

Responsibility in religiosity

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Abstract: Understanding ‘responsibility’ in its normal sense of freely fulfilling a role in a collaborative scheme, rather than as a basic agent integrity or prosocial disposition, I argue that the desirability of responsibility is one of the main supporting and constraining factors in the formation of religious thought and practice, with diversely typical manifestations. For those who are disposed to assume responsibility and to be religious, religious beliefs and practices offer a way of maximally enlarging one’s responsibility, an intrinsically appealing prospect. The global relevance of religious responsibility is shown by comparing exemplars in a wide range of cultures. Aeneas, Kongzi, Dharmakara, and Miaoshan each embody maximal responsibility in a distinct way that motivates and sets standards for a religiosity.

I wish to suggest that an interest in assumable responsibility is an important supporting and constraining factor in the formation of religion quite broadly, with diversely typical religious manifestations. The claim as I understand it does not seem to have been made previously, or at any rate does not seem to be in circulation; the great popularity of a highly abstract, normatively dominant conception of responsibility may actually screen it off.¹

Though I mean to take at least one step back from abstraction in conceiving religiousness and responsibility, my interest nonetheless is philosophical, centring on ideals for meaningful human life that might be compelling for anyone as we ponder and discuss our prospects. I will begin by locating responsibility as an element in being religious; then I will examine the pursuit of responsibility both as a generally appealing possibility and with a special seriousness in religious contexts. The global relevance of religious responsibility will be shown by comparing famous exemplars of religious responsibility across a wide range of literate cultures. I believe that the ideal interest of these exemplars shines even more brightly when lit by the proposed conception.

The primary argument here places responsibility *among* the makers of religious meaningfulness and envisions it in an *array* of religious forms. But in closing I will

consider reasons for regarding religious responsibility as an inescapable and unitary factor in religious life.

The variable(s) of religiosity

People say prayers, make vows, build shrines, engage in rituals, think and talk about transcendent things: such are the phenomena of religion. An elusive but essential aspect of any activity that seems rightly marked as religious is *religiosity* in the sense of the greater or lesser degree to which an individual or community goes in for a form of religion. There is social-scientific research on 'religiosity' that takes note of such things as reported beliefs in a divine being and frequency of praying or participation in ritual; this gives a factual picture of the variable but does not yet engage the question of the ideally motivating intention in being religious – a crucially important question in assessing religious meaningfulness. When we contemplate motivating intentions, it is evident that a person who simply accepts and makes matter-of-fact reference to the religious beliefs and practices of a community is not being religious in one important sense, and that a solemn worshipper or radiant mystic probably *is* being religious in that sense.

What then does intentional religiosity consist of? It would be theoretically convenient if we could define the field of religious meaningfulness by one characteristic intention or one ideal for intention. But unifying ideas like Schleiermacher's feeling for the infinite and Tillich's ultimate concern, or the normative Kantian and Levinasian definitions of religion as moral responsibility, posit a great ideal motivating power at the cost of a great oversimplification. For there is a stubborn diversity in expressed reference points for religious devotion – awe, reverence, piety, sincerity, love, submission, faith, zeal, hope – which shows even on a high level of generality that religiosity comes in different life-stirring, life-guiding forms.

To understand why and how a person might go in for a religious way of living, or why in fact people do this frequently and intensely enough to sustain a pattern of religiosity on the scale of cultures and traditions, it is necessary to understand the human capacities and tendencies that are involved. For example, to make sense of the popularity of beliefs in divine revelation we need to take account of both the human capacity to imagine communicating spirits and the general human tendency of optimism – with regard to revelation, the optimistic expectation that we will indeed have a way of hearing from a specially qualified source what we most want or need to hear. Evidently there is enough optimism in many religious communities to sustain the otherwise unlikely premise of divine revelation. From this we can tell that at least some individuals are optimistic enough in their religious agency to maintain the requisite optimism in such a community. Given that optimism varies among persons, we can reasonably guess that some members of any religious community (as indeed of any sizeable community) are more optimistic than others, and that being more optimistic overlaps to some extent with being more religious and thus probably contributes to

effective religious leadership in the community – if not in the leaders, certainly in a critical mass of the led. Recognizing the supportive role of optimism in the mental economy of the community, we will not be surprised to find some thoughts and practices of the community *catering to* optimistic belief:

