WHAT ATHENS HAS TO DO WITH JERUSALEM: LOCATION AND THE ORIGINS OF ETHICS

William Schweiker
Edward L. Ryerson Distinguished Service Professor of Theological Ethics
University of Chicago Divinity School

On Images and Ethics

One of the fun things about religious studies is to realize, for reasons hard to explain, that across cultures and religions the human imagination often fixes on similar things in order to grasp the meanings of dimensions of human life. Scholars have noted, for instance, the importance of the "desert" in mystical outlooks in different traditions. We can explore the importance of mountains, forests, and oceans. One even finds this in popular cultural forms today, as in the image of barren land that will be taken for oil in *There Will Be Blood* or the idea of storms in several popular movies. Think of Freud's idea of the oceanic feeling. Reflection on these kinds of images—maybe even archetypes, although I think that is to claim too much—is often used to enter into a discussion of religion and comparative thought about the religions. It matters, for instance, that Israel wanders in the desert, and so does Jesus. Religious poets in many traditions think about forests. We can then explore these kinds of images both to unlock their meaning in a culture or religion but also as one way to explore social and cultural dynamics and how a society organizes and orients human life. When we do so, then we engage in ethical reflection as well, or so I will argue.

It is not often noted, but there is an interesting and complex connection between the image of the city and the origins of religious and non-religious ethics, at least in the West. And to be sure we could explore other images related to ethics, like the importance of trees (Eden, Cross, Bo Tree) or mountains (Sinai, Sermon on the Mount, Zarathustra). Today, it is the city. And the city is an ambiguous image. We all know that for many people—even today—the difference between town and country is mapped onto moral distinctions. The city is a place of danger and vice whereas the country is a place of purity and virtue. Or, conversely, the country is the place of simplicity, ignorance, and backwardness, whereas the city is a place of freedom and intelligence, decisiveness and creativity. These valuations of town and country have deep roots in the American context, but one can also find it in the bible as well. For example, Jesus wanders around in Galilee and only later "goes up to Jerusalem." Similar valuations are seen in Henry David Thoreau and his retreat to Walden. Much earlier in the modern period, Rousseau was suspicious of the city; for him, society was what put human beings into the chains of social convention. And Nietzsche sets Zarathustra on a mountaintop alone before descending to teach the undeserving mass in the town. Longstanding evaluations of the "city" are powerful and ambiguous even as they continue to infest common sense.

Maybe because I come from a city in an agricultural state (Des Moines, Iowa), I know this easy distinction is not true. And anyone who lives in Chicago would not want to claim that cities are obviously places of freedom and intelligence!! We need to be suspicious of easy equations, and that is one point of this paper. So, what I want to probe is not this easy—and patently false—dichotomy of city=bad; country=good, or

conversely, city=good; country=bad. Rather, I want to explore the image of the city as a location, a place that enables us to think about the origin of ethics.

That is why I have chosen as a title: "What Athens Has to Do with Jerusalem." The original phrase comes from the third century CE Christian thinker Tertullian, who was trying to get at a religious, rather than ethical, point. He put the phrase into a question, namely, what does Greek rationalism have to do with biblical revelation? And his answer was, not much. Ever since, there has been in many places something of a conflict between reason and revelation. Importantly, if we shift the focus a bit—that is, lean towards reflection on the moral life—we see, interestingly, that as cities Jerusalem and Athens have a good deal to do with each other. They are important for the origin of ethics, despite what common sense might tell us. In the ancient world, this connection with the city reached its climax among Christian thinkers with the work of St. Augustine, often called the last of the Hellenistic philosophers. His magisterial work is of course the *City of God*, which is drawn in contrast to the City of Man as the two loci for the possibilities of life, one marked by God's peace and the other endless war. Yet the theme of the city continues even today when we worry about moral and religious diversity in "globalized cities" and the place of religion in the public square.

Here, I will use the idea or the image of the city to examine the origin of ethics, making connections that are not often seen within the history of Western religious thought. I will draw a distinction in terminology and show its importance to the discussion at hand, then plunge into the connection between the city and ethics. This short paper will conclude with some thoughts about ethics and global cities like Chicago.

A Distinction and Its Importance

Before talking about cities, we need a distinction widely recognized among those who work in philosophical and religious ethics, but one that is not always used consistently in our common discourse. The distinction is between morality or morals, on the one hand, and ethics, on the other. The distinction is fairly simple, but important.

