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Religion and Ethics [Religion and Television in Indonesia: Ethics Surrounding Dakwahtainment]

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Religion and Ethics

The Relevance of Ethics

The term “ethics” has been deployed in various contexts, disciplines and fields, leading to some difficulties in knowing exactly what ethics implies and how it is applied in different circumstances. As Garret (1968: 2) wrote in *Problems and Perspectives in Ethics*, “The word ethics has almost as many meaning as it has users.” Most often, lay people assume an equivalence between “ethics” and “morality”, using them interchangeably in daily conversations. Although the two are different, ethics and morality are closely related to one another, which can potentially lead to misconceptions. Today, the terms “moral” or “morality” are more related to sexuality or “the human desire for the flesh”, where “immoral” or “immorality” contribute to such connotations (Garrett 1968: 2).

Thus, while morality focuses on standards of action, guides to action, choices in action, ethics is the study of those standards, guides and choices. For this reason, ethics is often construed as moral philosophy or the science of morals. The use of the term “science” to describe ethics, problematic though it may be, leads people to think that it merely deals with theories about what is good and bad or right

and wrong. Here, Garrett (1968) argues for the “ultimate justification”, which is necessary to resolve the complex and concrete demands of society.

Singer (1994: 3-4) defines ethics as the science “about how people ought to live” and “the systematic studying of reasoning about how we ought to act”. He argues that the term often refers to a set of rules, principles, or way of thinking that guide, or claim authority to guide, the actions of a particular group. This way, ethics is often misconstrued as being similar to “law” for the plain reason that many believe ethics should be the guiding principle that serves as the foundation for society’s conception of good and bad or in deciding what constitutes right and wrong action or behaviour. The immediate problem emerging from this discourse is the subjective claims made on the determination of what is good and bad or right and wrong for society.

The question of the relevance of ethics to human life is both imperative and practical. It is imperative because the assumptions and foundations that lead to ethics may shift from time to time and from one place to another. It is practical because people need some assurance or firmness in their belief that what they are doing is good or right. However, the question of relevance relates more to the development of society as a whole and less to the individuals’ pursuit of their own happiness. Ethics is therefore relevant for the following reasons: first, either knowingly or unknowingly, most people have never stopped asking themselves about how to live in the present world. The propensity to persistently ask about principles and values is part of the nature of human beings as they navigate the different and difficult challenges in their daily life. The cumulative outcome of the social negotiation pertaining to these questions produces what conventionally is called culture.

Second, with the development of technology and access to mass transportation and telecommunication, people constantly face difficult moral dilemmas and ethical situations previously unfamiliar or even unknown to humankind. Ethical issues revolving around stem cell research, nanotechnology, genetic engineering, astrophysics and the omnipresent media (i.e. television and the internet), for instance, call into question their utility and potential adverse effects on society at large. The recent rise of reality television or internet pornography has caused many to pose difficult ethical questions, related to privacy, appropriateness, sexual behaviour and mores in society. More often than not, religion finds it hard to provide ultimate justifications for either allowing or disallowing outright such contents.

Third, as society moves towards a more explicit division of labour, the varying professions have led to an inquiry about the expansion of ethical and moral problems generated by newly emerging interrelationships among humans, their activities and the values they hold. Without a continual search for new ethical principles and values, human beings will forever be dictated to and restricted by the Epicurean philosophy of “maximising pleasure and minimising pain”, which can easily lead people to the height of absurdity in life, while unable to confront the demands of their own existence and answer the ultimate and most essential question pertaining to the meaning of life.

This brings us to social ethics and its equally complex notion and application. In the classic text *Social Ethics: Issues in Ethics and Society*, Winter (1968: 6) argues that “the subject matter of social ethics is moral rightness and goodness in the shaping of human society”. The scope, however, that Winter delineates does not at all help us to define the true nature of social ethics. Defining social ethics is in itself highly

problematic partly because putting the term “social” as an adjective to the noun (ethics) pre-supposes that ethics in and of itself is *unsocial*, an individuated form of moral philosophy. This raises the question of whether or not an individual – living and flourishing in a given society – can escape from the ethics that govern the social relations surrounding him. Winter goes on to lament that “social ethics is, thus, the continuing and daily business of man in his social existence, it seeks universals but works with the relativities of an historically conditioned situation” (Winter 1968: 8).

Going beyond definitional boundaries, social ethics hides a multitude of problems. Every culture or community has its own standards of what constitutes good and bad or what is socially acceptable and decent behaviour. Social ethics consequently deals mostly with the relativity of moral standards in a certain space-time context. Yet most people do not question whose opinions or perspectives matter most in determining these standards. Elsbernend (2005) argues that it is the majority that usually has the most say in setting the parameters for society. Moreover, she maintains that social ethics orbits around many disciplines such as economics, politics, environment, biology, ethnography, geography, even religion and spirituality. As a direct consequence, “credibility in social ethics increasingly requires competence and conversation with political, environmental, social, biological and economic scientists” (Elsbernd 2005: 141).

