to ascertain similarities within a diversity of traditions, thereby providing evidence of a common morality (see Outka and Reeder 1993; Reeder 1996; Twiss 2005a; Little 2015; and Ilesanmi 2019). In a similar vein, studying religious ethics provides ways to produce generalizable knowledge regarding the variety of religious traditions in their relation to morality (for example, Little and Twiss 1978; Green 1998), or ways to identify illuminating points of similarity and difference between two traditions on specific ethical issues (for example, Johnson and Kelsay 1990; Stalnaker 2006; Bucar 2016; and Moazam 2006). Studying a variety of religious traditions, moreover, poses basic philosophical questions about how—or on what terms—religious practices and teachings can be justified (see Jung 2017). Such study also poses questions about moral relativism along with whether—and how—universalistic claims about religion and ethics can sustain philosophical challenges from historicist quarters (see Stalnaker 2006). For that matter, many tools of moral analysis and social criticism, however much they now find expression in non-religious idioms, have their roots in religious traditions, and we do well to study those ideas' histories to understand, apply, and perhaps revise them in light of new insights and discoveries (see Little 1969; Walzer 1977, 1987; Toulmin and Jonsen 1988; Keenan and Shannon 1995; Tierney 1997; and Kellison 2015).

Yet another reason for work in the field is to show how religious and ethical thought can inform policy assessment and practical reasoning about vital issues of our time (see, for example, Childress 1982, 1997; Keown 1995; Lammers and Verhey 1998; Newman 1998; Zoloth 1999; Lauritzen 2001; James 2004;

Brockopp 2008; Jenkins 2013; Kalbian 2014; Pedersen 2015; Hartman 2018; Gade 2019; and Stalnaker 2020). Relatedly, studying the ethical ideas of various religious traditions can help to dismantle cultural and religious stereotypes, especially the idea that religions are little more than monolithic dogmatic beliefs and regulations (Sells 2015; Raucher 2016; and Sheikh 2019). It is also the case that studying religious reasons for human behavior can help fill out how we understand the many sources of moral psychology and moral formation (see Lauritzen 1992; Antonaccio 2000, 2012; Stalnaker 2006; Cates 2009; Miller 2016; Fredericks 2021; and Dunn 2021). And because religious ethics is a field unto itself, it is important to study how scholars reflect on the work of others in the effort to clarify the guild's organizing categories, proceeding in a self-reflexive way (see Little and Twiss 1978; Stout 1980; Santurri 1980; Lovin and Reynolds 1985; Green and Reynolds 1986; Green 1997; Gustafson 1997; Twiss 2005a; Little 2006; Davis 2008; Kelsay 2012; Ranganathan and Clairmont 2017; and Hwang 2021).

To be sure, these reasons are not sealed off from each another; scholars can—and do—bring two or more of them together in creative ways. My main point here is that we typically study religious ethics with several if not all of these reasons in mind. Such rationales explain how religious ethicists make contributions to knowledge—a general rationale for work in the academy.

Although additional reasons might be proposed in response to my questions, I believe that what I have listed fairly represents how the field has interpreted and carried out its tasks over the past half century.[8] Relevant to my inquiry into the ethics and politics of religious ethics is that these various reasons share two metadisciplinary values. First, religious ethics aims to represent ethics *inclusively*. There is an ongoing polemic in religious ethics (subliminal if not overt) against the notion that ethics can be adequately represented absent its connections to religious beliefs and practices. To fully grasp the history, depth, and breadth of ethical ideas, theories, histories, influential figures, contexts, and the like, attention to religion (broadly and historically conceived) is necessary. Second, religious ethics is underwritten by the value of *equal respect* toward religious traditions. As religious ethicists' concerns about ethnocentrism and religious apologetics make plain, scholars reject the idea that one or another religious tradition or specific religious concerns should enjoy pride of place in the field (see Editors 1973; Little and Twiss 1978; Green 1997; and Twiss 2005b). These two values, respectively, *license* and *limit* what may be done in the guild; in that respect, religious ethics is an exercise of practical reason with a dualistic structure.

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[8] Consider Twiss's digest of the aims of comparative religious ethics, which range "across enriched cultural moral self-understanding, appreciation of other traditions, enhancement of cross-cultural communication, addressing shared social problems, and systematic theorizing about religion and ethics." He adds, "while individual scholars may emphasize certain of these aims more than others, all appear to accept the fact that their work is relevant to advancing these aims" (Twiss 2005a, 150–51). My proposal in sec. 6 assimilates those comparative aims with several others as a way of thinking about the field's purposes.

The values of inclusivity and equal respect aim to ensure that we grasp the importance of religion for understanding the world of ethics along with the challenges of representing religion when studying ethics. Inclusivity is a positive duty that has us expand the range of sources for studying ethics beyond those in moral philosophy; equal respect supports the negative duty that has us insist that such inclusivity should not be biased in pernicious ways. Together, these values work to diversify and discipline how ethics is conceived and studied. Equally important, the values of inclusivity and equal respect make plain that work in the field is organized by ethical concerns regarding the proper stance that scholars ought to take toward their subject matter. So conceived, the study of religious ethics is a thoroughgoingly normative enterprise.[9] It is no exaggeration to say that ethics is prior to epistemology insofar as normative commitments underwrite the intellectual expectations and habits of the guild.[10]

At the risk of oversimplifying, we can say that these values mandate an *Anti-Reductive Paradigm* in religious ethics. This paradigm instantiates the methodological implications of the two values I identified above. It espies two reductionist temptations to be avoided by scholars interested in the world of ethics. The value of inclusivity has us insist that thinking about ethics as an entirely secular phenomenon is myopic; the value of equal respect has us insist that conceiving of any one religious-ethical tradition as autonomous and immune from critical interrogation removes it from the tools and terms according to which other religious traditions and practices are studied. With these concerns in mind, the Anti-Reductive Paradigm requires that we nest the study of religion and ethics within a wide matrix of interpretive, critical, and constructive concepts.[11] Religious ethics is thus a keenly robust, interdisciplinary practice. Even work that avows the particularity and distinctiveness of a specific religious tradition's ethic sometimes justifies itself by appealing to antitheoretical currents in epistemology and moral philosophy (see Hauerwas 1983). In that respect, too, it situates its agenda within a wider cluster of ideas, anti-reductively.

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[9] Here I use the word *normative* to indicate that moral standards shape the study of religious ethics.

[10] This is to say, even work that aspires to value-neutrality in its treatment of religious-ethical traditions can be understood as adopting that stance *not* for value-neutral reasons (in other words, seeking a disinterested vantage point, on the model of scientific inquiry), but to abide by the values of inclusivity and equal respect in relation to the materials under review. Value-neutrality can be instrumental toward ensuring the inclusive and respectful representation of religious-ethical materials. Grelle makes a similar observation about impartiality as a prerequisite for engaging in the "practical moral project of dialogue and mutual understanding" among religious ethicists who mediate between the university and broader public concerns in their efforts as public intellectuals (1998, 65). On science and disinterestedness, see Max Weber 1946.

[11] Aaron Stalnaker's study of Xunzi and Augustine on human nature and spiritual exercises provides an apt example of the Non-Reductive Paradigm and its ramifications for carrying out work in religious ethics. Stalnaker writes that studying the religious vocabularies of Xunzi and Augustine reveals "interrelated conceptions of metaphysics, history, recognized authorities, anthropology, general moral theory, and both theory and practices of personal reformation" (2006, 295).

3. The Egalitarian Imperative

Reflection about the values of inclusivity and equal respect opens up a fundamental normative dimension of religious ethics inherent within the interdisciplinary demands of the Anti-Reductive Paradigm. I will call this dimension the *Egalitarian Imperative*. It mandates that the study of religious-ethical traditions must resist treating any tradition as beyond the pale of critical assessment or consider any tradition out of bounds for study. Abiding by the Egalitarian Imperative is central to ensuring a nonsectarian, catholic approach to studying “the basic question of what religion and various religious traditions contribute to our understanding of the moral life.” It aims to guarantee that scholars of religious ethics give their subject matter its just due. We might say that this imperative is constitutive of the social contract of religious ethics insofar as it articulates the ground rules according to which work in the guild should be carried out. So understood, religious ethics is a rule-governed activity. Scholars who wish to join the international community of religious ethicists must affirm this social contract in their intellectual practices as a condition for being taken seriously as contributors to its many conversations.

The Egalitarian Imperative is both hypothetical and categorical. It is hypothetical insofar as it aims to guide scholarship in the right direction. It is thus instrumental to good work in the field, providing parameters within which to operate. It is categorical in that it identifies values that are good in themselves. In that respect abiding by the Egalitarian Imperative is an intrinsic good, one that expresses basic values for their own sake. Being inclusive and honoring the value of equal respect are premised on the idea that religious-ethical traditions and the communities that avow them warrant thoughtful and conscientious recognition and engagement as a matter of principle. This premise does not gainsay the possibility of critically assessing religious and ethical ideas; it only has us do so from a starting point of interpretive charity and a presumptive benefit-of-the-doubt (see Taylor 1992; Stalnaker 2006; and Miller 2010).