Now, what do you think, Shariputra: Why is that world called the ‘Land of Bliss’? Shariputra, physical and mental pain are unknown to the living beings that inhabit the world called the ‘Land of Bliss’; on the contrary, they only experience conditions of boundless happiness. (Shorter Pure Land Sutra §7)²

You are the best community singled out for people: you order what is right, forbid what is wrong, and you believe in God. (Qur’an 3:110)³

But of course optimism is not the only relevant intentional factor for religiosity. Turning to the factor I propose to focus on, there are grounds also for saying that belief in divine revelation depends on a human interest in responsible relationships. The archetypal recipient of revelation for the Abrahamic traditions is remembered for saying ‘Here I am’ when God begins to speak (Genesis 22:1), not ‘Thank you for telling me what I wanted to know’ after God has spoken. Admittedly it matters that in the larger biblical account Abraham *is* told where to go and what his legacy will be, which are matters of vital interest to him; but it seems a main point of his story that standing in responsible relationship is, in itself, one of the greatest ends – a point that registers movingly to the degree that people are ready to go in for responsibility.

Two common tendencies of thought make it harder to appreciate that responsibility is indeed something that people would pursue. On the one hand, *responsibilities* are thought of as burdensome practical requirements and liabilities that any sensible person would wish to limit. On the other hand, *responsibility* is conceived as a primordial response to Others that is always already made (or ideally should have been made), a basic prosocial disposition, *the* good way to be rather than *a* good way to choose. Now, it would be reasonable to treat responsibility as a significant religious variable even if these were the only available conceptions, for (a) if a religious scheme assigns ‘responsibilities’ to its members to secure the accomplishment of its essential objectives, some will be more apt than others to accept and fulfil these task responsibilities and some tasks will be more successfully carried out than others, with notable long-term results (the Roman Catholic church organization, for example); while (b) if a religious scheme leverages a primordial ‘responsibility’, some will be more strongly disposed than others towards responsible solidarity and, reflecting their attitude, some visions of community will be more enduring than others (the bodhisattva ideal in Mahayana Buddhism, for example). But explanations of religious formation along these lines do not yet bring into view a distinctly religious ambition to be responsible. We will be best positioned to appreciate the religiously formative power of responsibility if we are able to recognize that human beings sometimes

intentionally choose forms of living that seem to them more religiously responsible, and that religious cultures explicitly cater to that preference.

In fact, this can be seen worldwide. One way of exhibiting the phenomenon is to look at eminent exemplars of religious responsibility across a wide range of cultures. I will do this in later sections, drawing on classic material of Mediterranean, South Asian, and East Asian origin. To prepare for examining these cases, it will be helpful to build up the conception of religious responsibility in a way that allows us to avoid both the oversimplifying claim that a basic or proper religious motivation just is responsibility and the opposite mistake of missing the connection between assumable responsibilities and religious seriousness. The first step is to give an account of responsibility that reveals the appealing aspects of assumable responsibility.

A positive sense of assumable responsibility

Responsibility does not have one all-purpose definition, but I submit that most references to it assume a collectively accepted scheme of assigned roles in shared action.⁴ The simplest case is the two-party scheme of roles defined by a contract under which we each undertake to meet certain expectations. On the larger scale, a work organization provides our clearest model. The responsible agent is committed to carrying through a shared enterprise and to coordinating with fellow agents according to their positions in the enterprise. I may be responsible for X, an object of shared concern in pursuit of a collaborative goal, in the backward-looking sense that I can be identified as the benefactor or culprit for X obtaining (given that I was supposed to bring about, or not to bring about, X-related things); or in the present-oriented sense that I can be expected to watch over, report, and recommend on the state of X; or in the forward-looking sense that I can be expected to deal with developments affecting X (within my acknowledged limitations). On this understanding, responsibility cannot simply be unconditional: I *bear* responsibility only if I am included in the collaborative scheme and I can *take* responsibility, claiming to be in charge of certain states of affairs, only with the allowance of a collaborative scheme.