By morals or morality we mean the beliefs, values, norms, moral exemplars and so the outlook that actually guide peoples' lives. So, one can speak about a Christian or Jewish morality or the morals of the ancient Greeks or the moral worldview of the Mayan, for instance. In each case there would be some values, norms, beliefs, exemplars and saints and so an outlook about how one ought to live as a Christian or Jew or Greek or Mayan, but these would also be very different. Every culture, every religion, and every human being has some morality, some ideas and outlook about how one ought to live. This means that we come to the study of ethics with something already in hand.

By ethics, we mean a specific intellectual task, one that has become a discipline within the university and also in complex cultural traditions. But it is a task anyone engages in whenever he or she starts pondering or assessing his or her moral outlook. That is, the subject matter of ethics is morality, but it approaches morality in different ways. One way ethics approaches morality is to ask whether the norms, beliefs, values, exemplars, and outlooks that make up a morality (say, Mayan morality) are themselves good and true, and therefore should guide our lives. Thus, Jewish ethics seeks to understand the meaning of Jewish morals and also to show its truth and relevance for life, so too Christian, Greek, or Mayan ethics. Another way ethics approaches morality is more constructive. That is, an ethic proposes how one ought to orient life, actions, and

relations. In this task, an ethic might draw on the resources of some tradition, say, Buddhist thought and practice, but the intention is to articulate and propose a normative vision of how people ought to live. Of course, not every religion talks about reflection on its way of life as "ethics" in these ways. I do not think Mayans did and Muslims, for instance, often prefer the term "Law." Yet every culture seems to spawn some reflection on the meaning and truth and validity of its way of life—and so an ethics. And anyone who has asked if his or her accepted moral convictions are the right ones in a specific situation or has wondered about the truth of accepted values and sought to clarify them for actual life, has engaged in ethical reflection.

The distinction between morals and ethics is important since it allows us to put into question the beliefs that have shaped us in order to ask about their value. So, we can say, for instance, that Nazi morality was unethical, not valid. Or we can challenge ideas about racism rooted in some Christian outlook or made into law earlier in the history of this country. This idea of stepping back and making judgments about a morality does not come easily to people. Most of the time we accept the conventions of our cultures or religions; most of the time we inhabit rather than question our morals. As Nietzsche wrote in *Antichrist* (sec. 44): "Morality is the best of all devices for leading mankind around by the nose." Meaning, our "morality" is usually accepted and orients our lives. It is difficult to get an angle of vision to think about, criticism, and even revise the beliefs and values that provide sense and direction to our existence.

It seems that because we can only use the resources of our society or community that have shaped our lives, thinking and values to test or criticize our moral outlook. We are caught in a kind of circle: if we are reflective, we use our morality to test and criticize

our morality. A good deal of Western ethics has wrestled with this problem, that is, how to find a standard to test and criticize and even revise inherited moral beliefs and values. That is what Socrates did, and the Enlightenment, and so too today. When did it dawn on people to question their morals? And how is that related to the idea of the city? What did it enable them to do? This brings us back to the image of the city.

The City and the Origin of Ethics

At least in the West, the origin of ethics is usually associated with three names: the philosopher Socrates, the law-giver Moses, and the teacher Jesus. I sometimes note that one was poisoned by the polis for fabricating gods and corrupting the youth (Socrates), one was barred from entering the promised land (Moses) and one was crucified by the Roman Empire (Jesus). Doing ethics can be risky! For my purposes, what is crucial is that each of these figures (and later thinkers) has a certain connection to cities that is important for understanding the origin of ethics historically. This helps us to see why the city is important for creating the framework or background that allows some people, maybe all of us, to step back and to ask about their "morality," the customary beliefs that orient their lives. We can note at least three features of cities that enable and provoke ethical reflection. These features are not only found in cities, but they have been important for the development of ethics as the enterprise of reflecting on, assessing, and even changing moralities.