In addition, abiding by the Egalitarian Imperative ensures that, regardless of their political leanings, religious ethicists’ work is guided by objective values regarding inclusive representation, respect, and equality. That religious ethics was launched during a period of political turbulence in the United States surrounding matters of racism, gender justice, the environment, poverty, justice and health care, probity in academic research, and sexual equality seems hardly accidental. Moreover, crises in authority in a number of institutions in North America during the 1950s and 1960s and the rise of religious pluralism and cultural diversity during that same era led scholars to take a fresh look at moral resources for thinking about the good life and the good society (Toulmin and Jonsen 1988, 304). These wider concerns about social justice and moral authority provided the cultural context for work in the academy during the long-1960s, and ignoring that backdrop when thinking about the guild’s origins, developments, and normative impulses seems historically blinkered.[12]

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[12] These external factors supplement Gustafson’s discussion of circumstances bearing on the development of religious ethics from 1948 to 1998 (1997). I am grateful to Caroline Anglim for conversations along similar lines about the advent of modern bioethics in the U.S.

The Egalitarian Imperative's values of inclusivity and equal respect serve as objective norms of the guild's professional habitus. They are constitutive epistemic goods, markers of quality scholarship in the field, and lend dignity to our enterprise. Internalizing them means acquiring a set of intellectual virtues, dispositions to carry out scholarship in just ways. Studying religious-ethical traditions according to the values of inclusive representation, respect, and equality is to abide by a morality that religious ethicists can hold in common. These values mediate mutual expectations and civic friendship in the guild. Those who enter the social contract of religious ethics mutually recognize themselves as members of a community bound together by its common norms and virtues.

4. Critical Pluralism and Religious Ethics

The Egalitarian Imperative is a thin morality guiding how scholarship should be carried out, focusing our attention on procedural excellences. In this respect, it articulates basic, minimal requirements according to which work ought to proceed. With that fact in mind, it is important to clarify what the Egalitarian Imperative does and does not require of scholars in the field. It does not prescribe norms according to which religious ethicists evaluate their subject matter in a first-order way. That is to say, it does not mandate that religious ethicists ask whether one or another religious practice, belief, institution, etc. is inegalitarian. Such a mandate would need to come from the guild's substantive values, as I will describe below. Instead, the Egalitarian Imperative provides an overarching, second-order set of norms according to which religious ethicists should position themselves in relation to their objects of study. In that respect, it is a metadisciplinary demand. It has scholars determine whether the desires that shape their ways of exploring religious-ethical traditions are desirable.

It is also the case that the Egalitarian Imperative does not mandate any one particular method of study. It only limits how a research program should be carried out. So understood, it provides side constraints on work in the guild. The field of religious ethics, in this description, may include a plurality of scholarly approaches whose deployment is constrained by egalitarian values.

On this point, consider Sumner B. Twiss's summary of reigning methodologies in religious ethics, along with some illustrative work (Twiss 1998, 2005b; see also Schweiker 2005). First, Twiss observes, there exist "formal-conceptual" approaches that use moral theories to sort out patterns of reason-giving and rationality more generally in various religious traditions. This approach is deployed by Green (1978, 1988) and Little and Twiss (1978), for example. It views religious-moral traditions as expressions of moral rationality that are "identified by Western philosophical reflection" (Twiss 1998, 13). Second are "historical-philological" or "historical-comparative" approaches that focus on key normative terms within the contexts of their origins and development, or on particular cultural contexts that are studied in light of insights drawn from the history of religion and comparative religion. This sort of approach is deployed in different ways by Robin Lovin and Frank Reynolds (1985), James Turner

Johnson (1997), and John Kelsay (2005), for example. A third, "phenomenological-ethnographic" approach investigates an ethics of ordinary life within a range of intersecting cultural, political, and existential lines of inquiry, providing an optic that captures lay practitioners' moral identities and commitments as a central feature of analysis. Here the works of Richard B. Miller (2003), Farhat Moazam (2006), Elizabeth M. Bucar (2016), Jeffrey Stout (2010), Michal S. Rauscher (2016), and Atalia Omer (2019) are illustrative. Finally, there are "hermeneutical-dialogical" approaches that involve the mutual interrogation and translation of moral worldviews in a dialectical interchange. The works of Bruce Grelle (1998), Aaron Stalnaker (2006), and William Schweiker and David Clairmont (2021), in different ways, provide good examples of this methodology.

These models organize work in comparative religious ethics as well as in religious ethics more broadly. For example, one can identify patterns of practical reasoning, study one tradition of religious-ethical political theory, or examine the ethics of ordinary life within one tradition, and still operate within the methodological parameters outlined by Twiss in his description of comparative religious ethics. Important to my argument is that these methodologies coexist as options to guide different research projects. As Twiss writes, "Although these methods are hardly exhaustive, they are legitimate options for inquiry that can be selectively used and combined in the comparative task, depending on the choice of aim and material. The spirit of methodological pluralism and complementarity is now a leitmotif for this field of study" (2005b, 151). Indeed, Twiss urges a robust embrace of methodological plurality in the field (2005a, 657).

The Egalitarian Imperative guides these different methodologies both in theory and in the research projects I have just mentioned. They all operate according to its norms of inclusivity and equal respect, and thus ratify and strengthen the social contract according to which scholars should be carrying out their work. The desires for knowledge mediated by these methodologies are desirable insofar as they aim to be inclusive and equally respectful of the materials they enable scholars to study. Practitioners of these different methodologies who abide by the Egalitarian Imperative can thus recognize each other as members of the same scholarly community.

Framing the relationship between the Egalitarian Imperative and various methodologies in this way—as constraining and constrained, respectively—invites us to step back to classify their relationship under a single rubric. I will call my classification *Critical Pluralism*. This framework is *critical* insofar as it invokes the Egalitarian Imperative to distinguish between desirable and undesirable work. It is *pluralistic* insofar as it licenses a wide (but not indeterminate) range of scholarly curiosities, desires, and agendas.[13] If a scholar deploys a new methodology or combines aspects of existing methodologies to carry out her work, she can find ample room in religious ethics so long as her program operates according to the demands of the Egalitarian Imperative. Critical Pluralism provides a rubric for understanding how we can hold egalitarian norms together with the existence of methodological variety.

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[13] Jeffrey Stout describes his stance toward the methodological pluralism in religious ethics as one of critical pluralism, but not on the terms that I am advancing here (2005, 725). Stout suggests, and I agree, that methodologies are vulnerable to critique for reasons other than being inegalitarian. The Egalitarian Imperative as I propose it is a necessary but not sufficient condition for evaluating the merits of work in the guild.

This critical pluralistic account of the field, as I have indicated, means that religious ethics is a normative enterprise at the metadisciplinary level. It bears on our relationships with our materials as well as our relationships with each other. I should add that my account argues for normativity on terms that differ from the idea that one should explicitly avow one's commitments in one's work. My account does not mean having to make one's ethical, religious, or political commitments publicly known in one's writing, speaking, or teaching. Instead, it asks that we consent to its objective demands as a condition of carrying out our work. One expresses one's commitments by abiding by the normative structure of Critical Pluralism in one's scholarship, speaking, and teaching, regardless of whether one makes them explicit.

As I indicated above, the Egalitarian Imperative speaks not about the purposes of the field but about norms that constrain scholars' relationships with their source materials and with each other. More precisely, it indicates terms according to which one can determine whether religious ethicists are studying religion and ethics well. But within the guild's self-reflections, little has been explicitly argued for to tackle the deeper question of the field's justification. Instead, the lion's share of the guild's self-interpretation has focused on the proper protocols for carrying out work in the field, having us attend to its identity, organizing concepts, appropriation of intellectual traditions, material resources, or research paradigms in the study of religion and ethics (see Little and Twiss 1978; Green 1978, 1997; Editors 1979; Reeder 1978, 1997; Bird 1981; Stout 2004; and Schweiker 2005).

To be sure, concerns about the field's identity and methodology have been of great importance as religious ethics has sought to situate its organizing research questions and patterns of inquiry on the map of ethics, religious studies, and academic inquiry more broadly. This effort has been an especially urgent task given that religious ethics is a relatively new field of scholarship. Considerable thought has thus been devoted to distinguishing religious ethics from work in moral philosophy, the philosophy of religions, the sociology of religion, the history of religions, and interfaith dialogue (for instance, Little and Twiss 1978; Green 1978; Hindery 1978; Reeder 1978; and Twiss and Grelle 1998). Regarding such matters, the central questions have been: What are the distinctive markers of religious ethics (see Kelsay 2012)? How should we study the many ways in which the ideas and practices of the world's religions shed light on the moral life (see Little and Twiss 1978; Gustafson 1997; and Stout 2004)? What dimensions of ethics, or scholarship about it, should be delineated for work in the field (see Schweiker 2005; Twiss 2005a)? How should students of religious ethics be taught and, at the graduate level, acquire their proper scholarly credentials (see Twiss and Grelle 1998; Schilbrack 2002; Hauerwas 2003; and Gregory 2016)? What is the field's genealogy, and how might we clarify its established patterns of inquiry (see Reynolds 1981; Gustafson 1997; and Twiss 2019)?