Our expressions for *being* responsible would be uninterpretable apart from *having* responsibilities that one has assumed or been given. To say that one *is* responsible for X, if not simply an alternative expression for having responsibility for X, means that one identifies with that responsibility (as in 'I feel obligated') or that one is identified with it by others ('I know her, she'll come through'). To say that an agent generally *is* responsible implies that he or she has fulfilled and can be expected to fulfil responsibility assignments. These assignments need not already be codified. Some agents might be responsible in the sense that they are regarded as reliable role fulfillers in an ideal community of helpfulness in which what constitutes the relevant helpful action is often freshly determined ad hoc. In another sense, agents might be responsible as a matter of temperament if they

spontaneously seek to fulfil responsibilities, whatever those are, in contrast with others who fulfil their responsibilities only in a conformist or expedient way.

The concrete forms of responsibility are restrictive by definition and often onerous. When I become responsible for something, I no longer have an acceptable option of not being concerned about it or not tending to it. I am not allowed not to have answers for persons to whom I am responsible. I am not allowed to avoid the blame, along with appropriate punishment, for any incorrect action or lack of action for which I am responsible – and this imputation sticks to me for the rest of my life, as part of my biography. So long as we are thinking of responsibility as constraint and liability for blame and punishment, it is obvious why anyone would wish to limit it carefully under contract or avoid it altogether. To minimize responsibility is human.

But it is also human to seek responsibility and rejoice in it – more specifically, to rejoice in the possession of responsible awareness and in the exercise of responsible power precisely under responsibility's constraining aspect. For example, people voluntarily undertake family responsibility even more than they run away from it. It is likely that responsibility-incurring choices like the choices to marry and to have children are socially conditioned at the level of one's acquired vision of meaningful life, but it is true anyway that the responsible way of life is ideally attractive to many of us and not merely a set of constraints we cope with. Nor can the appetite for responsibility be resolved simply into a desire to raise one's social profile, since accepting responsibility often is not conducive to eminence and may even work against it.

Like any stance with a justification, responsibility has the partly adventurous, partly reassuring appeal of binding the agent to a worthy cause come what may. More specifically, responsibility draws positive value from the general advantageousness of collaboration and from an intrinsic good that we can see in several desirable qualifications of the collaborator's agency:

- (1) *Efficacy*. A conscious agent is unavoidably fascinated with the links between actions and effects, and specifically between agent-caused effects and quality of life; in collaboration, this fascination engages a larger, more complex array of effects and qualities thanks to the combining of agent efforts. So long as these effects and qualities seem to be good on balance, the individual agent will be impressed by the collaborative advantage in efficacy and by the relatively definite prospect of being able to explain and justify his or her exercises of power in fulfilment of a role. More immediately, the problem-solving capacities of the agent are satisfyingly engaged by the challenge of complex coordination.
- (2) *Understanding*. To play a role responsibly in a collaborative scheme one must understand how the scheme is supposed to work and to what end. A good team member in an organization must have some

of the head's or planner's perspective (as a good orchestra player has a sense of what the composer and conductor are after), and a good head or planner must have some of the perspective of each kind of member (as a good composer or conductor understands what the players can do). These perspectives determine not only what the agent understands technically but what the agent cares about. They are satisfying enlargements of practical understanding beyond the horizons of solo endeavours.

