

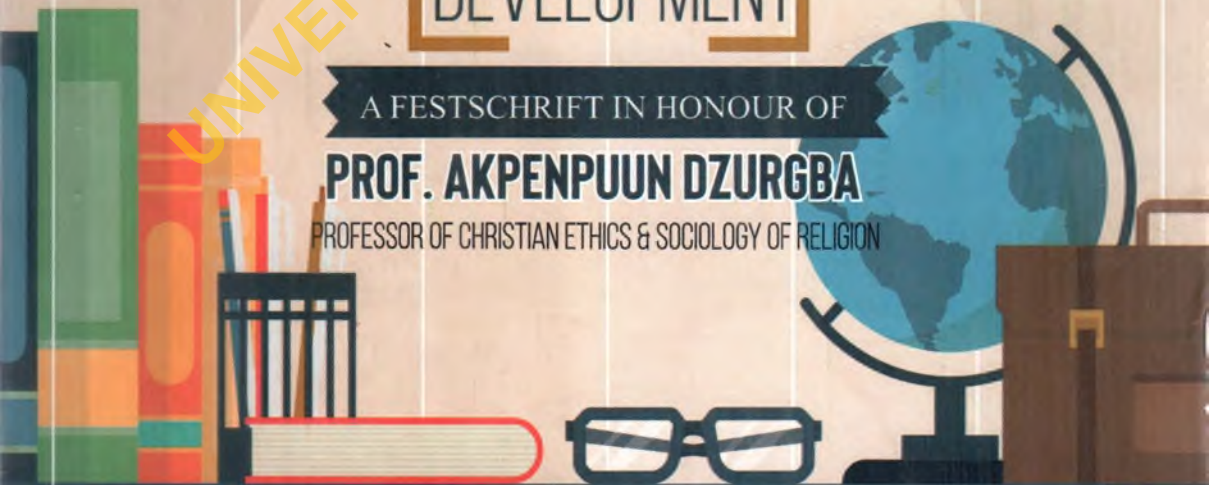


RELIGION,
ETHICS &
DEVELOPMENT

A Festschrift in Honour of
PROF. AKPENPUUN DZURGBA
PROFESSOR OF CHRISTIAN ETHICS & SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION

EDITED BY **J.K. AYANTAYO**

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RELIGION, ETHICS AND DEVELOPMENT;
A FESTSCHRIFT IN HONOUR OF PROFESSOR AKPENPUUN DZURGBA

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Chapter Two

RELIGIOUS ETHICS AS AN AREA OF SPECIALIZATION IN RELIGIOUS STUDIES¹

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Introduction

In this chapter, we want to provide a précis of Religious Ethics as an academic discipline to which Professor Dzurba has contributed immensely to its formation, development and growth and its appearance in the curriculum, its content, teaching and research in the Department of Religious studies, University of Ibadan, Ibadan. We deliberately include this chapter in this festschrift as a means of providing basic information about the course, its distinct nature and prospect especially in a society where some novice thought that Religious studies is just about training Pastor and Imam for clerical work. To achieve this aims, this chapter shall feature the following sub topical issues: what Religious ethics is all about, its scope, theory and methods of academic engagement.

Religious Ethics

It is an academic discipline devoted to the study of human conduct and intention and assessing such to be right or wrong using religious-ethical barometer as an academic discipline. Human action or intention being referred to connote deed, effort, endeavour, enterprise, exploits, undertaking, work and activity a person or a group of persons

performs at a given time. Such actions are the ones performed voluntarily, that is, they are not performed under duress, coercion, force, and pressure². The point we want to make here is that there is a difference between the action performed voluntarily and the one performed involuntarily. In a way, religious ethics is an aspect of social ethics, which is also an applied ethics. Ethics, in the context of our discussion is a systematic study of human actions and intention in order to determine their goodness or badness, rightness or wrongness, correctness and incorrectness and with attention given to how such course of action and intention being evaluated affects the person who performed the action or showed an intention in question, the person at which it is directed, and the society or the environment where the action is performed or the intention is muted³.