With these questions about the guild's self-interpretation in view, we can see how religious ethics has produced a new "regime of truth," as that idea is articulated by Michel Foucault: a field of knowledge with its own set of "ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation, and operation of statements," according to which "the true and the false are separated and specific effects of power [are] attached to the true" (Foucault 1984, 74). Foucault's ideas shed light on the importance of having "ordered procedures" to demarcate an area of inquiry. He also calls attention to the importance of power. One question that Foucault's ideas invite us to consider is whether the field of religious ethics, despite having articulated a number of accepted "ordered procedures," has secured the effects of power in the form of ongoing institutional support that generates faculty appointments, funding priorities, research support, peer recognition, and cultural influence. Attention to scholarly location, genealogy, or proper method begs the question about the value of work in the field and leaves considerations about securing the effects of power under-theorized. One wager of this essay is that the effects of power will be difficult to secure until the guild can provide a full-throated answer to the question: What good is religious ethics for? We might do well when making sense of our practices to each other, but can we make a public case for our work with wider aims of higher education? To answer these questions, we must move beyond the various, piecemeal rationales for work in the field to a broader, more comprehensive account that provides a fundamental justificatory reason for work in the guild. The politics of religious ethics, in short, requires a robust ethics of religious ethics.

5. Broader Purposes: Initial Steps

With these thoughts about methodology in mind, let us now turn to considerations of purpose to theorize about matters of value in religious ethics in thicker terms and purposes to which the guild can account and justify itself. To be sure, matters regarding the field's purposes have not been entirely ignored in its brief history. It is more accurate to say that efforts to speak to such matters have moved in fits and starts. Five contributions are worthy of note.

The first is William W. Everett's discussion of the "ethics of ethics" in religious ethics (1977). Ethicists, Everett observes, raise questions about the merits of their own vocation: "Is my activity as an ethicist contributing to justice? Does my work do anyone any good? Is the institution in which I operate just in itself and conducive to justice in the society? What is the ethical impact of my professional associations?" (91). He observes that answers to these questions differ between "actionists" and "reflectionists" in the field—scholars whose different aims turn on their respective social theories and institutional locations. Seeking to resolve these differences, Everett argues that, whichever group an ethicist favors, she should triangulate her work between the academy, professional organizations, and cultural associations as a way to protect against class bias and render her work more effective. Everett offers a way to resolve differences between actionists and reflectionists by thinking of how they can coordinate their work within this triadic account. He aims to have ethicists think about their different audiences along with the social locations in which they carry out their work and test their ideas. Focusing on the sociology of knowledge in this way, however, he is unable to propose a theoretical vision that might speak to the field's rationale as a whole.

June O'Connor's essay, "On Doing Religious Ethics," expands the metadisciplinary frame of reference by raising questions about "the task of religious ethics as a whole," which she tackles by describing the nature of the ethical task and then identifying what characteristics render that task a form of religious ethics (1979, 81–82). She writes: "To describe the nature of the ethical task is to describe a process in which one attempts to bring sensitivity, method, and discernment to discovering moral values. This process is religious ethics when the ethicist approaches her work attuned to a religious world view, which is to say, attuned to a perspective that acknowledges an experience of ultimacy" (82). O'Connor then describes religious ethics as a ladder-like structure having three steps: a concrete-experiential level that addresses conflicting value claims and decision-making procedures, a theological-philosophical level that articulates an interpretive framework, and a justificatory level regarding the epistemological roots of one's framework. Seeking to correct for an undue emphasis on rationality in the field, O'Connor argues for the importance of feeling in ethical analysis and for ethical insight. Here, too, however, consideration of the field's ethics defaults to a discussion of components that can inform its methodologies.

Soon thereafter Jeffrey Stout (1980) raised concerns about the field's goals in his review of Little and Twiss's *Comparative Religious Ethics: A New Method* (1978), arguing that their book develops a number of clarifying distinctions, definitions, and categories for studying religious ethics but does not articulate a set of aims. Without having an explicit sense of "the purposes of inquiry," Stout writes, we are "left in the dark" as to whether the tools and terms proffered by Little and Twiss are worth troubling about (1980, 291). As with Everett and O'Connor, however, Stout declines from proffering a set of ends that provide "criteria for assessing whatever descriptions and definitions we produce" (1980, 291). Stout subsequently defended a form of holism and, with that, the importance of history and change in moral vocabularies that would have us select larger units of analysis for the purposes of comparison (Stout 1983). He later stated that one of his works is motivated by "a substantively democratic concern for justice" along with matters of "civic friendship" (2005, 724–25). While these are laudable aspirations to be sure, here again we are left wondering what broader aims might make religious ethics desirable in ways that are sufficient to secure a greater measure of power in the academy.

More recently, John Kelsay has stated that there is little reckoning about the ends of the comparative study of religious ethics, the result of which is a lack of direction and set of criteria for identifying good work in the field or for advancing comparative religious ethics as a discipline in its own right (2012). Commenting on comparative work that draws on ethnographic methods and context-sensitive studies that might build in one or another way from Stout's holism, Kelsay writes:

> Over the last thirty years, scholars ready to identify their work within this rubric [of the comparative study of religion] have produced a number of interesting studies, characterized by great sensitivity to context and also to their own social location—that is, to the "stance" of the interpreter. But we have little sense of a vocabulary or classification scheme by which the disparate analyses of behavior produced in these studies may be brought together. Without such a vocabulary and the sense of the purpose that goes with it, we produce edifying discourses—good analyses, engaging accounts with some of them useful to people working in fields like politics or law. We do not have a discipline, however. So long as this description holds, the contributions to knowledge made by scholars of comparative religious ethics will remain marginal, at least as compared with those of historians, philosophers, linguists, or people working in any of the natural sciences. (2012, 584)

In Kelsay's view, the field of comparative religious ethics needs to generate more generalizable knowledge or models of classification so that it can better resemble other academic disciplines and areas of specialization. With that in mind he makes a twofold recommendation.

First, according to Kelsay, comparativists should seek to provide Weberian taxonomies and classificatory schemes to examine how institutions acquire legitimation. Second, comparativists should engage in a form of conceptual analysis in which scholars make groups' norms explicit "as a starting point for inquiries into the discursive social practices of other groups." Such inquires, he adds, "begin with an attempt at understanding, and may end in revisions or extensions of existing norms" (598). When ethicists examine contextually informed studies, Kelsay writes, they should be "interested in the ways discourse 'makes explicit' norms that previously operated implicitly. Observing and attempting to describe or explain the procedures of argument by which behaviors are judged legitimate or not—this, I claim, is the identifying feature of the study of ethics" (592). Focusing on "institutionalized patterns of argument in relation to legitimation," Kelsay writes, provides a "starting point for the kind of taxonomy or classificatory scheme required for comparative study" (592). In his mind, the distinction between teleological and deontological forms of ethical reasoning used by Little and Twiss in *Comparative Religious Ethics* to sort out differences among Christian, Theravada, and Navaho ethical teachings is a good example of this kind of comparative work. Ethicists make their distinctive contribution to knowledge, Kelsay adds, "in terms of an analysis of institutionalized patterns of reasoning about the legitimacy of practice. It is this that sets their work apart, and which serves as the starting point in an argument for their existence in the academy" (592).

Kelsay worries about the limited impact "of religious ethics as an approach within the academy, especially within the study of religion" (596), echoing my concerns about power and the field's regime of truth. He is correct to suggest that whether religious ethics can become a discipline depends on whether it can identify an end toward which scholarship should aim (see Toulmin 1972, 378–95). The proper question to ask is what kind of end that could be. While analyzing and classifying logics of legitimation and tracking patterns of immanent reasoning are surely important contributions to knowledge, they fall short of normatively assessing such claims according to more general, intersubjective reasons that may not be expressed in the institutional patterns of reason-giving under a scholar's review. There is no reason to bracket the importance of normatively assessing such institutional (or other) reasons as part of the ethicist's scholarly mandate or to omit such matters as a starting point in an argument for the guild's existence in the academy. No moral philosopher wrings her hands about whether her normative claims—properly defended within a space of shared, intersubjective reasons—belongs in the academy, and there is no reason to believe that scholars who study religious ethics should feel any differently.