Our enlightened interest in the agent's own understanding in these connections is at the heart of the modern bias towards speaking of 'responsibility' rather than 'duty' or 'obligation'. As Roland Pennock astutely pointed out, responsibility is an essentially modern, liberal concept that we apply when we want to allow for an agent's exercise of discretion in relation to a social desideratum (Pennock (1960), 4–5, 9). A 'duty' or 'obligation' is more rigidly predefined; in a 'responsibility' there is room for spontaneity and personal authenticity. If someone fails to fulfil a duty, they are simply at fault, whereas if someone fails to fulfil a responsibility, a conversation needs to be reopened about how responsibility should be understood and assigned or what the irresponsible person's attitude really is. (Thus in *philosophizing* with his son about 'duties' in *De Officiis*, Cicero was addressing 'responsibilities' *avant la lettre*.) Apparently 'responsibility' has become our term of choice for general moral orientation because we prefer to trust each other in social collaboration via the communicative dynamic of 'answering for' our freely chosen actions rather than merely by monitoring the presence of standard virtues or compliance with standard duties. We want to acknowledge that our ends and means are subject to discussion. In Kohlbergian terms we aspire to a 'post-conventional' kind of conscientiousness (Kohlberg (1981)).

- (3) *Expanded scale*. Acting responsibly requires acting as effectively as possible while being aware that the success and well-being of others depends on what one does. As the sites of impact are multiplied beyond oneself the importance of acquiring and exercising relevant skills is enlarged and the exercise of those skills is more ideally satisfying. The American First World War hero Alvin York is more important as a good army sniper in France saving hundreds of lives than as a good turkey shooter in Tennessee.

Note that all of these enhancements of agency are appreciable regardless of whether (a) others have conferred responsibility on an agent, (b) the responsible agent enjoys the confidence of fellow agents, or (c) responsible actions earn social rewards. One can imagine a praise of responsibility citing only social enhancements of the agent's standing, but I hope I have shown that there is much to

say for the good of responsibility from an agent's own responsible point of view without appealing to a desire for social approval.

To my definition of responsibility as role fulfilment it might be objected that responsibility originally requires neither collaboration nor a scheme, thinking of situations like this: one can instantly become responsible to and for a hungry stray cat without having any idea of what to do with a cat. Are we not reminded here that the real wellspring of the meaningfulness of responsibility is the direct pressure of apparent need, the immediate upsurge of concern? This could be an emotive or voluntarist point against an intellectualist or conventionalist conception of morality.

Whatever the merits of the objection's assumptions about morality, it seems mistaken about responsibility. Granted, I might be moved to enter a responsible relationship by sheer sympathy or admiration without the prompting of an idea of responsibility; we could say in the given case that the cat looks hungry and I simply feel the importance of relieving its hunger. It also seems correct to say that if I do come to bear responsibility to and for the cat, the cat's manifest need and my sympathetic or empathetic reaction to it will contribute to the overall meaningfulness of that responsibility. But we conceive the relationship as *responsible* only if we apply to it some idea of a collaborative scheme; whenever we *can* apply this idea a distinctly meaningful agency comes into play, that of being a situation-recognizing, role-accepting, task-focused, trustworthy collaborator. I may tacitly develop a simple form of responsible interaction with the cat just by putting food out, or, if I become a responsible cat owner in the usual way, by doing what cat owners are supposed to do – taking the cat to the vet, giving it flea treatments, and so forth, thereby meeting generally accepted standards of cat care and protecting or improving the cat-related state of the neighbourhood and the world. In these ways it becomes apparent how my responsibility involves the requirements of a scheme.

In a precisely defined collaborative scheme like that of a work or sports team it is easy to display the advantages of collaboration in all three of the dimensions of satisfaction I have identified. A soldier, for example, (1) uses specially developed skills to contribute to the army's victory or survival, (2) understands that the army determines the outcomes of battles and wars as no single soldier could, and (3) takes part in coherent group manoeuvres that physically display the expanded scale of soldierly power. Moral and religious collaborations are not typically as clear as this in their mechanics or their outcomes. Unlike the soldier who can see fellow soldiers carrying out prescribed actions, the moral or religious agent always has room to wonder if fellow agents are fully collaborating. Even fully conscientious agents have room to rethink and renegotiate with others what is acceptable, whether in general or in a situation. They must idealize a collaborative consensus on standards and congruent performance if they are to preserve the high intentional satisfaction of team membership.