One can therefore maintain that social ethicists deal with evaluative meanings and society’s struggle to achieve some form of order based on the collective understanding and moral judgement of what is good and bad or right and wrong, regardless of whether they

are derived from social conditions, prevailing norms or a particular religious worldview.

Four Approaches to Ethics

The complexity of the study of ethics leads to variants in the way one approaches ethics. Based on focus and orientation, the study of ethics may be divided into four: meta-ethics, and normative, descriptive and applied ethics. As a branch of moral philosophy, meta-ethics delves into the nature and methodology of moral judgments. Gensler (1998) considers meta-ethics as the method for selecting moral principles and doing normative ethics. Meta-ethics or, as some would prefer, analytic ethics involves reasoning about the presuppositions behind the moral systems developed under the category of normative ethics, which is all about questioning the validity of those premises about reality and human nature. In *Ethics as Social Science*, Yeager (2001: 16) argues that meta-ethical issues are really about morality and that they concern themselves with the metaphysical, epistemological, semantic or psychological aspects of ethics. Meta-ethics thus examines the coherence and rationale of the practical forms of ethics, which altogether form its subject matter, and assesses the logic of moral reasoning.

Normative ethics relates to the question: what principles ought we to live by, given the continuous and shifting challenges? Here, Yeager (2001) writes that there are two levels of normative ethics: one that looks for very general, comprehensive moral principles, such as that we ought always to do whatever maximises total pleasure for everyone. The other concerns moral questions such as abortion or lying (2001: 5). In short, it involves creating or evaluating moral standards and

asks whether or not people's current moral behaviour is reasonable. Thus, the study of normative ethics places emphasis on values (moral judgments), norms (rules that govern an action) and virtues (traits that make a good person good) in society.

Descriptive ethics focuses on defining the existing morality or moral systems in society. It usually entails the description of how people behave and how this either conforms to the moral standards they claim or not. It also often denotes comparative perspectives on the different standards of ethics and morality that diverse societies hold to be true or have developed. The typical supposition usually follows the Epicurean philosophy that holds the opinion that people tend to make decisions that bring pleasure and avoid pain.

Frequently also dubbed prescriptive ethics, applied ethics concerns "precepts" and "maxims of behaviour" and critically reflects on them (Yeager 2001). Applied ethics condemns lying, cheating and stealing and exhorts benevolence in its practical application in daily life. But it does not end there, according to Yeager (2001), because applied ethics also recommends what kinds of behaviour and traits of character to cultivate.

From these four approaches to the study of ethics, the author has taken a combination of two, i.e. normative and applied ethics. Combining these two approaches can help describe, analyse and assess the phenomenon of *Dakwahtainment* in Indonesia.

Normative ethics lend its aid to portraying the idealism in Islam with respect to *dakwah* or Islamic propagation, while explaining why the actions and behaviours of the celebrity *ustadzs* and *ustadzahs* involved in *Dakwahtainment* are in principle contradictory to the normative ethical values that Islam espouses. The normative ethical

approach generates a comparative overview between *what ought to be* and *what is* in the modern-day model of *dakwah* or Islamic propagation in Indonesia.

Applied ethics can help in prescribing the kinds of ethical code that may be necessary to regulate the *Dakwahtainment* programmes on Indonesian television, to make them more suitable, appropriate and fitting to the normative high standards of ethics that the Prophet of Islam Muhammad set forth as a precedent. Applied ethics may aid the author in thinking how *Dakwahtainment* programmes can help generate or push for a morally robust socio-religious development in Indonesia.

Islam and Religious Ethics

Religious ethics refers to the relationship between religion and ethics. As Winter (1968) pointed out, the correlation between religion or religious concerns and ethical valuation is more troubling than that between social science and ethics. This is in part because religion is perceived to be intimately connected to all things sacred and connotes the active participation of and interaction with the Divine, who holds absolute power and reigns over everything in the universe. The foremost characteristic of religious ethics, Winter argues, is the moral imperative. Religious ethicists believe in the claim of justice and benevolence as imperative, originating from the notion that morality is “the ultimate order”, providing “good beyond human capabilities” (Winter 1968: 13).

This places faith and religious practice, i.e. rituals and devotion to the Divine, which, by nature and definition, are concomitantly personal and subjective, as a barrier to reaching a negotiated settlement

on acceptable moral conduct and viable forms of behaviour in society. Religion and religious practice seem to be constantly at odds with the coming together of social ethics. Following the Enlightenment, secularised Europeans earnestly asked how religion could be at all relevant to ethics and social life.

In this study, religious ethics is defined as a method of understanding moral issues from the perspective of systematic faith and practice. It delves into the role of the Divine and how it interacts with the moral conduct and behaviour of both the individual and society. Al-Attar (undated) argues that the Divine origins of moral values and rulings are regarded by religionists as the only valid and genuine cause for acknowledging and retaining their legitimacy. They consider moral values almost synonymous with religious values and religion as the only guarantee of truthfulness in moral judgement. Furthermore, “religious texts are assumed to be the ultimate source of moral knowledge, and obedience to whatever is considered to be commanded by God would accordingly be the most highly regarded, basic virtue” (Al-Attar undated: xi).