From the above, we can then describe religious ethics as something dealing with what religious people ought to do and believe, and how they should conduct themselves in this world. Such spell out and inform all their social relation, interrelationship, conduct and engagement revolving around man-to-man relationship and man-nature relationship. In other words, religious ethics attempts to determine what conduct is good and what is bad, or what ought to be approved and disapproved within the ambit of religious beliefs. It explains why one should act in one way or the other. In the same way, therefore, religious ethics is descriptive. It is also prescriptive, because it stipulates what is to be done by religious people, including how to behave in every situation⁴.

For the purpose of emphasis, it is important to state here that every world religion has its own ethics. This is so because there is a thin line of demarcation between religion and ethics. As we shall see later, religion is the mother of ethics to a school of thought, while another school describes ethics and religion as Siamese twins when we are talking about their interface with society.

Characteristics of Religious Ethics

Religious ethics has some features, which distinguish it from secular or philosophical ethics. These features are reflected in the source(s) of religious ethics, its forms, content and its context. We shall briefly discuss a few of them one after the other.

Religious Ethics is God Based

Religious ethics is God based given the assumption that it originates from God. This suggests that God is the source of religious ethics. This is expressed within the belief that God is the maker of the earth and everything there in including man and morality. God made man and created in him the sense of right and wrong. This enables him to distinguish right from wrong. It is in this sense that Karl Barth, while describing Christian ethics, says that man unaided cannot discover moral truth⁵. What the above suggests is that it is what God wills or commands that must be done why what He forbids man must abstain from.

Revelational

The fact that religious ethics is God based also qualifies it to be described as revelational ethics. That is, it is revealed ethics, because of the impression that God reveals to man what he should do or how he should act and decision to take on moral matters. The revelation could come in forms of inspiration, dream, motivation, and illumination, empowering and enabling religious teaching that God always aids man to act in one way or the other. God energizes and empowers people to take a moral decision when they are in dilemma or passing through some good or bad circumstances of life.

Religious Ethics is Decision Oriented

Religious ethics is decision oriented because it is normative given the facts that it highlights the principles underlying the desirable types of human conduct and brings to the fore the value of an activity or a thing. It is in this sense that Kaufman defines Christian ethics as the attempt to define and understand from the Christian point of view what it means to be a deciding person in the midst of a community of other deciding persons⁶. Obviously, man is responsible for every course of action he/she takes, because there is always the freewill to act as revealed or do otherwise. In other words, it is arguable that, while religious ethics is revelational, it also allows man to take his own decision.

Religious Ethics is Scriptural

The argument that religious ethics is scriptural is grounded on the fact that the religious scriptures such as the Bible and the Qur'an

for Christians and Muslims spelt out how man or group of men ought to behave. For example, the Bible declares that: "All scripture is inspired by God and is profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction and for training in righteousness, which the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good works"⁷. On the scriptural and inspirational nature of Islamic ethics, Doi leaning on the Qur'an stresses the fact that:

The Holy Qur'an is Al-Burhan 'the proof' and Al-Furqan 'the distinction'. It is a distinction between the truth and falsehood, right and wrong...it is a complete code of life. It represents clearly the intellectual and moral bases of Islamic Sharia and strengthens them with arguments and appeals to the heart⁸.

Religious Ethics is Traditional

Religious ethics, apart from being scriptural is also traditional; that is, it rests on some established and institutionalized traditions. By traditions, we mean the acceptable course of actions have become integral part of the existence of man or institution. In religious matters, such a course of action has been integrated into religious beliefs and practices. In Christianity, for instance, Christians talk about church traditions. In Islam, we talk about the Hadith (the tradition) of the Holy prophet, which has come to supplement the Qur'an as a source of Islamic moral religious law. Likewise, in traditional religion, we have oral traditions, which are stories, folktales, myths and fables passed in oral form from one generation to the other.

