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## **NDIAS Graduate Student Fellow Reflects On & Looks Forward to Teaching Religious Ethics to Notre Dame Students**

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## student perspective

# ndias graduate student fellow reflects on & looks forward to teaching religious ethics to notre dame students

by Bharat Ranganathan

"Religious ethics." If you've ever been to a meeting of the American Academy of Religion or the Society of Christian Ethics, you've probably heard this term being used. You may also have seen it advertised as a subfield within religious studies. But what (if anything) is religious ethics? Despite its common usage, there seems to be little consensus about an adequate definition. Why? Some scholars lament the historical move, which occurred in the mid-twentieth century, from Christian ethics to religious ethics. Others believe that religious ethics shouldn't be considered an independent subfield within religious studies; rather, it should fall within the ambit of the history of religions, the philosophy of religions, or theology. Others still think that nothing should differentiate religious ethics from ethics simpliciter—i.e., regardless of their religious commitments, ethical norms are binding on persons as such.

In our continuing seminar, "On the Concept of Religious Ethics," we will attempt to develop an appreciation of religious ethics. In our first meeting last fall, we discussed the field of ethics more generally and made our first foray into understanding the theoretical questions surrounding religious ethics. For example, we discussed the distinctions among "metaethics," "normative ethics," and "practical ethics." We also considered the ways in which different scholars—postmodern or otherwise—have attempted to do away with ethics. We then turned our attention toward religious ethics specifically. Focusing on James Gustafson's 1998 article, "A Retrospective Interpretation of American Religious Ethics, 1949–1998," we charted the shift from Christian ethics to religious ethics and the expansion of the field of ethics to include, in addition to normative ethics, comparative and descriptive ethics. We also discussed articles by John P. Reeder, Jr. and Jeffrey Stout. Here, our discussion focused on definitions about "religious" and "nonreligious" ethics and whether a religious ethicist needs to be religious him or herself. We will be meeting again in Spring 2014. Our projected topics of discussion include attempts to "reject" religious ethics and methodological issues pertaining to comparative religious ethics.



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