Editorial

ETHICS AND RELIGION IN THE STREAM OF LIFE

Jose Nandhikkara

Ethics, Creed and Cult are constitutive of all religions; there is no religion without rules for moral behaviour. More importantly human beings are fundamentally ethical beings so much so that they are called *homo ethicus*. *Homo ethicus* is also intimately related to *homo religiosus* in the stream of life. Traditionally religions were the custodians of Ethics and moral instructions were included in the scriptures and handed down through tradition. Life and words of the founders of religious paths are normative for believers for deciding what is good, right and just. The cultic celebrations are also occasions for ethical instructions. For many believers it is religion that directs their ethical decisions and they would assert that religion is necessary and sufficient to live ethically. The religions also generally take into account how the traditional ethical teaching can be interpreted and updated for solving complex moral problems in the modern world. Such contemporary interpretations argue that Scriptures and Sacred Traditions do not exhaust full range of ethics, though contemporary ethical decisions cannot be against the normative traditions. The advancements in science and technology, changed social scenarios in economics, commerce, politics, etc. demand new ethical solutions. Many religions like Christianity have eschatological goals also for ethical behaviour whereas religions like Confucianism aim at maintenance and propriety of relationships.

With the arrival of modernity, secularism and liberal democracy many consider religion to be a liability than a contributor for the harmony of life; they prefer and promote secular ethics. It takes different forms: anti-religious, a-religious and ethics beyond religions. Pointing to the dangers of religions as shown in wars, acts of terrorism, communal violence, etc. in the name of religion some take the form of anti-religious in ethical matters. For example, communism looked at religion as enemy of the revolution and proposed a communist ethics. Socialist and humanist ideologies also point to the drawbacks of organized religions and argue for a separation of state and church and relegated religion into the public sphere. According to them religion is more part of the problem rather than solution and may be tolerated only in the private sphere. In developing countries like India, where vast majority of people belong to one of the

religions, ethical values are not maintained as much as in nations like Denmark and Sweden, where religions have less importance. The widespread corruption in such countries also point to the lack of effectiveness of religion in the ethical life of the people. Therefore the academia and political and social scientists prefer secular ethics or ethics without religion in the public sphere, religion being confined to the private realm. They argue that human beings have come of age and need to go beyond religions. With the help of logic and reason, they are capable of deriving normative principles of behaviour without recourse to the sacred. The core values of human life – truth, love, justice, etc. – do not necessarily need a religious back up, it was argued. The moral dimension of human life, according to secular ethics, does not derive from religion but from human needs to cooperate and live in community with each other. Ethical values are fashioned and evolved by natural selection and adaptation, not handed down by God. They argue for a social ethics which makes no recourse to religion and can be equally acceptable to those with faith and those without – an ethics beyond religion.

It puzzles, however, the academia especially in the west that overwhelming majority of the people still belong to one or other religious tradition. In fact, there is a 'Return of Religion' in many parts of the developed world and a reaffirmation of religion in developing countries. A secularized morality does not seem to be able to answer convincingly, 'Why should I be moral?' More and more people realise that religion can be part of the solution for the contemporary social, national, international and global problems. Science, for all the benefits it has brought to our world, has not helped us to make sense of our lives. In spite of the scientific advancements problems of life continue to haunt people. Religion and ethics are important to find meaning in life and they are interdependent. Religions could be effective agents for promotion and protection of human rights and social harmony it is argued. Faith in God inspires people to lead a life of moral values and moral worth; it shows that life has meaning. Certainly religion has helped millions of people in the past, helps millions today and will continue to help millions in the future.

It is in this context, to examine the complex interrelationships between Religion and Ethics, the Centre for the Study of World Religions, Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram, Bangalore, and Globethics.net India jointly organized a one-day workshop on Religion and Ethics in collaboration with the Faculty of Philosophy, DVK and the Department of Philosophy, Christ University, Bangalore. Some of the papers presented in the

workshop are revised to be included in this issue of the Journal of Dharma on Religions and Ethics.