Legalistic

Leaning on the Bible and Quran, we can safely argue that religious ethics is legalistic because it is law-based because many of the moral codes are equally taken as legal codes. In other words, religious ethics is synonymous with religious laws. For this reason, some scholars interpret moral injunctions in the Bible and the Qur'an as Christian laws and Islamic laws, respectively. For instance, the Mosaic laws are based on the principles of love of God and one's fellow man as exemplified in the Ten Commandments or Mosaic Laws in Exodus and Deuteronomy. They function to preserve certain moral

values. For instance, the sixth to the tenth laws are concerned with rights to life, and sacredness of life, sex right and property right. Others deal with good human relation and general well-being of men as they interact with one another in society⁹. The Islamic morality is exemplified in what is called Islamic laws which are sourced from the Qur'an, the Hadith and the Sunnah, the 'Ijima and the Qiyas. The Hadith, as a source of Islamic law, is a record of the saying or doing of the Prophet Muhammad and His companions. Muslims turn to it for answers to all moral problems. The 'Ijima refers to the agreed view of the companions of Prophet Mohammed on some issues. It refers to consensus or converging idea or conclusion of the companion of Prophet Mohammed. The Qiyas is analogical deduction of majority of Islamic jurists and theologians on matters not sufficiently covered in the Qur'an or the Hadith.

It is Deontological

The fact that religious ethics is legalistic in nature also makes it deontological and formalistic. It is so because the meanings of right or good act are inherent in the act itself. That is, the rightness does not depend on the effects it produces. This explains the Biblical injunction: 'thou shall not steal'. Stealing is not declared as bad because of the effects it produces, de-possessing the owner of his possession, but the fact is that the act is bad in itself. This is why stealing is condemned worldwide. Thus the deontological nature of religious ethics makes allowance for strict respect for religious laws concerning stealing among other penal offences. In essence, religious ethics is authoritative.

Religious Ethics is Life Directed

It is concerned with the general well-being of man. It is directed at making man relate meaningfully with others and his environment – land, water, nature and the living and non-living things inhabiting the land, water, and air. On the account of this submission, religious ethics can be described as pervasive, that is, it covers every aspect of man's aspects of societal life: economy, technology, sports, politics¹⁰, business¹¹, education, music, entertainment, ethnicity¹², communication¹³, name, technology, trade, international relation, international trade¹⁴, security, time, medicine¹⁵, environment, medical practices, population, election, immigration, migration, resources,

geography, water, law, agriculture, land, water, chieftaincy, air, motoring, housing, family, space, production, marketing, relationship, marriage, kinship, ritual, death birth, growth, group, social action, films, video, globalisation, education, Law, constitutions, ordinances, edit, decree, gender¹⁶, social inaction, work, leisure,. Peace, conflict, pain and sorrow, joy, sex and happiness, public opinion, individuals and group of individuals and so on and so forth .In other words, religious ethics is not abstract unlike some aspects of philosophical ethics, because it deals with reality. It deals with practical things and issues of social importance.

Religious Centered

Religious ethics is primarily for religious people and not for non-religious people. By so doing, religious ethics has a specific scope. That is, it is meant for people practicing religion whose ethics we are concerned with, unlike philosophical ethics, which is broad. For example, Christian ethics is meant for Christians, Islamic ethics for the Muslims, and traditional religion ethics is meant for traditional religious practitioners. On the basis of this submission, we can infer that, Christian, ethics guides the behaviour of Christians while Islamic ethics regulates conducts of Muslims. However, it is possible that the ethics of the two religions and in fact, major world religions (such as Confucianism, Hinduism, Islam, Zoroastrianism, Christianity, Brahmanism Buddhism, Taoism, *Judaism*, and African traditional religions) to share the same view on a particular ethical value for example, the golden rule, but the method of articulating the value may vary from one religion to the other. This is exemplified below:

“Do to the doer in order to cause him to do for thee. That is thanking him for what he may do; that is parrying something before it is shot. Egyptian wisdom literature, taken from before philosophy” Frankfurt and others.

