

# RELIGION IN THE CONTEXT OF CULTURE, THEOLOGY, AND GLOBAL ETHICS

by *Philip Hefner*

*Abstract.* The theme of this symposium is distinctive and challenging, because it incorporates the dimensions of interreligious reflection, theology, science, and ethics. This article presents a palette of issues that are both challenge and resource for approaching the theme. Three sets of issues are considered: (1) the role of religion in culture, (2) theological interpretation of nature, disease, and evil, and (3) the fashioning of a global ethic.

*Keywords:* culture; death; disease; evil; global ethic; metanarrative; organization of consciousness.

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The theme of this symposium, “The Possibility of a Global Ethic: The Potential of a Religion-Science Dialogue on HIV/AIDS,” is one of the most difficult for Christian theology. The difficulty lies not only in the challenge of interreligious reflection, joining theology, science, and ethics, but even more in the inherently and perennially intractable questions that lie at the core of this theme: How do we derive behavior from religion? How do we move from knowledge to action? How do we understand the reality of evil in human existence?

My reflections on this theme are organized in three areas: (1) religion existing in the context of culture, (2) theological interpretation of nature, disease, and evil, and (3) issues pertaining to the formation of a global ethic.

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## RELIGION EXISTING IN THE CONTEXT OF CULTURE

I have devoted much effort in the past ten years to understanding culture as an emergent in the evolutionary process, rooted in the biology of our brains, transcending biology by producing a new form of information but never decoupling from its biological matrix. Solomon Katz has contributed to the ordering these ideas in his concept of *biocultural* evolution (Katz 1980; 1999, 242–43; Hefner 1993, 198). Gordon Kaufman has made the same point in his use of the term *biohistorical* evolution (Kaufman 2003). I have defined culture as learned and taught patterns of behavior and the symbol systems that contextualize those behaviors so as to interpret and justify them.

Culture is a domain of freedom and exploration on the one hand and of memory on the other. The former is the realm of the new, that which is being discovered and constructed for the first time; the latter is the realm of received wisdom, the learnings of the past that supported the life of culture in earlier generations.

Religion exists within culture, it is a phenomenon of culture, and it mirrors culture in that it is also a domain of exploration and memory. Religion is constituted by myth, ritual, and moral behavior. We might speak of a myth-ritual-praxis constellation (Hefner 1993, 157–73). At the heart of this constellation is a core of sacred meaning that serves to interpret all of reality and experience. The origins of this core of meaning are beyond our scientific knowing and our philosophical speculation, with the result that myth-ritual-praxis systems characteristically speak of their core of meaning as “revelation” or its equivalent. Myth is a narrative of “how things really are”; ritual, as a set of symbolic actions that seek to relate the story of how things are to concrete action in everyday living, mediates between myth and praxis; praxis is the translation of the symbolic actions into actual behavior outside the sanctuary. Ronald Green has provided cross-religious instances of this constellation in his *Religion and Moral Reason* (1988).

Green’s discussion of the rites of early Christian initiation provides an example of how the myth, ritual, and praxis interact in a dynamic fashion (1988, 156–60). For forty days prior to Easter, a group of persons has undergone intensive instruction, or catechesis. This instruction has included the mythic narrative of how God as heavenly Father created humans in God’s own image, and Christ’s commands to love all fellow human beings as oneself. On Easter eve, late at night, they undergo their rite of initiation, coinciding with the remembrance of the night when Jesus made his transition from the death of the grave to new life in the resurrection. The initiates strip off their clothes and are plunged into the water of the baptismal pool. When they emerge, they are given identical white robes, and they participate in their first Holy Communion, eating the bread and

drinking the wine that symbolize unity with Jesus and with the community of his followers. Note how that ritual proceeds from the myth: each initiate sees the others stripped; a bond of common humanity is thereby formed, distinctions of class and status are leveled away; what unites these naked persons is their oneness as children of the heavenly father. The ritual has fostered empathy. Beyond this ritual, outside the holy place, solidarity with the baptismal group is to be translated into solidarity with all persons; regardless of how people appear in their worldly existence, all are naked before God. The empathy that was evoked in the baptismal waters is to become the governing principle for human interactions in the market place. From empathy, morality and ethics can emerge. Religious reflection or theological thinking may be added to this mix as a resource for enabling the move from myth to ritual to praxis in the marketplace.