Another intervention, by Twiss, offers a more fulsome vision of the field. His summary account of the dimensions of comparative ethics provides a concise statement that can advance an understanding of the purposes of religious ethics. Twiss writes:

> Ethics in the comparative mode represents cross-traditional and cross-cultural inquiry with simultaneous hermeneutical, critical, constructive, and theoretical dimensions. The hermeneutical dimension involves interpreting moral cultural systems, thinkers, practices, and patterns of reasoning in social and historical context. The critical dimension involves analyzing the social, political, economic, and institutional influences on these systems, thinkers, practices, and patterns. The constructive dimension involves identifying and developing intercultural moral resources for articulating new self and social understandings as well as practical strategies for advancing human well-being. And the theoretical dimension involves reflecting on systemic issues raised by the preceding dimensions—for example, ethnocentrism, methodological distortion, universalism versus relativism, justification and truth, role of the imagination, and relations among understanding, interpretation, and explanation. As presently understood and practiced, comparative ethics embraces methodological pluralism (and complementarity) and accepts the role of comparative ethicist as a transformative public intellectual. (2005a, 147)

To these observations, Twiss soon added specific aims of comparative religious ethics in his review of Stout's *Democracy and Tradition*. In addition to pursuing the goals of democratic justice as avowed by Stout, Twiss writes, it is also "possible to be less ambitious and less normative in one's goals—for example, to pursue cultural moral self-understanding" as opposed to "the self-understanding of other traditions," or to understand and appreciate "other moral traditions as an end-in-itself (wholly apart from other concerns)." Other, more ambitious goals might include "developing a systematic theory or explanation about why human beings construct moral communities in the way they do," seeking "to develop a scientific explanation of moral behavior, perhaps informed by the disciplines of biology, sociology, and psychology, or by emergent theories within, adjunctive to, and between these disciplines." Twiss advocates for the existence of many goals in comparative religious ethics and adds that the field "must remain open to and encouraging of other approaches and methods that may have different presuppositions and implications, and be less concerned about imposing theoretical constructs on the data" (2005b, 655–56).

Twiss's summary of the dimensions in comparative religious ethics echoes Kelsay's desire to find more general rubrics for making sense of religious-ethical traditions. It also speaks to my challenge to Kelsay insofar as Twiss includes constructive work among the tasks of the comparativist and envisions that role as a "transformative public intellectual." Twiss's summary asks for more than what descriptive and explanatory studies of patterns of institutional reason-giving and legitimation provide, and indeed represents a step beyond what Twiss generated in his collaboration with Little in *Comparative Religious Ethics* (1978). Presumably, such a transformative public intellectual would carry out her work not only with interpretive, critical, and theoretical aims, but also in ways that seek to expand the moral imagination and construct alternative ways of envisioning moral possibilities and social life. Ethics, after all, is a practical discipline that has traditionally aimed at making an important difference in how people organize their lives. In response to my question, "What good is religious ethics?," Twiss might respond that, in addition to making contributions to knowledge (following my list above), religious ethicists should develop "intercultural moral resources for articulating new self and social understandings as well as practical strategies for advancing human well-being." To date, Twiss's principal contributions in that regard have been in human rights scholarship and global ethics. Human rights norms provide reasons to carry out the sort of independent normative argumentation that is overlooked in Kelsay's account of how we might imagine a starting point for making a case for religious ethics within the academy. Twiss's vision invites us to think more deeply about such constructive aims and about the justification of religious ethics more broadly. To that task I now wish to turn.

6. Critical Humanism and Religious Ethics

As I indicated above, religious ethics can be justified insofar as it aims to expand the moral imagination through its encounter with difference and realize the goods of what I call Critical Humanism. For critical humanists, the main objects of such scholarly inquiry are central to what I call "moral subjectivity." The core idea, again, is that human beings are persons with depth, free and responsible for expressing, interrogating, and changing their desires against a background of options that provide reasons for action. Attention to such matters must explore the dynamics of subject-formation—ways in which human beings come to generate, attempt to understand, and revise their ways of being, knowing, and acting. With these ideas in mind, Critical Humanism enables us to grasp and evaluate the processes, idioms, and contexts of moral subjectivity as well as the interpersonal, political, cultural, and environmental contexts that help to shape them. More specifically, Critical Humanism on my description is shaped by four values: *post-critical reasoning, social criticism, cross-cultural fluency, and environmental responsibility*. Religious ethics, insofar as it contributes to our understanding of human agency, moral subjectivity, and action in light of these values, can find a *raison d'être* and serve as an important ally of critical humanistic intellectualism. What, more precisely, might that mean?[14]

6.1 *Post-critical reasoning*

Post-critical reasoning refers to the ability to read closely and carefully, construct strong arguments, marshal supporting evidence, ask difficult questions, and weigh the merits of others' ideas and cultural expressions. Humanists expect themselves to be logically sound, clear about their definitions and concepts, thorough in their research, and fair-minded in their representation and assessments of others. They also aim to be constructive in their criticisms, mindful of historical contexts, alert to artistic and rhetorical forms, learned about linguistic meanings and nuances, and prepared to raise unsettling questions about the materials under their scrutiny. The tools on which they rely are also matters of critical awareness. At that second-order level, humanists reflect about their principles of selection, frameworks of analysis, authorial voice, and the traditions of learning on which their scholarship draws. For that reason, their humanistic inquiry is properly described as *critical*: it insists upon self-reflection regarding a scholar's principles of selection; frameworks, tools, and concepts for representing different cultural materials; traditions of scholarship on which she relies; and the troubled legacies of racism, sexism, ableism, heteronormativity, privilege, and ethnocentric prejudice in humanistic thought.

In this way, Critical Humanists' work proceeds along a double movement that I call *vernacular-near* and *vernacular-distant* modes of inquiry.[15] Vernacular-near inquiry requires the close reading of texts and other forms of human communication—the painstaking scrutiny of words, idiomatic expressions, conventions, and media with which language and images are used. The basic idea is that to carry out proper interpretation and criticism, a scholar must first think through an argument, idea, treatise, letter, book, poem, film, piece of music, play, political construct, method of communication, or image before stepping back to analyze it. Vernacular-distant concepts, on the other hand, are general and abstract. Scholars use vernacular-distant concepts to frame the material under their scrutiny and to place their work within a wider body of conversation, comparison, and analysis. When used self-reflexively, vernacular-distant concepts should expand the orbit of one's awareness to include the assumptions and traditions on which one relies when carrying out scholarly work. The challenge for humanists is to move back and forth between these two modes of inquiry in the process of crafting an interpretation. These modes are hardly separate; the scholar's aim is to deploy them dialectically so that each constrains the other in a hermeneutical circle.

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[14] In what follows in secs. 6.1–6.4, I draw in an abbreviated fashion from Miller 2021, 249–85.

[15] See Geertz on "experience-near" and "experience-distant" concepts in the social sciences (1983, 57).

Also important are the more finely grained, felt experiences that one undergoes when engaging in humanistic inquiry. About such matters I turn to the work of Rita Felski, a feminist literary and cultural theorist whose ideas greatly enrich our understanding of critical humanistic thinking. Felski describes affective dynamics in humanistic inquiry in ways that shed valuable light on work in religious ethics.[16] Offering a "neophenomenology" of aesthetic and literary experience, she identifies four modes of engagement that well describe what ordinarily occurs when we engage cultural materials of one or another sort: recognition, enchantment, knowledge, and shock. Attending carefully to them, she hopes, might build bridges between lay experiences and the work of scholars in the humanities (Felski 2008, 23–131). They provide a landscape of our intimate, first-personal receptions of cultural materials. A few words about these matters are in order.

Recognition refers to the experience of new or renewed self-awareness that occurs in aesthetic experience. Recognizing oneself in a story, Felski writes, entails the feeling of being "summoned, called to account: I cannot help seeing traces of myself in the pages I am reading" (2008, 23). The effect is to alter one's perspective and to see oneself from a different angle, thereby gaining a new form of self-awareness. Rather than describing the experience of identifying with what goes on in a story, recognition means being brought to self-consciousness through the awareness of an other. Felski draws on Hegelian thought to stake out the idea that we know ourselves through an encounter with an other, and that to recognize entails not only self-interpretation but also acknowledging something or someone else. Enlisting the ideas of Stanley Cavell as well, she observes that recognition includes acknowledging the fact of being addressed by an other, and hence acknowledging the other's claim for acceptance and inclusion in public life (2008, 29). For this reason, Felski argues, literature can provide an important form of public recognition of marginalized groups or perspectives.

Enchantment refers to "an intensely charged experience of absorption and self-loss" (2008, 67). Felski's point here is that texts are seductive, but she quickly adds that their powers are limited. We can find ourselves enthralled in an aesthetic encounter, but we are also mindful about being immersed in an imaginary spectacle. “We experience art,” she reminds us, “in a state of double consciousness,” taking pleasure in “enchanted worlds that simultaneously acknowledges the imaginary nature of such worlds” (2008, 74). With our experience bifurcated in this way, we can resist worries about the potential ideological trappings of aesthetic experience. “Modern enchantments,” Felski states, “are . . . suspensions of disbelief that do not lose sight of the fictiveness of those fictions that enthrall us” (2008, 75).