Responsible agents generally get external confirmation of the enlargement of their agency, and palpable grounds for satisfaction, in the ambitious job descriptions that define their places in collaboration. In hopes of collaborative success under conditions of technical and moral uncertainty, much is asked for: that the responsible agent be capable of acting harmoniously with colleagues, ideally with all the nimbleness and tact of a good dancer; that the responsible agent understand the bigger picture, ideally with all the insight of a wise head or planner, and never fail to react appropriately to a particular development that matters for that role, even a very challenging and unforeseen element; and that the responsible agent be productive, ideally as productive as Sergeant York was in ending a major battle by sharpshooting. We expect a fully responsible agent to accept whatever is entailed in fulfilling the assignment, first embracing the moral necessity of doing the right thing and the risk of failing to do the right thing, and then embracing every practical necessity of execution. But we also want the responsible agent to be a freely pledged trusty colleague, willing to prosecute our shared venture from an unshakeable autonomous base. We want the responsible agent to want the responsibility; this seems inseparable from really caring about the conditions and objects of the responsibility.

Demanding that responsibility be wanted would be cruel and hypocritical if responsibility were not really attractive and satisfying. Because it *is* attractive and satisfying in principle, maximized responsibility is an attractor in the formation of values. We can state this as a general rule for explaining or justifying intentional states: when either of two possible intentions may be held with regard to a practical prospect, if one of the intentions is associated with a greater fulfilment of responsibility, that intention is to that extent more attractive to an agent with at least normal practical interests and social sensitivities, and especially attractive to that agent (not rare) who goes in for responsibility. Many other attractions and pressures can override this one. But for some people – most impressively for our cultural heroes of responsibility – this attractor is noticeably in force and seems vindicated.

Religious responsibility

Responsibility affirms: 'God is acting in all actions upon you. So respond to all actions upon you as to respond to his action.' (Niebuhr (1963), 126)

Anyone who is positively attracted to responsibility for the reasons we have presented would be attracted to *maximized* responsibility: it would be wonderful to have maximally responsible colleagues, and it would be wonderful to exercise the fullest responsibility oneself. A religious scheme offers powerful added prospects for collaboration, with transcendent beings who might be Great Partners (if they are not too overpowering or unaccountable) and special responsibilities that priests or other religious intermediaries might bear in having needed insights

into the Partners' ways. But the Great Partners might be no different for practical reckoning than elders or kings, and priestly responsibility might be no more than the responsibility that is always conferred by knowing something of importance to others and being able to act on it.

To see how the maximizing of responsibility might take religious shape, let us consider how the occasions for exercising responsibility allow this to happen.

Think first of an obvious progression of responsibility in a military context. Rex notices that members of a neighbouring nation are moving across the traditional border and forcing many of his own people off their land. Feeling that he should do something to stop this, Rex expands his responsibility in certain channels. He informs himself about the experiences of displaced farmers, judges effective means of motivating the citizenry and fighting, and organizes an armed action to expel the invaders and secure the border. This will be a long-running operation, putting his people at risk throughout. To succeed, Rex needs sound policy and tactics. If he does succeed, he becomes a paragon of military responsibility. Beyond distinguishing himself, he confirms the worthiness of military endeavour and helps to sustain a military spirit in his culture. Many young people will want to be like Rex.