“Is there one maxim which ought to be acted upon throughout one’s whole life? Surely it is the maxim of loving-kindness does not do unto others what you would not have them do unto you.” Confucianism: Analects 15:25

“This is the sum of all true righteousness – treat others, as thou wouldst thyself be treated. Do nothing to thy neighbour do to thee”: Hinduism.
“No one of you is a believer until he desires for his brother that which he desires for himself” – Islam, Sunan, taken from Readers Digest excerpt from the World’s Great Scriptures, Lewis Browse

“A man is good only when he is willing not to do to another is not good for himself” – Zoroastrianism, Mareus Busch-major religions of the world.

“All things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do you even so to them for this is the law and the prophets”. Christianity - Matthew 7:12.

“This is the sum of duty do naught unto others which would cause you to pay if done to you” Brahmanism, Mahabharata 5:1417.

“Hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful” – Buddhism – Udanavarga 5:18

“Regard your neighbour’s gain as your own gain, and your neighbour’s loss as your own loss” Taoism: T’ai-Sharg Ken-ying p’ien.

“What is hateful to you; do not to your fellow man. That is the entire law: all the rest is commentary” – Judaism, Talmud, Shabbat, 319 (Rost 1986)

“Whenever a person breaks a stick in the forest, let him consider what it would feel of it were himself (that was this broke) Yoruba proverb. Crawford, (1989)

Religious Ethical Theory

Ethical theory can be defined as an ethical idea or set of ideas that is intended to present and defend systematically fundamental questions such as: What moral standards (norms and values) should we take into account when assessing actions, decisions and institutions and how should such moral standards be justified? In other words, Ethical theories provide foundation for decision-making when it comes to justifying one's ethical decision or judgement. Ethical theory therefore provides justification for ethical judgement. By ethical judgement, we mean forming an opinion or taking/ making a decision after a careful thought on ethical matter. An ethical matter is the one that raises the question of the rightness or wrongness of an action performed voluntarily at one time or the other. It is important to note that not everyone makes decisions in the same way, using the same information and, employing the same decision rules as a guide or defense.

The major ethical theory of Religious ethics is what is known as Divine ethical theory. The Divine Command Ethical Theory emphasizes that right conduct is based on what is understood to be the will of God; that is, what is morally right or wrong is defined in terms of God's commands. This presupposes that what is forbidden or permitted or required are just those things that are forbidden or permitted or required by God. In other words, no action is good unless God wills it or no action is bad unless God condemns or forbids it. That is, nothing is permitted unless God permits it, and nothing is required unless God requires it. On the account of this explanation, it is obvious that God expresses His will over all matters – both good and bad. Thus, obedience to the commandments becomes a moral obligation. In addition, the commands are authoritative and go with the spirit of compulsion. Thus, they are mandatory. While man obeys them, he also has one or two things to gain, because obedience is rewarded while disobedience is punished. That is, obedience to God's commandments presupposes compensating obedient people with rewards and punishing for the disobedient. Therefore, in religious settings, the words 'obedience', 'reward', 'disobedience' and 'punishment' are religious-ethical terms. This assertion is buttressed in the religious concept of eschatology, which involves assessment of every man's deeds on the day of judgement. For example, the Bible and the Qur'an affirms that, on the day of God's judgement of the

world, both good and bad people would be judged in accordance with their earthly deeds. God's people, that is, those who kept His ordinances and moral precepts to the letter would go to good heaven while those who disobeyed would go to hell¹⁷.

In the light of the interconnection between obedience and reward, on the one hand, and disobedience and punishment, on the other hand, William Paley observes that:

We can be obliged to nothing but what we ourselves are to gain or lose something by...as we should not be obliged to obey the laws, or the magistrate, unless rewards or punishment...depended upon our obedience, so either should we, without the same reason, be obeyed too...obey the commands of God¹⁸.

Because ethics is life and decision centred, it also employs secular ethical theories to analyse issues from religious point of view. A few of them which are extensively discussed in my book on Fundamental of Religious Ethics are the following:

Consequentialism: It holds that the consequences/aftermath of an action determines its rightness or wrongness. It goes further to suggest that a good action is the one whose results favour majority of those who are affected by the action.