Religion interprets the process of culture. In the example, it interprets human togetherness or community; it tells us something of what community means. Religion speaks of what is important in this cultural process—in this example, empathy. From that focus on importance, ideas of ought and ought not, right and wrong, may emerge. One might argue that this process of moving from ritual to praxis, from asserting what is important to what ought to be, is religion's entrée to ethics—global or otherwise.

Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi helps us to understand that if culture is to carry out its functions, it requires the organization of consciousness to sustain and direct it (Csikszentmihalyi 1991, 11–15). In important ways, organization of consciousness is the central issue of culture. The values we espouse, the worldviews we hold, the decisions we make, all flow from the ways in which our consciousness is organized. The psychological dimension of our personality plays the role of gatekeeper between our genetic and cultural inputs, selecting what we will pay most attention to and therefore act upon (Csikszentmihalyi and Massimini 1985). This gatekeeper function, as well as decision making, rests on the foundation of how consciousness is organized. In his classic work *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* sociologist Emile Durkheim recognized that religion concerns itself above all with ordering our understanding of reality, and in this concern it reveals itself as the precursor, not the antithesis, of science (Durkheim [1912] 1995, xxv, 25–26). In his contribution to this symposium, Kaufman (2003) insists that our Christian repertoire for organizing the consciousness needs reformulated ideas, and he proposes certain specific reformulations.

How our consciousness is organized tells us whether ancient forests are so many board feet of lumber or rolls of newsprint, or whether they are to be preserved as natural treasures. How our consciousness is organized tells us how relations between women and men should be structured, whether persons who produce and consume more goods are to be more highly

valued than those who do not. How our consciousness is organized tells us whether victims of HIV/AIDS who live in the United States are to be given more attention than those who live in Africa or China. What is religion if it is not a powerful agency for the organization of consciousness? Of course, there are other such agencies within culture: economic philosophies and marketing, education, national and racial ideologies. What is the proper character of religion within culture? Paul Tillich had it right when he spoke of the “dimension of depth”—religion seeks to organize consciousness according to the deepest realities of life, the realities that relativize all others, the realities that pertain to our being or non-being at the deepest level (Tillich 1988, 3–40).

I said earlier that religion shares culture’s dialectic of moving between the domains of free exploration and memory, the new and the wisdom received from the past. Religion is challenged to balance the two. The scientific study of religion tends to emphasize religion as a receptacle of received wisdom. Most anthropologists speak of religion as a conservative factor in culture. Roy Rappaport was a notable exception to this judgment (see his *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity* [1999]). Religious communities mostly agree with this scientific verdict. Religious communities often preach and practice such maxims as “old is better,” “the Golden Age lies in our past,” and “innovation is heresy.”

More careful examination reveals, however, that exploration is as critical as memory for religion, even if public opinion and doctrine deny it. Exploration is critical, because religion seeks to interpret the meaning of the present and the future, just as it organizes consciousness for present and future action. Religion looks for the sacred, for God, in the present. Religion is just as concerned for where God’s presence is manifested presently and where it will be in the future as it is for where God has been manifest in the past. If we look closely at the great, paradigmatic figures of religion—Moses, David, Gautama Buddha, Jesus, Mohammed—we are in fact more impressed by their efforts at exploration and innovation than by any bondage to received wisdom. It is most often the ideological interest of later generations that attempts to depict them as conservative.

In this discussion I do not draw weighty conclusions concerning religion in culture, although such could be drawn from it. I simply suggest that religion’s activity of organizing consciousness through myth, ritual, praxis, and doctrinal interpretation, as well as its effort to negotiate the waters between exploration and memory, are resources for fashioning a global ethic in general and an ethic for HIV/AIDS in particular.

#### THEOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION OF NATURE, DISEASE, AND EVIL

One of the assumptions on which this symposium was convened is that (quoting from a preparatory memo from the planning group) “diseases,

epidemics, and pandemics are natural occurrences, caused by organisms which when in contact with human bodies, in most cases, cause death of humans.” HIV/AIDS is one of those diseases, and as such it poses three major conceptual tasks for theology. The first pertains to nature. Even though there is much in the Christian theological tradition about nature, the concept needs thoroughgoing revision, as Kaufman has also proposed, because our understanding of nature is precisely what has undergone such incredible change through the last fifty years of scientific development. We have increased our knowledge of many aspects of nature more in the last fifty years than in all the previous years of human history put together—from the cosmos to the particle and the molecule, to the gene and the neurotransmitter. In a real sense, nature is not at all what it used to be for either our common life as human persons or our theological reflection. Nature and our transformed perceptions of it are inherent to consideration of the phenomenon of HIV/AIDS.