The first feature was seen most clearly by the ancient Greeks, especially Socrates. As we know, part of the point of human life for the Greeks—part of what makes for well being and well doing (*eudaimonia*)—was to be able to participate in the life of the *polis*, the city-state. Of course, this was limited to free males, and so over half the population

was excluded. Yet the idea was that "political existence" and the ability to debate and discuss in community with others were seen as human goods. Political existence enabled the orientation of social life. Socrates, as we know, was a town dweller who participated in the ongoing debate of the *polis*, posing questions about the meaning of basic ideas and ideals: what is piety, what is justice, what is love? In this respect, he is rightly called one "father of ethics." Socrates' death on the charges of making new gods and corrupting the youth provoked Plato's work and the formation of his school, and with Plato the arduous work of ethics began in full. Two central texts of his corpus, *The Republic* and *The Laws*, are about the proper formation and direction of the polis and human life, the soul. *The Republic* opens with Socrates in a shipping port outside the *polis*, thereby casting the whole social order into question.

Thus, part of the reason the city is crucial to the origin of ethics is that whereas families might be ordered through customary structures, social collectives larger than a single family must make decisions about their existence—about political realities—and this demands debate, discussion, and reflection, or it becomes a matter of violence. This debate and discussion can also challenge customary beliefs and so provoke the work of what we have called ethics. In other words, one origin of ethics is rooted in the social nature of human existence, which is most pressing and real in connection with communities, cities.

This brings us to a second feature of cities important for the origin of ethics. It comes into focus once we see, as Plato did, that social life, our lives within families and larger social communities, help to shape who we are as persons, our souls. The question

becomes twofold: is social existence good for the soul, and, what communities ought we to inhabit?

Some thinkers have rightly worried that there is something inherently dangerous about living within social structures. Rousseau noted that human beings are born free and yet everywhere are in chains because they must exist within social structures. Nietzsche, in his *Genealogy of Morals*, claims that the most fateful change in human existence comes with being enclosed within the all of society. Thoreau, too, worried about the forces of social convention on the moral life. For all of these thinkers—and others could be noted—the city provides crucial insight into what enslaves, tyrannizes, and distorts human beings from living authentic and truly good lives. Whether or not one accepts Rousseau's argument about the "noble savage" or Nietzsche's ruminations on the *Übermensch*, the city has provoked ethical reflection precisely because social life itself can be seen as a threat to human freedom and virtue. Incidentally, this is why your mother may have said when you were a kid, "Now be careful who you play with." She knew the force of social bonds to shape character, and she rightly worried. In this respect, all mothers are Nietzscheans, even if they do not always appreciate their little noble savages!

One can grant the dangers of social life to the rectitude and freedom of the soul and still insist on the importance of the city to the good moral life, to justice and responsibility, and also love and peace. One does so, as St. Augustine saw, by insisting that the question is *which* city one is to inhabit. Recall, again, that Augustine drew a distinction between the "City of God" and the "City of Man," or, roughly, between the reign of God and the Roman political order or the secular realm. (I recognize that the idea

of the "secular" is under debate, but I cannot enter that debate here.) The City of Man lives for its own glory and uses power and domination to attain what little peace it can; the City of God is based on the love of God and finds true peace in this love and service to others. The point of the Christian life, then, is to be trained to live in the City of God while a pilgrim in this world, interacting with the secular world. The church is caught, as it were, between God's reign and the secular order that structures present life.

What we are calling "ethics," Augustine would have called philosophy; he would have used divine philosophy to refer to the analysis and criticism of the "earthly city" from the perspective of and for the sake of the City of God. The insight gained from an Augustinian perspective is that social existence, and so the morals of a community, can be assessed and criticized from the perspective of another kind of social existence. This tactic has been used throughout history by thinkers as diverse as Karl Marx, Immanuel Kant, and others. Think of Martin Luther King, Jr. and his idea of the "beloved community," Jonathan Swift and Gulliver's travels to strange lands, or Thomas More's *Utopia*. This use of the city in ethics requires that we adopt a kind of double vision on reality: to see what *is* in the light of what can and *ought* to be. Our ideas about what can and ought to be the shape of personal and social life might seem utopian or serve as regulative ideals to guide social life (as Kant thought), but they certainly serve ethical reflection.