In "Ethics and Business: Evidence from Sikh Religion," Charan Singh presents the guidance of Sikh religion, the youngest and most recent of the major world religions, to practice discipline and positive approach in all walks of life and particularly in business practices. He argues that Sikhism encourages enterprise, workforce participation and economic progress. For a Sikh, Charan Singh argues, human life in itself is a business, with every breath being a business period, and the highest priority of life being Truthful Living. The three pillars of Sikh religion are to work hard and earn an honest living, share with others the fruits of such labour and meditation, implies cultivating virtues.

"African Religion and Ethics: The Notion of Ethical Non dualism" by Maheshvari Naidu works on the premise that ethics, as value laden scripts and sets of relational belief and behaviour, are dynamically informed and richly nourished by the religious and spiritual traditions within which they are conceptually entangled. The author focuses on the traditions of Advaita Hinduism and African Traditional Religions and raises a discussion on their non-dual philosophic perspective through the lens of relationality and the African notion of *ubuntu*.

Shaikh Mohd Saifuddeen, Chang Lee Wei, Abdul Halim Ibrahim, and Nor Aina Mhd Khotib share their fruits of research on "Islamic Ethical Framework to Tackle Scientific and Technological Dilemmas." The framework is based on the *maqasid al-shariah* or the higher purposes of the Islamic Divine law. Under this framework, there are five purposes of the Islamic Divine law which are protected, namely faith, life, intellect, progeny, and property. This framework can serve as a useful checklist that can assist Muslims in providing responses to the various issues pertaining to science and technology.

"Challenges in Bioethics: A Christian Vision" by Lucose Chamakala discusses contemporary bioethical challenges focussing on capital punishment and the use of reproductive technologies. Even though capital punishment had been considered as an indirect violation of life in the past, in the modern circumstances, according to the author, it cannot be morally justified. Similarly, even though Christianity is highly concerned about the difficulties of the infertile couples, the use of in vitro fertilization and surrogate motherhood cannot be morally justified as these procedures involve the destruction of many human lives and high risks to human life at its early highly vulnerable stages. However, Christianity admits that

there are some situations when humans are compelled to accept and respect certain limitations to protect human life.

Vivek Kumar Radhakrishnan makes a study on Hindu moral code, *Manusmṛti* in "Dharma: Agent of Social Cohesion and Equilibrium in Manu's State." Dharma, as envisaged in *Manusmṛti*, serves as a common value and dictates common goals for the people that could be attained by functioning for the good of the institutions they belong to and, ultimately, for the survival of the society. Social institutions like marriage, family, *varṇa* system, *āśrama* system, political system and legal system were structured with accurate positions and roles for their efficient and smooth functioning. They were made to function compatibly with each other to ensure the survival of the society. Manu carefully avoided conflicts and competitions in the society. Thus, by acting as a cohesive agent, Dharma, as a foundational moral principle, integrates both individuals and the institutions to maintain the equilibrium of Manu's state.

"The Dilemma of Dharma in the Gītā: Religious Constraints on Moral Duty" by Cinderella Sequeira explores the ethical dilemma in the Gītā faced by Arjuna in relation to adherence to scriptural norms and duties by birth, the compatibility between dharma and karma and its end as Mokṣa. *Varṇa-āśrama* dharma, according to the author, establishes an oppressive society in which every individual is expected to be kept under a check and control system, limiting human beings to people programmed to work alone. It also endangers their ability to engage in an occupation of their choice on the basis of their aptitude and interest as a result of which the authenticity of a people is lost.

The contributions in the issue of the Journal of Dharma affirm that ethics and religion though distinct are inseparable in the stream of life. *Homo ethicus* and *homo religiosus* are constitutive dimensions of being human. Efforts to separate them are in vain; to a certain extent it is even dangerous. Historically and logically they are united in the stream of life. All those who believe in God and follow a religious path should come together to promote harmony of life. Let our ethical lives challenge and inspire all, also those who do not follow a religious path to live ethically. As Wittgenstein observed, "To believe in a God means to understand the question about the meaning of life...to see that the facts of the world are not the end of the matter...to see that life has a meaning."[1] Ethics and religion join together in the stream of life.

[1]Wittgenstein, *Notebooks 1914-1916*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1961, 74.