Now think of how similar stories can be told about religion. Here is one: Deva dreams of her deceased grandmother. In these dreams, the grandmother expresses insights into the motives of living people and gives Deva advice. Deva thinks the advice over upon waking and sees spiritual benefit in relaying it to others in her community, especially youngsters. She also considers what her grandmother would have observed, valued, and done while living, and the probable views and accomplishments of community ancestors generally. She resolves (as some in earlier generations had similarly resolved) to attend to ritual practices in which the ancestors are addressed and memorialized, and to repeat stories that make the ancestors vivid – such as a story that ancestors have gone to live among the stars. These occasions and stories create a supportive frame for communicating relevant ideas from her dreams and reflections. Thus her responsibility expands from keeping up a relationship with her grandmother and helping the youth into discerning and reinforcing the practical commitments that unite and preserve her people.

Observers of Deva's culture might be struck by the imaginative force of its stories and rituals, or by the explanatory work they do, or by the people's conservative or even fearful ('superstitious') adherence to them. Unless one happened to know Deva or someone like her, it would be easy to miss the strain of responsibility in the community qualifying the stories and rituals as really *serious*, worthy of the highest interhuman respect. Missing this strain, one would miss a religious quality of concern that is one of the motivational supports of the religious culture.

The most responsible members of a community, the Rexes and Devas, are unlikely to be the most audacious, because their stance is fundamentally responsive. They are willing to consider needs and to do what they can to meet those

needs. But their optimistic and creative peers may provide them with new material that ratchets up the standard of responsible cognizance. Deva may not be the one to make up an amazing new story about the ancestors living among the stars, but once someone else has done so she may discern its significance and become one of its sponsors.

As imagined so far, Deva's version of religious responsibility is cognitively modest, though enlarged beyond the ordinary scene of practical relationships to include all the generations in action sharing. But it is a plausible part of her scenario that someone has won acceptance for a story of the ancestors living among the stars, which indicates a tendency of religious representation to expand the scale of responsibility when it can. Deva is on a slope leading to a developed theology of divine beings, divine providence, and Eternity – a slippery slope downward, from the perspective of a critic of wishful and fantastical religious ideologies, but a commanding stairway upward from the perspective of one who accepts enlargements of responsibility. Her religiously responsible sensibility will support the development of religious beliefs and practices in a number of ways:

- (1) As Deva has faced and responded seriously to an image of her grandmother in dreams, she has reason also to take seriously (if not necessarily to accept) a shaman's or prophet's claim to have been addressed by a divine being and given a message to relay. As she was led to draw her own conclusions about real ancestors and take those conclusions seriously, she has reason also to take seriously a priest's or saint's or sage's representation of the divine.
- (2) As Deva has accepted a multigenerational scheme of life as the context of her practical decision-making, she has reason also to take seriously a fully amplified notion of cosmic harmony or eternity or Niebuhr's 'God acting in all actions upon you' – the greatest conceivable action-sharing.
- (3) As Deva has incorporated the perspective of the ancestors in her own thinking, she has reason also to take seriously any potentially responsible claims about human access to divine wisdom or power. If, for instance, she were informed of Kongzi's claim that Heaven produced his virtue (*Lunyu* 7.23), she would see the religious relevance of his conception and consider whether it is an interesting analogue to her own present conception, a compelling enlargement of it, or a deviation from it.
- (4) As Deva is aware of the responsibility-taking position that she herself is in, she has reason to study and, when appropriate, admire and emulate the responsibility-taking of others, not overlooking any exemplars of religious responsibility of whom she has heard.

Now let us consider how some known exemplars display in diverse ways a religious enlargement of responsibility.