A third feature of the city and the origin of ethics now comes into view. Notice that Augustine asks about what it means to be a "Christian," Rousseau worries about the ways in which social life can distort human freedom, and Plato was most concerned with why his city executed a virtuous man. In each case, the question centers on character or

identity, what kind of person we ought to struggle to become. In Plato's and Augustine's thought, this is closely tied to the kind of community we ought to form: Athens or the Church. Not surprisingly, they connect reflection on the soul with reflection on the city, the just and faithful community. At issue, in this third level, is the formation of moral character. Ethics has always been concerned to explore and propose ideals about what a good person is, or who has an honorable or righteous or wise character, often through the idea of virtue or use of moral exemplars.

Character brings us back, interestingly, to Socrates, Jesus, and Moses. Why? Because each of those men arose within a specific community and yet embodied in their character a different way of life: Socrates challenged the heroic ideals of ancient Athens; Jesus tussled with the Pharisees; Moses welded his people in the Exodus and desert wanderings. This means that ethics must propose and assess what kinds of identity or character are truly good, just, or virtuous. Ethics often turns to moral exemplars both to understand human possibilities for goodness and also to critique social values. This is also the place, it seems to me, that globalized cities, like Chicago, offer a new location for ethical reflection.

Moral Identity and Global Cities

I have suggested that the image of the city is important for understanding the origin of ethics—i.e., critical reflections on morality—because cities require human participation and cooperative in the formation of social life, provoking the question of which kind of community we ought to build; yet they can also threaten human existence. Likewise, we saw that the city is also bound to the formation of character, the labor of identity formation, and even moral exemplars.

This question of identity formation becomes most salient within our current global context. As many social theorists have noted, we now live not only within highly differentiated societies (where economy, law, education, media, politics have their own values and rules), but in societies increasingly porous to others through global immigration, the flow of media, economic interdependence, and environmental realities. Anthony Giddens, in *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Stanford, 1991), notes that in our current time, "the self, like the broader institutional contexts in which it exists, has to be reflexively made. Yet this task has to be accomplished amid a puzzling diversity of options and possibilities" (3). In other words, the dynamics of global cultural flows and the movement of peoples mean that human identities are in flux and have to be formed in these ever-shifting contexts. This fact of identity comes to a head in global cities like Chicago, posing a major ethical challenge.

In global cities, peoples' identities are constantly being negotiated: race, class, religion, gender, political outlook and the like are melded into an identity that seemingly does not have one dominate descriptor. I cannot say, for instance, that my gender or race or political outlook does or should dominate my social identity. What about religion? Religions often claim absolute devotion and seek to form the identity of adherents under one descriptor, that I am, for example, only to be a Christian. Religions often seek to enfold and transform one's identity within the community's vision of the world as the marker of true membership or fidelity, salvation or enlightenment. No wonder that we see in the global whirl a rise of fundamentalism since these movements claim that one's identity must be formed around one description, say Hindu or Christian or Muslim. The

ethical question is then this: are these challenges now put to people's identities within the sweeping force of global dynamics mainly a problem or mainly a possibility?

For some it is a problem and there is the desire to have identity unified under just one descriptor, usually religious or political. This is seen in the forms of fundamentalism, ethnic conflict, attacks on globalization and so on around the world. For others, this is the possibility for people to form complex identities that allow them to identify with others who have complex identities as well. While you might be a Hindu and I am Christian, we are nevertheless also Americans, social progressives, and fans of the Chicago Fire. My point is that the globalized city recaptures for our time the idea of the city and the origin of ethics that we have been tracing, but in a compressed form. It is a space in which people of different religions, races, ethnicities, and the like must decide how to form their social life and to use the instruments of either political and social discourse or violence. It is a place of threat to some forms of identity and in which some people will try to retreat into their communities—the City of Their God—in order to stop the reflexive interaction with others that challenge and reform identities. And the globalized city embodies the very dynamics of late or high modernity, as Giddens called it, which requires we undertake fashioning our lives, a task that is inseparable from the work of ethics.

What is most exciting about this location of ethics, in my judgment, is that it calls for new and creative forms of ethical reflection to meet the global challenges we face as a species. Like it or not, we live in one world riddled with many moralities, and the ethical task is to assess, test, and revise those moralities in ways that will respect and enhance the integrity of life. About what that ethics should look like, I have some thoughts. Explaining those ideas would take us beyond our topic of exploring the image of the city

and the origin of ethics and into the actual work of theological ethical reflection. So here I will stop, and you may read the invited responses to my essay on the forum's discussion board and join in the conversation there, if you wish.