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[16] Echoing the work of June O'Connor 1979 and Paul Lauritzen 1992.

The concept of knowledge as it relates to aesthetic experience has us think not about the self but about the world that is disclosed beyond it. Drawing on Paul Ricoeur’s theory of mimesis, Felski claims that literary art produces truth, but not by representing it in a literal sense. She invites us to think about literary work as providing redescriptions and reconfigurations, “a chain of interpretive processes rather than an echo or an imitation” (2008, 84). Literature can thus “expand, enlarge, or reorder our sense of how things are” (2008, 83; see also Ricoeur 1984, 52–87). But going beyond Ricoeur’s discussion of narrative, Felski argues that literary works use other mimetic devices to achieve their effects as well. They allow us to enter into the mental lives of a story’s characters, enabling what she calls “deep intersubjectivity,” the “capturing of the intricate maze of perceptions, the changing patterns of opacities and transparencies, through which persons perceive and are perceived by others” (2008, 91).[17] Relatedly, reading requires a talent for “ventriloquism” so that “we adapt our minds to multiple lexicons and modes of expression that encompass alternate ways of making sense of experience.” The act of reading thus has us attend to local vernaculars and dialects expressed in a work of art (2008, 96).

The fourth mode, shock, refers to art’s power to disrupt, disturb, and disorient its audience. Unlike pity and fear, shock is fueled by an essential element of surprise; while we can fear what we already know, “shock presumes an encounter with the unexpected, an experience of being wrenched in an altered frame of mind” (2008, 113). Shock refers our experience of being “punch[ed] . . . in the gut” in a highly punctuated and sudden way. It has the effect of challenging our taboos and “shaking up consciousness” in ways that can spur self-knowledge and self-reflection (2008, 130).

With this neophenomenology in view, Felski challenges cultural critics to reckon with why people find pleasure in reading, and to move past a miasmic mindset that trains scholars of art and literature to deny themselves these same pleasures when engaging in cultural criticism. She develops her claims against a specific foil, what she calls “a rhetoric of *againstness*” on the way toward developing the constructive position that she calls “postcritical reading” (2015, 17, 151). Postcritical reading contests the idea that academic sophistication means debunking, demystifying, or denaturalizing ideas to expose the operations of power behind a cultural document. Instead, postcritical reading aims to get critics to think about reading in terms of "attaching, collating, negotiating, assembling—of forging links between things that were previously unconnected" (2015, 173). On this account, interpretation involves "a coproduction between actors that brings new things to light rather than an endless rumination on a text's hidden meanings or representational failures" (2015, 174; emphasis omitted).

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[17] Referencing George Butte 2004.

As I noted above, post-critical reasoning requires skills that are staples of humanistic inquiry—the ability to read closely and carefully, construct strong arguments, marshal supporting evidence, ask critical questions, and weigh the merits of others' claims and ideas, dialogically and dialectically. But in addition, and explaining the prefix "post-," it mandates reckoning with the affective experiences to which Felski directs our attention, beyond those that describe our more rational engagements with art and literature.

How can these ideas about post-critical reasoning enable us to articulate goods to which religious ethics can aim? Four connections suggest themselves. First, the value of post-critical reasoning reminds us of the importance of careful, disciplined attention to texts and arguments—basic requirements of all ethical inquiry. "What interests ethicists is argument," Kelsay rightly notes, and scholarly inquiry in religious ethics critically examines the reasons that can make arguments plausible (2012, 592). Attending to the languages, methods, sources, logics, and frameworks in religious-ethical work is essential to scholarship in the field as well as for keeping the moral imagination self-aware, disciplined, and realistic. Religious ethics aims to make sense of ethically relevant materials, to render legible ideas that may be strange and unfamiliar or opaque and obscure. We do so by hovering close to our materials while also drawing on broader questions and constructs to organize our thinking, dialectically and dialogically, in vernacular-near and vernacular-distant ways. In that way, religious ethics is "a coproduction . . . that brings new things to light." Insofar as religious ethicists aim to render their materials intelligible to themselves and others, they participate in a wider set of goods that are constitutive of rational inquiry itself.

Second, post-critical reasoning can allow for an appreciation of other religious-ethical traditions insofar as it aims to be a corrective for a "rhetoric of *againstness*." The basic intuition here is that religious-ethical traditions have something important to say about the human condition and human values, however imperfectly and however subject they are to critique and revision. Charles Taylor captures the sentiment I have in mind when he writes:

> Cultures that have provided the horizon of meaning for large numbers of human beings, of diverse characters and temperaments, over a long period of time—that have, in other words, articulated their sense of the good, the holy, the admirable—are almost certain to have something that deserves our admiration and respect, even if it is accompanied by much that we have to abhor and reject. Perhaps one could put it another way: it would take supreme arrogance to discount this possibility *a priori*. (1992, 72–73)

By resisting a miasmic mindset in academic work today, religious ethicists can help to humanize their subject matter without doing so naively. They can help to cultivate a critical hermeneutics of appreciation (see, for example, Twiss 2005a).

Third, recall that post-critical reading aims to instill a certain talent for "ventriloquism," the demand that "we adapt our minds to multiple lexicons and modes of expression that encompass alternate ways of making sense of experience" by having us attend to local vernaculars and dialects expressed in the materials we examine (Felski 2008, 96). This talent is clearly important for those who have made a cultural turn in religious ethics that includes ethnographic work. On that model, religious ethicists are to attend to the idioms and contexts of their research subjects in the effort to ascertain their perceptions and felt experiences of moral commitment and practice. Learning about others' moral subjectivities can help expand the moral imagination. And, like the narrative author, religious ethicists face the constructive task of translating their ethnographic data in ways that are authentic to their subjects while also revealing the objective moral realities under review. That is to say, they find themselves having to construct a narrative or series of paradigmatic vignettes in ways that serve the larger purpose of advancing a moral argument (Walzer 1977; West 1999; Miller 2003; Stout 2010; and Bucar 2016). In this respect, too, religious ethics participate in, and advance, the larger good of post-critical reasoning.

Fourth, note that post-critical reasoning enables us to understand the value of the emotions for human understanding and how such feelings are vital aspects of a scholar's engagement with her source material. Emotions have cognitive content insofar as they can shape and guide an individual's interpretation of her source materials (see Lauritzen 1992). Felski's focus is on aesthetic and literary experiences, but there are good reasons to think that her ideas apply to the study of religious ethics as well. It would be odd to imagine engaging religious-ethical texts in ways that silence one's affective capacities for self-reflection, absorption, discovery, and disquiet. Religious-ethical sources (no less than literary and artistic materials) summon us, enchant us, disclose to us, and upset our sensibilities.

Feelings are also important ingredients in ethical deliberation and judgment. Such feelings can include the experience of tension when faced with two undesirable paths of action, puzzlement about whether (or how) to apply a principle to a case, or intrigue about how coordinate relevant data into an overall judgment. They may also include moral indignation in response to injustice or resentment in response to the personal experience of disregard or disrespect. For that matter, sympathy and compassion can be aroused in response to the moral plight of others. The moral life is informed by moral sentiments, and to the extent that they can inform and enrich the moral imagination they have an important place in post-critical reasoning and Critical Humanism more generally.

This is not to deny that the practice of post-critical reasoning must be vigilant about its modes of engagement. Recall that post-critical reasoning is attentive to the power of cultural materials to mesmerize and seduce. Because religious materials are frequently connected with forms of power and domination, post-critical reasoning mandates that we attend to religion's potential to mystify problematic social practices and institutions in public life. For that reason, it is necessary to widen the theoretical circle of Critical Humanism and consider its second value—namely, social criticism.

6.2 *Social criticism*

Social criticism refers to intellectual work that assesses customs, practices, and policies that shape the direction of institutions and aspirations of public culture, as well as the habits and moral subjectivities they help to form. Here we shift our attention from close and careful analyses of meanings and modes of interpretive engagement to how discourse can be deployed for the purposes of social control and subject formation. Social critics enlist concepts such as subjugation, empire, opposition, ideology, and resistance for their vernacular-distant concepts in order to interrogate cultural materials' potential for sorcery and domination. Social criticism tends toward complaint more than toward acclaim, but in either case it proceeds on the idea that knowledge is generated by the encounter with others—that knowledge, recognition, and acknowledgment are coeval and codependent. In that respect, social criticism is an obvious and necessary expression of post-critical reasoning. It is nothing less than a natural expression of human consciousness in response to the reality—and quality—of people's social circumstances.