Egoism: it is a version of consequential theory, which holds that actions whose consequences will benefit the doer can be considered ethical. It places emphasis on the benefit an individual is going to derive from the results of an action as the most important thing.

Altruism. The thrust of this theory is that a good action is the one whose result is for the benefit of everyone affected by the action except for the performer of the action.

Hedonism: It holds that pleasure is the primary or most important intrinsic good that an individual moral agent should pursue. In this way, hedonism suggests that every person's pleasure should be greater than the amount of pain they experience as a consequence of an action.

Collectivism: The basic thrust of this theory is that the right action is the one that places higher emphasis on the effects of a moral action on the collectivity of groups of people, their identities, goals, rights, and outcomes as more important than the interests of individuals that constitutes the group.

Relativism: This theory maintains that the rightness of an action is always relative to what a language or a culture dictates. In other words, it is saying that the rightness of an action or otherwise is a function of what a culture, a people or group of people considers as right or otherwise.

Absolutism: This holds that right action is the same everywhere irrespective of language, ethnic and cultural difference across the globe. It states that the rightness of an action is always absolute irrespective what a language or a culture of a people or group of people dictates.

Utilitarianism: It considers the best action is the one that maximizes utility that is, all pleasure that results from an action, minus the suffering of anyone involved in the action.

Situationism: It holds that the rightness of an action depends on the situation one finds oneself at one time or the other. It assumes that a person's behavior is dictated largely by his situation rather than by his personal attributes.

Ascriptivism: It presupposes that a performer of every voluntary action should be held responsible for his/her action rather than blaming someone else as the brain behind or hidden causal factor responsible for the action so performed voluntarily

Decisionism: This theory is premised on the argument that it is not the content of decision that matters or that makes it rights rather it is rightness is predicated on it being made by a constituted authority/proper authority, or by using a correct method in making the decision.

Emotivism: It claims that ethical sentences are emotionally oriented and that they do not necessarily convey something that someone intends to do or deal with.

Ethical formalism: This is predicated on the argument that moral judgments are to be based on the conformity or otherwise of an action to universal laws or universal prescriptions.

Moral absolutism: It conjectures a right action or wrong action as good or bad in themselves irrespective of the reason for performing them and the consequences of performing them. For instance; lie is bad. It doesn't matter if it is told to save life.

Ethical analysis

Ethical analysis of religious conduct entails careful evaluation of moral values, goals, purpose, moral claims and aspirations underlying religious activities, beliefs and practices. In other words, it connotes assessment or appraisal of people conformity or non-conformity, adherence or otherwise to moral rules or standard that are true or the other. Ethical analysis of human action presupposes consideration of these pertinent questions:

- (i) What is the action in question?
- (ii) Who performed the action?
- (iii) Why was the action performed?
- (iv) When was the action performed?
- (v) How was the action performed?
- (vi) How did it affect the performer of the action?
- (vii) How did it affect the person(s) at which the action is directed?
- (viii) How did such action affect society where the action took place?

What follows the assessment is pronouncement of ethical judgement by the use of the following terms: good, bad, right, wrong, correct, incorrect, desirable, undesirable, condemnable and commendable. As noted earlier, ethical judgement could be informed by either deontological or teleological thoughts.

- ¹ This article is generated from my J. K. Ayantayo, *Fundamentals of Religious Ethics*, Ibadan: Samprints and Graphic and Co, 2009,
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- ³ B. C Smith, *Syllabus for the Study of Biblical Ethics* (6th edition) Texas: Published by South Western Baptist Theological Seminary, 1991, p 7.
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- ⁶ B. C Smith, *Syllabus for the Study of Biblical Ethics* (6th edition) Texas: Published by South Western Baptist Theological Seminary, 1991, p 9
- ⁷ 2 Timothy 3:16-17.
- ⁸ A.R.I. Doi, *The Cardinal Principles of Islam*, Lagos: Islamic Publications Bureau 1981, p 21
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- ¹⁸ W. Paley, "The Principles of Moral and Political philosophy" in *British Moralists* (Indiana Polis, IN: Hackett, 1991, p.259. (Originally published in 1785)