Exemplars of religious responsibility

The ideal of responsibility as a religious motive of religious development might seem especially congenial to those traditions for which the prophet Abraham's 'Here am I' and responsible relationship with the world's Creator/Ruler/Redeemer is paradigmatic. Abraham's prophetic mode of life is conspicuously *responsible* in that he hearkens to an authoritative voice and works in his own way to fulfil its orders; prophetic responsibility in the Abrahamic tradition is also appreciably *religious* in quality in the extraordinary behaviour it supports, one type of which we see in Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac and later in the emblematic self-mortifications of Hosea, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Jesus. But the ideal is not only Abrahamic. I would like to stake out the range of possibilities and increase the credibility of a global claim for the formative role of responsibility in religion by calling attention to four non-Abrahamic exemplars, each a distinctive classical type. Aeneas, Kongzi, Dharmakara, and Miaoshan could each be said to embody the idea of maximal responsibility in a way that motivates and sets standards for a religiosity – the Mahayana exemplars Dharmakara and Miaoshan – in an interestingly gender-differentiated way.

Although these classic figures were not originally characterized as 'responsible', I believe that we can hardly fail to see them that way now, according to our own psychological and moral understanding.

(1) *Aeneas* is imagined by Virgil and presumably by the *Aeneid's* first audience as a responsibly disposed human being – his epithet is *pius*, 'dutiful' – tested by the heaviest possible loading of responsibilities. He is a deeply interesting answer to the question 'How much responsibility could one person bear?' For he has hard-to-fulfil responsibilities in every major dimension of human existence: as a son, father, and husband charged with the safety of his family during the destruction of Troy; as a military captain and expedition leader driven by storms around the dangerous Mediterranean; as a lover of the formidable, forbidden Dido; as a representative of Troy and father of a new nation in a hostile land; and as a servant of conflicted transcendent powers. All of these responsibilities are visited on him unsought. He takes them on as the perfect good sport. Yet he is a real human with the imperfections especially of a warrior, as shown in his later battle scenes where bloody *furor* gets the better of his *pietas*.

Aeneas is a man who *has* religious responsibilities and fulfils them, performing appropriate sacrifices and faithfully executing his god-given mission. But he has no choice about these obligations. Where he impressively shows that he *is* responsible in a religious way is not so much by praying or sacrificing on suitable occasions as by addressing the ghosts of his father and the jilted Dido in Book VI. He faces up to them, and the issues associated with them, in their placement among all the dead in Hades and in their ghostly sempiternity. Another Trojan might believe in ghosts merely due to an active imagination or a literal understanding of ghost tales, but ghosts for Aeneas *are* persons, persons now dead, whom he *ought (always) to*

face according to his accepted role in a spiritually determinative relationship. Even those who do not believe in ghosts can appreciate how this part of Aeneas' experience is essential to his full extension of responsibility in a religiously amplified collaboration.

According to a mainstream (though not uncontested) interpretation of the *Aeneid* that I follow here, Virgil's Aeneas represents the ruler Augustus whose programme for reviving Roman religion was essentially conservative, not based on any new revelation or theology.⁵ It is fitting, therefore, that Aeneas is steadily *pius* and in no way religiously creative. Yet he is an interesting character; he senses his freedom and self-determination as he soldiers through his trials. His individuality is not squashed after all by fulfilling the exceptionally heavy demands of his collaborative assignments.

Aeneas, not the gods, is the spiritual centre of the Roman epic; whatever Virgil and Augustus may have thought about gods, it was perfectly possible then, as now, to read the gods' sponsorship of Aeneas' mission as a figure for the ultimate seriousness of the Roman ruler's responsibility for Rome and the world. Aeneas is religious because he lives this responsibility. (Reinforcing the idea, Virgil's Jupiter tells Juno that in the end the Romans will surpass the gods in godliness (*pietate*).)⁶

After the demise of the Roman polity, Aeneas is remembered as an embodiment of Stoic dutifulness and no longer as interestingly religious. But in his Roman context he is the face of a religiosity, and it is his embrace of extraordinary responsibility that makes him so.