For Muslims, Islamic ethics is embedded in the notion of the *akhlak al-karimah* (good pattern of conduct) that emanates from God’s Messenger and Prophet Muhammad, who has reached the level of *al-insan al-kamil* (the perfect being). The Quran states: “Ye have indeed in the Messenger of Allah a beautiful pattern of conduct for any one whose hope is in Allah and the Final Day, and who engages much in the Praise of Allah.”²⁴ In a different verse, the Quran praises the Prophet Muhammad for occupying a high level of ethics by stating: “And thou

²⁴ The Quran 33:21.

(standest) on an exalted standard of character”.²⁵ In one reliable *hadist*, it was reported that the Prophet said, “Verily, Thou hath been sent down to perfect ethics among the believers”.²⁶ Only through rigorous personal mentorship in perfecting the ethics and conduct of the community of believers can Islam then assume the highest idealism of being the *rahmatan li'l 'aalamiin* (blessings for the universe), as stipulated in its Holy Book.

Weber’s dichotomy between “exemplary” and “ethical” prophets is relevant to the discussion.²⁷ According to Weber, Islam is distinctive from other religions because of its insistence on radically destabilising the *status quo* and building an ideal, perfect society, comprising perfect beings with a good pattern of conduct. As an extension, the Prophet Muhammad was seen by Weber as a radical social change agent, distinguishable from the more traditionalist figures found in the exemplary prophets.²⁸

The most potent source from which the Prophet Muhammad derived his authority was the revelation (*wahy*) that was subsequently collated in what we now know as the Quran (Arabic, the recitation). Through the Quran, perceived by Muslims as the verbatim word of God, the Prophet Muhammad manifested his radical movement and embarked on his ethical reconstruction of world society. Islam’s propensity to put forth its religious ethical principles and values, however, is not without its contradictions and adversaries, especially within the context of democracy and the power struggle based on

²⁵ The Quran 68:4.

²⁶ This prophetic saying was said to be narrated by three prominent and reliable *hadist* scholars, namely Bukhari, Baihaqi and Hakim.

²⁷ Robin Gill, *Theology and Sociology: A Reader* (London: Cassell, 1996), 36.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 37.

material possession. In “Rethinking Islam Today”, Arkoun (2003: 37) argues:

Within this new value system, ethical thinking has less relevance than the technical regulations of the market and the efficient control of productive forces. Democracy limits the source of authority to the acquiescence expressed in different circumstances by various professional or political groups. There is no longer any reference to the transcendental origin of authority. The question of revelation is thus eliminated; it is neither solved intellectually nor maintained as a plausible truth according to the pragmatic reason prevailing in so-called modern thought. All relations are based on the respective power of nations, groups, and individuals; ethical principles, founded on metaphysical or religious visions, lose their appeal. I do not mean that we have to go back to the “revealed” truth according to *ishâhi* thinking. I am stressing a major difficulty of our time: the rupture between ethics and materialism. At the same time, social *imaginaire* is not more controlled or used in a better way by “scientific” knowledge. Rather, it is mobilised more than ever by ideologues who take advantage of the modern mass media to disseminate slogans taken from religious (in Muslim societies) or secular ideologies, or from a mixture of both (in the so-called socialist regimes).

For many scholars like Arkoun, it is conceivable to think about the diminishing influence of religious ethics amid the tide of modernisation, secularisation and materialism, which for all intent and purposes systematically work against any system of ethics that presupposes even the remotest sense of transcendental origin. Having said that, this line of argument fails to capture the overwhelming power and spirit of religious ethics entrenched in the doctrines stipulated in the sacred texts. In *Islam: Past, Present and Future*, the ethicist Hans Küng (2007: 66) wrote:

Indeed for all Muslims the Quran is the truth: the original source of the experience of God and piety and the mandatory criterion of right faith; the way: the true possibility of coping with the world and the eternally valid standard for correct action (ethic); the life: the abiding foundation of Islamic law and the soul of Islamic prayer, already the material for the instruction

of Muslim children, the inspiration of Islamic art and the all-permeating spirit of Islamic culture.

Küng (2007: 92) argued that Islam is “an ethically orientated religion” that embraces “a basic ethic of elementary humanity grounded in God’s word and will”. He maintains the centrality of the Quran by saying:

The Quran is concerned with ethical imperatives for human society, not all of which were new. However, on the new basis of faith these norms worked in favour of more justice, fairness, restraint, moderation, mediation, compassion and forgiveness, though this was not transposed into a legal structure of rights and responsibilities (Küng 2007: 149).

It should therefore be clear from the discussion above that Islam, more specifically the Quran and the Prophetic teachings, tends towards affirming that ethics and religion are not mutually exclusive, and that *wahy* was revealed to humankind to support a basic and credible framework for a universal system of ethics.²⁹



²⁹ On this point, I am thankful to Professor Kevin Reinhart's presentation during the Akhlaak-e va Aadian conference in Qum, Iran, which suggested that the notion of *ma'ruf*(good) in the Quran pertained to “something that you already know”, highlighting the universality and intrinsic knowledge of ethics.

