

Unit Three: Ethical Decision-Making

All major religions have love and compassion at their core, they promote tolerance not violence and hate, and most have their own version of the Golden Rule – treat others as you wish to be treated. They all recognize that human happiness ultimately comes from our relationship with one another.

— Desmond Tutu, South African social rights activist, retired Anglican bishop, 1984 Nobel Peace Prize, 2009 Presidential Medal of Freedom

We know that whatever our differences, there is one law that binds all great religions together. Jesus told us to “love thy neighbor as thyself.” The Torah commands, “That which is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow.” In Islam, there is a hadith that reads “None of you truly believes until he wishes for his brother what he wishes for himself.” And the same is true for Buddhists and Hindus; for followers of Confucius and for humanists. It is, of course, the Golden Rule – the call to love one another; to treat with dignity and respect those with whom we share a brief moment on this earth. It is an ancient rule; a simple rule; but also one of the most challenging. For it asks each of us to take some measure of responsibility for the well-being of people we may not know or worship with or agree with on every issue. Sometimes, it asks us to reconcile with bitter enemies or to resolve ancient hatreds. It requires us not only to believe, but to do – to give something of ourselves for the benefit of others and the betterment of the world. In this way, the particular faith that motivates each of us can promote a greater good for all of us.”

— President Barack Obama, National Prayer Breakfast, February 5, 2009

Can one have a code of ethics without having religion? Certainly, this question is continually under debate. One of the readings in this unit, written by Tibetan Buddhism’s Dalai Lama, addresses this very question. His answer may be surprising to you. In addition, Paul Tillich’s theory of religion (Unit One reading) asserts that all people are religious, because all have some object, person, belief or goal that holds a place of ultimacy in their lives – something about which they are “religious.” To extrapolate from Tillich’s theory then, their ethical decisions are rooted in their “religion,” that is to say, that object, person, belief or goal which is their primary arbiter of decision-making.

Then, there is the flip side of this question: Can religion exist without an ethical code? One would be hard-pressed to find a religion that does not contain an ethical component. All do. And, surprisingly to many, there are even some ethical instructions that are shared among all religious traditions. Most notably, and as at least two of the suggested readings in this unit assert, the ethical principle that is often called The Golden Rule is expressed in some way in every major religious tradition: *Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.*

This unit is intended to briefly introduce you to ideas about ethics from various viewpoints: Judeo-Christian (Joseph Fletcher), Islamic (Qur’an texts), and Buddhist.

—Lora Hobbs & Austra Reinis