By interrogating how cultural materials can be deployed in those ways, social critics would seem to indulge in the sorts of practices toward which Felski directs her critique—namely, the idea that sophisticated scholarship means finding what a cultural text "reveals or conceals about the social conditions that surround it" (2015, 179). But social criticism is not of a debunking sort; it is not a "rhetoric of *againstness*" (2015, 17). As Felski notes, we all engage in critique on a regular basis (2015, 187). As Michael Walzer writes:

> Social criticism must be as old as society itself. How can men and women ever have lived together without complaining about the circumstances of their common life? Complaint is one of the elementary forms of self-assertion, and the response to complaint is one of the elementary forms of mutual recognition. When what is at issue is not existence itself but social existence, being-for-others, then complaint is proof enough: I complain, therefore I am. We discuss the complaint, therefore we are. (1988, 3)

Seen in this way, social criticism "must be understood as one of the more important by-products of a larger activity—let us call it the activity of cultural elaboration and affirmation." It is hardly an esoteric practice. Rather, social criticism "is the work of priests and prophets; teachers and sages; storytellers, poets, historians, and writers generally. As soon as these sorts of people exist, the possibility of criticism exists" (Walzer 1987, 40).

Viewed as a by-product of cultural elaboration and affirmation, social criticism can best be understood by turning to Marx and *The German Ideology*. Marx's central idea is that ruling ideas, (ideas that authorize the use of political power and rule), work to secure the interests of the ruling class. Such ideas reflect particular interests but parade themselves in universalistic terms, aiming to secure political and cultural hegemony while aiming to appear non-hegemonic. To be convincing to others, dominant ideas must present themselves as disinterested and inclusive, working in the service of everyone. But in the effort to cast themselves in this way, dominant ideas must incorporate some ideals (if only partially and imperfectly) that reflect the hopes and interests of those who are ruled. Ideologies generate expectations among those who are ruled, expectations that press hard for what has been promised but not achieved. Therein lies the starting point of social criticism, criticism that highlights gaps between professed ideals and lived, social realities. Social critics carry out their work as an "inside job," elaborating upon values and meanings that are honored in the breach. They thereby challenge the institutions of society in the name of the very values that are recognized and shared in a common life (Walzer 1987, 89). In this way, they practice immanent criticism to capture interests that are trivialized or excluded by those in power.

But social critics need not rely exclusively on an account of cultural interpretation and elaboration to find their sources of normativity. Our social lives rely not only on shared, local understandings, but also on standard, minimal requirements—duties to refrain from arbitrary violence or to treat others respectfully, for example—independently of one's membership or social location. Using a more minimal code of rights and duties, social critics can speak not only about local injustices, but also about social problems in other contexts as well (Walzer 1987, 93).

With these ideas in mind, we are able to ask, how can these ideas about social criticism enable us to envision goods to which religious ethics can aim? Three answers suggest themselves. First, as I indicated above, religions can be sources of sorcery and domination, mystifying political institutions that subordinate various members of society and sustain conditions of deprivation and disenfranchisement. Oppressive social hierarchies routinely find legitimation in religious symbols and teachings that help them dehumanize certain persons or groups. Given this longstanding and ever-present reality, religious ethicists have good reason to reveal how political authorities mobilize religious traditions to legitimize the exercise of power. That is to say, religious ethicists as social critics have tools to diagnose how religion can be instrumentalized for political advantage. They can show do so, for example, by tracking how patterns of reason-giving sustain legal and political forms of authority. But they can also do so by identifying how religious symbols and traditions add aura to universalizing claims that polities make and, with that idea in mind, carry out ideology critique. In this latter respect, religious ethicists can practice an ethics of belief according to which religious authorities and political traditions are subjected to ethical evaluation on terms that they may not themselves avow. The central idea here is for religious ethicists to analyze and evaluate forms of religious and cultural discourse with an eye to their potential to dominate others unfairly. In that respect, religious ethicists can contribute to the good of social justice.

A second good to which religious ethicists as social critics can aim is the value of clarifying a social group's self-understanding. Here the idea is that religious ethicists can examine how social and political institutions aim to shape the habits and political imaginations of their members in the process of building communities. In this respect, social criticism is part and parcel of a society's modes of self-interpretation. As Walzer observes, the "social" in social criticism has "a pronominal and reflexive function . . . which names subject and object at the same time" (1987, 35). We shape ourselves and our social life in the course of carrying out social criticism. Such criticism is a contribution to—indeed, is constitutive of—collective self-knowledge and coexistence. By critically interpreting how religious, political, and other authorities seek to mobilize cultural resources to their advantage, religious ethicists illuminate how the social imagination and political habits are shaped and how they might be reshaped according to their own traditions or in light of others' responses to them. In this way, they contribute to the good of collective self-understanding.

A third good to which social criticism can direct the work of religious ethics, related to each of these first two, is to make plain how the organizing ideas of a society—those that purport to benefit all members—only partially succeed, leaving others in one or another state of alienation, disadvantage, and marginalization. The point here is to expose how various groups are denied a basic psychological good—namely, that of belonging.[18] Given the value of the experience of membership, recognition, community, and the like, we do well to attend to institutionalized practices that deliberately or inadvertently ensure that some persons are assigned a second-class status. Social criticism might well be seen as exposing, first and foremost, how polities conceal their stratifying and alienating maneuvers while appearing to be undiscriminating, welcoming, and inclusive. The point is not only to expose the structures according to which domination is sustained, but also to address the psychological toll of such arrangements. In this way, religious ethicists can examine how religions and social formations marginalize certain vulnerable groups. And because religions can be a source of liberation and community as well as oppression and alienation, religious ethicists can also identify how religious beliefs and practices offer ways to espy patterns of domination in the wider culture and mobilize religious symbols and ideals to carry out social and cultural critique.

To be sure, political regimes comprise diverse constituencies who embrace a range of values about the meaning of the good life. That variety is shaped by cultural, religious, ethnic, racial, sexual, and gendered factors—factors central to the formation and expression of identity. Beyond political groups and organizations, our families, religious communities, neighborhood associations, racial and ethnic communities, gendered and sexual identities, and transnational allegiances all help to shape and express who we are. Such memberships mutually inform each other in everyday experience, and their accounts of the good provide reasons for action well beyond the sources of normativity that enable us to critique hierarchy and domination. An intersectional understanding of moral subjectivity mandates that we widen the scope of Critical Humanism beyond its attention to social and political life to include the study of culture and identity. For that reason, it is necessary to consider the value of studying different cultures and cultivating cross-cultural fluency.

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[18] I am grateful for conversations with Nick Buck along these lines.

6.3 *Cross-cultural fluency*

Critical Humanism values knowledge about how we develop and articulate our moral subjectivities—about the diverse sources that fund our self-pictures and reasons for action. Contrary to the idea that Critical Humanism, as a form of humanism, wishes to eliminate differences in the study of others, Critical Humanism's commitment to post-critical reasoning makes plain that self-interpretation is coeval with knowledge of human difference. That commitment to difference has Critical Humanism mandating that we study the diverse range of cultural traditions, historical periods, and social contexts around the globe. Self-knowledge and knowledge of others depend on studying the languages, literatures, societies, histories, philosophies, and artistic productions of the many people and cultures of the world. For these reasons, Critical Humanism values what I call *cross-cultural fluency*. It requires extensive engagement with the civilizations, histories, languages, thought forms, and practices of a wide range of traditions and communities. It often relies on comparative thinking as a way of expanding the moral imagination.

Seen in this way, cross-cultural fluency is a clear corrective to provincialism insofar as it has us move beyond our own social locations to engage others in their specific contexts and circumstances. It has us take seriously, as Kwame Anthony Appiah writes, "the value not just of human life but of particular human lives, which means taking an interest in the practices and beliefs that lend them significance" (2006, xv). In addition (and going beyond Appiah), the idea is that consciousness relies at its very root on the encounter with difference. With cross-cultural fluency conceived in this way, we can see how Critical Humanism's first and third values shed light directly on each other. Given its dependence on alterity as an underlying condition, post-critical reasoning cannot avoid operating in cross-cultural and comparative ways.

The merits of cross-cultural fluency are many, offering several reasons to justify the study of religious ethics. Four reasons bear mentioning here. One concerns the underrepresentation of different voices and traditions in humanities education and scholarship. The issue here, again, turns on recognition and acknowledgment in post-critical reasoning—this time with an eye on the effects of their absence on vulnerable and minority groups. The central idea is that we are importantly shaped by others' recognition and acknowledgment—that our self-perceptions are constituted in no small part by how we are perceived by others. For that reason, incuriosity and exclusion can take serious psychological and political tolls. Specifically, there is the danger that those from excluded groups are given a demeaning picture of themselves—as if, as Charles Taylor writes, “creativity and worth inhered in males of European provenance” (1992, 65). Here we risk the injustice of *misrecognition* in which, as Taylor writes, “a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves.” Such misrecognition “can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being” (25). Religious ethics can work to correct for this danger of misrecognition and foster amicable relationships in a world of religious difference by insisting upon the inclusive study of religious and ethical traditions (see, for example, Mathewes et al. 2015, 30).