Conceptualizing disease poses a second task. Compared to other areas of religious and theological thinking, there is virtually no theology of disease available in any library. The preparatory memo I alluded to earlier speaks of disease causing the death of humans. Since HIV/AIDS is the disease under discussion, I have elided death into evil, as the third conceptual task that is posed to us. The traditions of the world’s religions may well reveal more attention given to evil than to any other issue. Next to reflection on Jesus Christ, Christian theology gives pride of place in the theological work order to evil. The problem facing us is that every theologian who possesses even the least self-awareness admits that the topic has never been resolved. Nevertheless, we cannot avoid this issue.

British philosopher R. G. Collingwood (1945) made the point that our access to nature is always conditioned by our ideas about nature. There is no transaction possible with the natural world apart from the ideas we bring to nature. These ideas are, of course, products of culture, so we may say that culture governs both our understanding of nature and our behavior toward it. Ideas are central to the organization of consciousness, and they raise the issue of metanarratives. Currently, we are sensitive to the unwholesome, even oppressive, possibilities that emerge when one or a few ideas are elevated to a normative position, as if they were indeed all-encompassing narratives. Organizing consciousness is at the heart of this problem because it is precisely the organization of our ideas and thus of our behaviors that is the neuralgic point. We call for a pluralism of organizing ideas so that no single group’s narratives can dominate our thinking and our actions. This tension between unity and pluralism, universality and particularity, constitutes a fundamental challenge to our efforts at organizing consciousness.

The role of ideas is especially vivid when nature includes disease. Neither the cancer cell nor the HIV virus could have an idea that it is doing

anything other than maintaining itself—surviving, we would say, as all life-forms do. Virtually all human beings, however, will attach the idea of evil to the diseases that emerge in a natural medium. In effect, the survival strategies of the virus and those of humans conflict disastrously. What is natural selection for HIV is evil to the victims of the virus and to those of us who see them.

This raises a number of systemic issues for the logic of Christian belief. I list five of them here.

1. How is the nature of nature related to the nature of God? Since Christian belief, at least in its mainstream, holds that God is the sole creator of all that is (creation out of nothing), all that occurs in nature (and culture, for that matter) must be related to God—to the power of God, to the intentions and purpose of God, and to the plan of God. How do evil and suffering relate to God? How could they possibly have emerged in a world that has the good God as its sole creator? At best, the logic of the Christian faith can assert that evil is not intended but is rather the by-product of other divine intentions.

Or does God have a strategy that includes evil? What could the divine purpose of evil be? Could we speak of HIV/AIDS in such a framework? Or would it be blasphemous even to suggest that God had a purpose for the disease? Another classic sociologist of religion, Max Weber ([1922] 1963), understood that one of the chief functions of religion is to reflect on such questions and to construct theories of how evil is related to God. Technically, these theories are labeled *theodicies*, derived from the Greek “justifying (or vindicating) God’s tolerance of evil.” The history of Western philosophy and theology is littered with these theories, many of them thought-provoking, all of them finally inadequate.

2. Creation in the image of God. For most of the tradition, the image of God belongs only to humans, and it has often been used as a way of asserting the superiority of humans over the rest of nature. Some theologians today insist that the entire created world reflects the image of God in some sense (see Gilkey 1993, 175–92). In what sense could the HIV virus reflect the image of God?

3. What is healing? *Health* and *salvation* share the same etymological root in some languages. Is health defined as healing, curing, or caring? hospital (where curing takes place) or hospice (where caring is exercised)? For most of their history, hospitals have in fact been hospices, places for caring and comfort. The modern hospital is a recent invention, since it is only with the advent of scientific medicine that hospitals came into being as centers of curing. For millennia, the religious communities of the world have owned and operated both hospitals and hospices.

I believe that healing has a sacramental character, in that it rehearses God’s intention that we be whole. That intention is not dependent on our

acts of healing being successful, just as the intentions symbolized in the sacramental meals of Holy Communion or Seder, for example, are not dependent on the nutritional qualities of what is eaten in those rituals. Whether successful or not, they represent God's intention. Does this sacramental view embrace both caring and curing? What about preventing? These questions are peculiarly relevant to our consideration of HIV/AIDS. Until the appearance of pharmaceutical "cocktails," the consolation and caring of the hospice was the chief option for treatment. With the advent of these medical interventions, cure is not possible, but prevention takes on added meaning—prevention of virulent symptoms and the prolongation of life under circumstances that range from tolerable to good. Efforts to produce a vaccine take prevention into still different channels.