Second, there are practical benefits to cross-cultural fluency and, with that, religious ethics as well. Educated about matters of different traditions, customs, and practices in history and around the globe, students can interpret and thus more easily navigate cultural differences. They can acquire a kind of global consciousness that helps to expand their moral imaginations and, in the process, humanize the lives of others in their minds.

Relatedly, and third, cross-cultural fluency and comparative religious ethics impart knowledge of why one’s own traditions might be questioned or resented, how they might be the source of moral indignation among others. In this respect, cross-cultural fluency is an important component of social justice. As Martha Nussbaum puts the point, we need to understand other cultures “partly because in so doing we come to understand intellectual and moral wrongs in which our predecessors have been implicated” (1998, 116). Here again cross-cultural fluency and work in religious ethics consists of self-involving knowledge, deepening ways we learn about our predecessors’ moral failures, and the many interwoven and troubling histories that work to make us who we are.

Building on this last idea, and fourth, cross-cultural studies can play an important relativizing function: they deflate claims of cultural or moral superiority among those who are seeking to learn about other cultures. It has us reject the ethnocentric assumption that one’s own cultural, national, or religious standards are superior to anyone else’s, and it has us work hard to prevent our interpretive practices from being biased about the merits of our received traditions, privileges, and beliefs.

For these reasons, religious ethics can claim an especially strong connection to the values of cross-cultural fluency along with cognate concerns about preparing students for a world marked by globalization (see Beyer 1994; Juergensmeyer 2000; and Bird et al. 2016). As the inaugural editorial of the *Journal of Religious Ethics* makes plain, the field is committed to the study of comparative religious ethics (Editors 1973). While that editorial does not explain why, one line of reasoning can follow the argument I have laid out above. Given its commitment to the knowledge of human differences, the study of religious ethics can enhance cross-cultural dialogue and communication, enhance global understanding, foster epistemic humility about the legacy of any one religious-ethical-cultural tradition's merits, and combat the injustices of ethnocentrism and misrecognition (see Twiss 2005a).[19] In these ways, it can expand the moral imagination and deepen an individual's self-understanding.

Increasingly, cross-cultural fluency has called attention to diverse cultures' respect for, interpretations of, and protection of the natural world. A burgeoning body of scholarship in the environmental humanities aims to relativize not only the conceits of any specific cultural heritage in relation to others, but also the value assigned to human interests and human welfare more generally. The impulse is often to protect against not only misrecognition and ethnocentrism, but also *anthropocentrism*—the idea that human beings are the center of the universe, possessing interests that are to be valued above all others. With these ideas in mind, we turn to the fourth value of Critical Humanism, namely, environmental responsibility and its connections to religious ethics.

6.4 *Environmental responsibility*

Critical Humanism's attention to (and recognition of) the other has us imagine not only our moral obligations toward other persons near and far, but also toward non-human life forms, biosystems, and the planet on which we depend. For that reason, it urges us to exercise *environmental responsibility*. That broad ethical mandate has given rise to a relatively new domain of scholarship—the environmental humanities—that is now a robustly cross-disciplinary area of scholarship, social criticism, and activism. By drawing together specialists in many areas—the philosophy of science, global literatures, literary criticism, history, film and media studies, geography, art, law, ethics, science and technology, design studies, political theory, philosophy, the natural and physical sciences, and the study of religion—scholars in the environmental humanities examine causes of and solutions for ecological problems from a range of disciplinary perspectives. Beginning roughly with philosophical and ethical concerns in the 1970s, the environmental humanities expanded in the 1980s by generating work in environmental history and then, in the 1990s, expanded once again by catalyzing scholarship in literary and cultural studies or ecocriticism (The Environmental Humanities at UCLA 2022). Here I will focus on the aims of environmental ethics and some connections to religious ethics.[20]

Environmental ethics addresses humanity's moral responsibilities to the environment as well as the concepts, methods, and sources of normativity that define and justify them. The organizing problem is humanity's demonstrable exploitation of the environment, a lack of care and concern about the health of the planet that has reached the point of existential crisis. More specifically, environmental ethics addresses issues such as climate change; air, soil, and water pollution; deforestation; the loss of biodiversity and species extinction; ozone layer depletion; natural conservation and restoration; environmental racism; oil and mineral extraction; resource asymmetries between the global north and the global south; and the proper treatment of non-human animals. In addressing such matters, environmental ethics reckons at one level with basic questions regarding moral status, including questions about the moral status of the natural environment and non-human animals, and whether these should be assigned intrinsic value or instrumental value for human welfare. Relatedly, environmental ethicists debate whether we are to accord value to non-human entities on individualistic terms or in terms of biocentric regions or groupings, for example, animal or plant species, ecosystems, or areas of land. They also inquire into whether we are to privilege some forms of life over others, local over regional or global ecology, domestic animals over wild animals, endangered species over non-endangered ones, or native species over non-native species—or various combinations of these categories—when these values conflict (see Sideris 2003). Not surprisingly, environmental ethics has produced a vibrant field of practical reasoning for environmental practice and policy.[21]

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[19] There exist limits to cross-cultural fluency as well, along with sources in social criticism to address them. For more on these matters, see Miller 2021, 271–73.

[20] On the environmental humanities, environmental history, and ecocriticism in relation to the study of religion, see Miller 2021, 277–84.

Of special importance to much of religious environmental ethics is Lynn White Jr.'s essay, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis" (1967). White argues that much of the environmental crisis can be explained by theological justifications for humanity's subjugation of nature, especially the idea that we are made in God's image and may subdue natural forces for human benefit. This alienating dualism between humanity and the natural world, White claims, has allowed for a history of exploitation that has led to our ecological crisis. Although White acknowledges that Franciscan and Eastern Orthodox traditions offer a non-dominating picture of Christianity in relation to the environment, his article poses challenges to theological and philosophical worldviews regarding their effects on human behavior in relation to the environment that continue to reverberate. As Willis Jenkins observes, "Nearly every book on the relation of Christianity to its environment refers to White's thesis, and most introduce their argument as a definite response to it" (2009, 285–86).

Perhaps because religious traditions typically imagine human beings within a wider set of temporal and spatial coordinates than is standardly the case in secular ethics, the study of religion would seem to be an obvious place to imagine the ramifications of human behavior for environmental well-being in both short- and long-term ways. As it is often said of religions, they place the human story within a larger arc of cosmic forces in nature and history. But owing to White's complaint that Western monotheism, biblical theology, and human chauvinism are largely responsible for contemporary environmental problems, scholars of religion and ethics have found it necessary to make a case for a positive or productive relationship between religious thought and the environment. Generally speaking, efforts to speak to White's challenge have taken one of three trajectories.

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[21] In what follows, I draw from Miller 2021, 275–76.

One trajectory excavates non-anthropocentric images and teachings in monotheistic religions and develops their implications for humans' proper relationships with the environment. This effort identifies aspects within monotheistic religions that can be deployed to challenge the idea that human beings are divinely authorized to assume dominion over the natural world. They propose, instead, a nature-friendly stance from within traditional religious cosmologies. Accordingly, this first trajectory seeks to generate revisionist frameworks and epistemologies, producing a "greening" of religious thought by reinterpreting and reconstructing the teachings of specific religious traditions (for example, McFague 1997, 2001).

The second trajectory judges such revisionist efforts insufficient for addressing Western monotheism's grip on the environmental imagination and, in its place, proposes turning to non-monotheistic traditions for resources to address environmental problems (for example, Ruether 1994). Here the idea is that the Abrahamic traditions are irredeemably anthropocentric and in need of replacement by traditions that valorize non-human life and natural environment more robustly. One hope is to identify alternative religious cosmologies that enable us reimagine how humans understand our place within, and obligations toward, the environment. As such, this second trajectory opens up the study of religious ethics to comparative inquiries that have environmental crises as a common object of concern. Comparative religious environmental ethics research programs study different cultures and traditions, thereby strengthening connections between the value of environmental responsibility and that of cross-cultural fluency (see Hartman 2018).

A third trajectory rejects the idealist premise that underwrites these first two trajectories. It questions whether worldviews are principally determinative of thought and action and instead proceeds from either an affective or a pragmatist epistemology. This trajectory does not deny the value of having a proper cosmology to organize one's thought and action but insists that general outlooks materialize from phenomenological experience or concrete actions that address practical problems (for example, Gustafson 1994; Jenkins 2013). Pragmatists in particular insist on thinking in pluralistic and contextual terms about environmental issues instead of assuming that they revolve around a single set of either conceptual or practical problems. To be sure, pragmatists face the challenge of scaling up from the practices of different communities to address problems at regional, national, and global levels. For this reason, this third trajectory requires environmental ethicists to place their arguments and research within intersecting spatial registers.