Evil and dying are always in the background when we think of hospice caring, on the one hand, and medical cure and prevention on the other. Hospice does in fact prepare its patients for death, while cure and prevention seek to stave off death. Our public discussion often speaks of all these realities in terms of battle—the war against disease, death, and evil. Is this, in Christian terms, war against God's enemies, since God is on the side of healing?

4. Rabbi Harold S. Kushner, in his 1981 book, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, abandons the creation-out-of-nothing tradition (as do most process theologians, of which he is one), on the grounds that it is more comforting to recognize that God is not all-powerful. God shares our frustration and despair that the evil disease cannot be defeated. This strategy may be self-defeating, however. It is certainly incomprehensible that a good God who is sole creator could fashion a world with the evil of HIV/AIDS. On the other hand, we may well find comfort in the fact that evil is incomprehensible precisely because it contradicts the nature of nature as God has created it. Nature is not supposed to be evil. This understanding can motivate us to fight evil, because it underscores that when judged by the normative nature of nature as it proceeds from God, evil should not exist; it is ab-normal.

5. Justice issues. If healing has a sacramental dimension, then it belongs equally to all persons, because God's intentions pertain to all equally. To limit access to healing strategies and medicaments is an attempt to restrain the intention of God.

We can conclude these reflections with another series of questions. How do we understand the nature of nature that it can be a locus of fatal disease? What is the religious valuation of disease? Does it have a place in God's purposes? What is the religious valuation of healing? Does it have a place in God's purposes?



## ISSUES OF A GLOBAL ETHIC

The basis for a global ethic lies in the fact that we are one human species, living in an interconnected network of distinct communities, within one global ecosystem that provides both resources and constraints for human life, facing the same fundamental problems. The formation of a global ethic faces challenges on two major fronts. On the one hand, the diversity of cultures makes it difficult to determine a single ethical program that can apply to each particular instance. On the other hand, a concern for the freedom and authenticity of the individual cultures raises the question whether it is possible to construct a global ethical program that does not result in the dominance of one culture's ethical values over the others. This concern raises in turn the question whether there even *ought* to be a global ethic. A global ethic rests on one global metanarrative, and today it is precisely the desirability of such metanarratives that is called into question.

The effort to construct a global ethic may be illumined by looking at four current sets of resources, which proceed from four thinkers who believe that such an ethic is an urgent necessity today. I categorize these resources under the rubrics *metaproblems*, *metanarrative*, *metanature*, and *metamethod*. Each of these approaches is sensitive to both the issue of universality versus particularity and the issue of the potential oppressiveness of metasystems.

*Metaproblems: Katz's Analysis of Universal Problems that Affect All Societies.* Katz brings the "macroperspective of anthropology" to bear upon an interpretation of the challenges facing the human community in the contemporary world (Katz 1999, 238). He identifies "the most serious challenges ever to have confronted the planet in the areas of health, environment, and security [problems of cooperation and aggression]" (p. 237). In his view, these "most serious" challenges are self-evidently global in their nature and scope and therefore require a global ethical response. He judges that even though science and technology are already aware of these problems and are devising strategies of response, success is not possible unless the religious-spiritual resources of the global human community join with science and technology.

*Metahistory: Ewert Cousins' Narrative of the Second Axial Age.* Cousins views the human situation from the perspective of the world's religions and traditions of spirituality. He describes an already emerging historical narrative that he considers to be the Second Axial Age. This terminology follows Karl Jaspers' theory of the First Axial Period of history, 800–200 B.C.E., which describes a transformation of human spirit that responded to deep cultural movements in both East and West, resulting in the emergence of the Confucius and Lao-tze, the Upanishads, the Buddha and Mahavira, the Jewish prophets Elijah, Isaiah, and Jeremiah, and the Greek



philosophy of the pre-Socratics, Plato, and Aristotle (Cousins 1999, 211–12).

The contemporary parallel, the Second Axial Age, also describes a transformation of the human spirit that encompasses the entire globe. Five components mark this transformation: (1) a complex process of convergence that transforms the earlier move toward differentiation, without abolishing differences; (2) a spirituality of the earth that celebrates our roots in the natural world; (3) the recovery of the view of primal peoples that the entire human race is one tribe; (4) a turn toward the material world as the locus of spiritual reality, placing real-world global problems on the spiritual agenda; and (5) dialogical cooperation of the world religions in efforts to engage these real-world problems, most notably peace, justice, poverty, discrimination, and care of the earth (Cousins 1999).

For Cousins, the mandate for a global ethic is not so much an imperative imposed upon the global human community as it is a quest that emerges from the narrative of contemporary human history.

*Metanature: Csikszentmihalyi's Depiction of the Evolving Future.* Csikszentmihalyi interprets the mandates of the human future within the large framework of the continuing process of evolution, which includes human history and the placement of the human species in the planetary ecosystem. He does not speak explicitly of a global ethic, but his depiction of the evolutionary future becomes a framework for such an ethic. This portrayal of the evolutionary future is in fact a “meta” view of nature in which any global ethic must function.

Csikszentmihalyi's proposals share with Cousins' a concentration on the evolution of the human spirit. He identifies three conditions, grounded in metanature, that are critical for a viable “ideational system” (which he also calls spirituality).

1. To be viable, such a system must maintain a dialectical respect for both the sacred and the profane. This means that religious and spiritual interpretations, although not reducible to material scientific explanations, must be commensurate with them.

2. The structures of the evolving human consciousness must be taken seriously. These structures are described in Csikszentmihalyi's psychological theory of *flow*, which asserts that “people feel best when they do things that make them feel involved, concentrated, and competent. . . . Flow experiences engage individual skills through clear and challenging demands for action and thus produce a dynamic state of consciousness that requires a constant rebalancing of the ratio between challenge and skills” (1991, 24). The relevance of this theory to a global ethic becomes clear in the following description: “The fact that people seek out flow experiences even in the absence of material rewards illustrates the fact that we need more than the fulfillment of genetically and socially conditioned needs. The

flow state is a paradigm for the future because, while it lasts, people lose their self-conscious sense of individuality and often report a feeling of union with entities larger than the self" (1991, 24).

3. A global ethic "will move the fulcrum of its worldview from the human being to the network of being, to the process of evolution itself. . . . A new ethics will have to account for the interests of as many forms of life as possible; also, it will have to consider the sacredness of the inorganic conditions that make life possible. It will have to reconcile human nature with the laws of the universe as we know them" (1991, 24).

Csikszentmihalyi, like Cousins, understands that attempts at shaping an ethic for the future must accept the restructuring of human consciousness that is underway even now. The new ethic will be in continuity with the past, as evolution always is, but it will also force us to reconsider perennial issues from new perspectives, with new intensity (p. 25).

*Metamethod: Don Browning's Proposal for Universal Practical Reason.* Browning's contribution to forming a global ethic proceeds from his proposal for a universal practical reason, which is spelled out in five levels (Browning in press). First is the "visional level," which is "conveyed by narratives and metaphors about the character of the ultimate context of experience." With respect to the HIV/AIDS problem in Africa, for example, the worldview of "Africanity," which includes distinctive ideas of the relation of children to the divine, even their sacrality, is immediately relevant to the widespread cases of HIV-positive pregnant women. Second is the "obligational dimension," which is "guided by some implicit or explicit moral principle of a rather general kind." Sanctity of individuals and respect for them might be a principle relevant to the HIV/AIDS issue.

Third are "assumptions about the basic regularities of human tendencies and needs," which might include assumptions about the needs of HIV-positive persons for sociality and sexual expression. Fourth are "assumptions about pervasive social and ecological patterns that channel and constrain these tendencies and needs." Fifth are "concrete practices and rules informed by the foregoing dimensions," such as mores concerning monogamy, marital fidelity, and paternal responsibilities.

Browning's proposals for practical reasons are contextual, even as they conform to a methodological "deep structure," which I term a metamethod. This method compels efforts at shaping a global ethic to take into account the embodied realities of the various cultures of the world.

#### A PALETTE OF ISSUES

These reflections certainly do not exhaust the possibilities and the requirements posed by the theme of this symposium to Christian theology. They are, rather, a palette of considerations that suggest not only the difficulties

of the theme but also the resources and possibilities for exploring the many dimensions of the theme. The difficulties point to the complexity of the challenge, and at the same time they give us a glimpse of the urgency and the excitement of the tasks that the theme sets before us.

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