Methodologically speaking, this third trajectory poses an obvious alternative to the first two, seeking first to ascertain the many ways that practices help to generate frameworks as a necessary step in understanding how they can provide resources "for inventing new capacities from their moral traditions" (Jenkins 2009, 284–85; see also Peterson 2007; Fredericks 2021). That methodological shift invites religious ethicists to explore how different religious communities look to their writings to address concrete environmental challenges and engage in "practical theological creativity" to guide social action among their constituents (Jenkins 2009, 296). Another effect is to invite critics to reimagine what might be judged as naïve anthropocentric ideas in more expansive and ecologically productive ways. For example, environmental social justice activism, focusing as it does on human welfare, "innovatively expands human dignity through ecological and social space in order to meet a specific political problem" (Jenkins 2009, 298). In that way, efforts at environmental responsibility find themselves tethered to practices of social criticism, enabling environmental ethics to explore, for example, how environmental problems are disproportionately imposed on Black, Brown, and Indigenous communities (see Di Chiro 1995; Mascarenhas 2021). Given the fact that social critics and scholars of environmental ethics often focus on various forms of domination, the alliance between these two values can be strong indeed.

7. The Values of Religious Ethics, Thin and Thick

I noted above that the procedural ethics of religious ethics is intrinsically good insofar as it expresses values that are admirable as a matter of principle and instrumentally good as a way of guiding research practices. When we consider the thicker values to which religious ethics can order itself, additional intrinsic and instrumental goods come into view. Religious ethics can serve intrinsic goods insofar as it pursues ends that are admirable features of human knowing and self-awareness, and it can serve instrumental purposes insofar as it can assist in securing recognition, legitimacy, and support in the study of religion and humanities education—what I have called the politics of religious ethics. Understanding the goods to which religious ethics can aim strengthens the case for the existence of religious ethics in the academy and provides reasons to applaud the field's many achievements to date. As my references above make plain, religious ethics is congenial with the aims of Critical Humanism as a whole. By cultivating post-critical reasoning, social criticism, cross-cultural fluency, and environmental responsibility, religious ethicists can—and do—show how their scholarship embodies epistemic goods that human inquiry seeks to realize across an increasingly expansive (and intersecting) set of domains (intrapersonal and interpersonal, social and political, cultural, and environmental). Expressing the values of Critical Humanism gives religious ethicists additional bases for enjoying a social contract among themselves, and it enables us to join cause with colleagues in the humanities more broadly.

But this rationale of religious ethics leaves untouched the relationship between the thin, procedural morality of religious ethics and the thick account I articulated above. What, more precisely, is their relationship? Arguably, having an integrated picture of the field, one that coordinates its thin and thick moral vocabularies, can further augment the field's case as an important intellectual precinct in the academy. I want to conclude by describing how that coordination can be done.

Recall that the Egalitarian Imperative expresses thin, objective norms whose authority is apparent from surveying work in the field. Does the consensus that materializes from that review suffice to justify the guild's thin morality? At one level, one could argue that this consensus expresses some agreed upon intuitions about what counts as a fair scholarly procedure, perhaps an "overlapping consensus" that might be endorsed from a range of deeper philosophical or theological commitments (see Rawls 1993). In this description, religious ethicists rely on free-standing norms to guide their scholarly practices. The Egalitarian Imperative would thus not go "all the way down" to find its grounding.[22] Rather, it would be supported by a variety of perspectives, each with different reasons. Seen in this way, religious ethics would be guided by its own common morality consisting of an overlapping consensus that is supported by a range of beliefs, traditions, and convictions.

But identifying an overlapping consensus is not the only way to vindicate the thin, procedural values that organize work in the field. A vision of knowledge that aims to expand the moral imagination through its encounter with difference evinces goods that help make sense of the values of inclusivity and equal respect. That is to say, the minimal morality of religious ethics can be understood as embedded in the goods of Critical Humanism, expressive of values that are given full-bodied expression in the thick morality of critical humanistic intellectualism. On this view, the thin morality of religious ethics can go "all the way down," holistically. Scholarly procedures and their minimal values would then be abstracted from their deeper connections when crises occur, such as those that pressure scholars in the field to clarify its identity and its "ordered procedures" (see Walzer 1994, 1–19).

How might such a holistic justification of the field's thin morality be conceived? Consider, first, the procedural value of inclusivity. That value is vindicated by the substantive goods of post-critical reasoning and cross-cultural fluency. These two ends of Critical Humanistic inquiry insist upon the value of thinking in non-parochial ways. For the sake of post-critical reasoning, inclusivity is instrumental toward ensuring that that scholars resist selecting materials that reflect their own cultural tastes, religious or political leanings, metanarratives, and social proclivities—that the value of difference as constitutive of human knowing is honored. The value of inclusivity is also justified by post-critical reasoning's commitment to ensure that the vernacular-distant paradigms on which one draws are themselves tested for their exclusionary biases. Such biases obviously thwart post-critical reasoning's need to engage difference, acknowledge the other, and learn from alterity.

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[22] My terminology here draws on John P. Reeder Jr. 1997. When discussing ways to conceive of relationships between religion and ethics, Reeder distinguishes between viewing ethics in relation to religion in an "all the way down" (holistic) manner on the one hand, and viewing some ethical norms as having a free-standing independence of religion on the model of natural law reasoning, on the other. Here I am widening the lens to argue that the *field* of religious ethics relies on egalitarian norms to guide its practices and that such norms can be justified either as free-standing or in holistic ways.

The connection between inclusivity and the good of cross-cultural fluency may be more obvious. Cross-cultural fluency cannot be pursued without a genuine commitment to difference, which lies at the heart of Critical Humanism. Heeding the value of inclusivity can also make available materials in which others' criticisms of one's own troubled legacies are made apparent, thereby increasing the good of self-knowledge and humility. Inclusivity likewise lies at the heart of efforts to humanize teaching and learning by gaining a critical appreciation of how others reckon with the human condition and challenges to the good life. For that matter, the value of environmental responsibility vindicates the value of inclusivity. The impetus to expand considerations of moral status beyond the human good lies in acquiring a more expansive understanding of the moral claims of others, including non-human others, on oneself. All of these purposes can thereby justify the need to carry out scholarship guided by the value of inclusivity.

Consider, second, the procedural value of equal respect. This value is clearly justified by the substantive goods attached to social criticism and cross-cultural fluency, and it resonates with basic concerns regarding environmental responsibility. These ends of Critical Humanism insist upon the value of thinking and behaving in respectful and non-dominating ways. Social criticism aims, in no small part, to address the problems of domination in culture and politics. The value of equal respect is justified by this commitment insofar as social criticism attends to vulnerable groups for whom promises of belonging and a better life go unfulfilled, relegating them to the status of second-class citizens. Moreover, when carried out in culturally sensitive, probing, and empathetic ways, social criticism can show that critique of others can be carried out non-ethnocentrically, as an exercise of respect (see Miller 2016). Equal respect, in short, can name both the duties and virtues of social critique and is justified by substantive concerns regarding basic fairness.

Cross-cultural fluency justifies equal respect on somewhat different terms. It rejects claims to moral or cultural superiority and instead views others as equal members of the planet. In that way, the good of social equality helps to vindicate the norm of equal respect as a component of the thin morality guiding work in the field.

The relationship between the good of environmental responsibility and the value of equal respect is less of a straightforward justificatory sort. Equal respect structures some environmental ethics and politics that insist upon equality between human and non-human life, but that theoretical position does not lie at the heart of the environmental humanities. It is rather the case that environmental responsibility's more general concern for non-domination resonates with the value of equal respect. Insofar as the lack of equal respect issues in dominating practices and attitudes, concerns about such matters in environmental ethics help to make sense of the value of equal respect as a procedural norm guiding work in the field.

8. Conclusion

Now a half-century in the making, the field of religious ethics has ample resources for articulating its procedural and substantive values. The procedural excellences of anti-reductionism and egalitarianism make plain that religious ethics is a normative enterprise according to which ethics precedes epistemology. The values of inclusivity and equal respect underwrite the "ordered procedures" that aim to diversify and discipline the study of ethics. Moreover, when directed to the goods of Critical Humanism, religious ethics enacts substantive values that can justify its scholarly desires and practices. By participating in the project of Critical Humanism—ordered to the goods of post-critical reasoning, social criticism, cross-cultural fluency, and environmental responsibility—religious ethics can advance purposes that offer a comprehensive rationale for its place in the humanities. With those connections in place, the field can be in a better position to secure the effects of institutional and cultural power. Seen in this way, the ethics of religious ethics can aid and abet the politics of religious ethics.

It is also the case that the substantive goods of Critical Humanism can offer justificatory reasons to endorse the values of inclusivity and equal respect, as I noted above. So understood, the field's procedural values can be organically connected to the substantive values that justify the field, thereby joining the right and the good. Post-critical reasoning, social criticism, cross-cultural fluency, and environmental responsibility are each motivated by the need to reckon with difference—and reckon with difference in expansive and non-dominating ways. Accordingly, the goods of Critical Humanism can vindicate the values that guide knowledge-production in religious ethics. Together, these goods and values provide an integrated account of reasons to carry out work in religious ethics and, with that, greater confidence and potential power about what the field can achieve.

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