(2) Unlike Aeneas, *Kongzi* (Confucius) is not a captain, lover, or family man in any dramatic way. He is an intellectual, fulfilling his Heaven-sponsored mission by giving philosophical guidance for the generally best results in life. As we meet him in the *Lunyu* (Analects), he is not actually responsible for anyone else's practical affairs, and this lack of worldly responsibility is precisely his trial: he must prove his concern for the community, his fidelity to sound principles, and his competence in articulating them by maintaining himself with no social support beyond a small circle of similarly marginal scholars. What keeps him going is his collaboration with something greater: 'It is Heaven itself that has endowed me with virtue. What have I to fear from the likes of Huan Tui?' (7.23).⁷ This saying reminds us that there is actually much to fear in worldly terms from the likes of Huan Tui – the power-wielding unenlightened – so that a distinctively desirable courage and fortitude are called for in the most-responsible life, the life of human responsibility religiously envisioned.

The virtues and life-policies recommended by *Kongzi* are intensely responsible: considerateness (*ren*), appropriateness (*yi*), reciprocity (*shu*), filial piety (*xiao*).

Every day I examine myself on three counts: in my dealings with others, have I in any way failed to be dutiful? In my interactions with friends and associates, have I in any way failed to be trustworthy? Finally, have I in any way failed to repeatedly put into practice what I teach? (1.4)

So important is the principle of responding rightly and as expected to one's fellow beings that emphasis is laid on correct facial expressions (16.10; or demeanour, 2.8) and on consistency in mourning long after one's parents have died (1.11).

Over and above his teachings of personal responsibility, Kongzi embodies maximized intellectual responsibility in his devotion to a classic tradition – 'How seriously I have declined! It has been so long since I last dreamt of meeting the Duke of Zhou' (7.5) (something like a Jew saying, 'I have not thought of Sinai') – and in his dedication to learning, best pursued in conversation with fellow aspirants to goodness: 'I once engaged in thought for an entire day without eating and an entire night without sleeping, but it did no good. It would have been better for me to have spent that time in learning' (15.31).⁸ For a philosopher who deals in principles, Kongzi goes about as far as one can go in accepting external checks on ideation. The message to Confucians is to stay consistently engaged with others in all endeavours – to be the most committed team player.

(3) *Dharmakara*, the king-turned-monk who ultimately became Amitabha, the Buddha of the Pure Land, is a hero of religious responsibility in that the felt necessity of saving all suffering beings carried him into Buddhahood. He is a pure type of one who cares infinitely and practically about his fellow beings, like a perfect king. He focuses all the energy of his good disposition on the goal of liberation for all and a great concord in 'prospering', as expressed in his vow:

[On] the strength of the determination I will assume . . . I will have a magnificent field, the best and highest. And in this most noble beautified high seat of awakening will be found the incomparable bliss of the state of nirvana. And I will purify this field so that in it all living beings will reach nirvana. Living beings will gather from the ten directions, and once they are here will quickly prosper in bliss. (Larger Pure Land Sutra §19 [7–9])⁹

By vowing to assure the liberation of others, Dharmakara intends to assume responsibility even for their responsibility, his power enabling all lives to mesh in the best way:

[Vow #23] May I not awaken to unsurpassable, perfect, full awakening if, after I attain awakening, the roots of merit of the bodhisattvas in my Buddha-field will not appear in whatever form they wish them to grow, even as their wish arises . . .

[Vow #43] May I not awaken to unsurpassable, perfect, full awakening if, after I attain awakening, living beings in another Buddha-field will hear my name and yet the root of merit that comes with hearing my name will not be enough to give them possession, until they have attained the highest limits of the essence of awakening, of the root of merit which is joy and delight in the conduct of the bodhisattva. (Gómez (1996), 72, 75)

Dharmakara is ambiguous as a *human* exemplar of responsibility because he can become the divine saviour Amitabha only by realizing a perfect intention to exercise a more-than-human power of salvation. On his human side, he wholeheartedly wants this. Fortunately a bridge between Dharmakara's human yearning and Amitabha's divine power is provided by the Buddhist dharma, the supremely

helpful conception of the human situation as a gateway through which one can aim one's passion for enlarged responsibility towards a reality of love greater than belief or statement. In keeping with his name, 'treasury of dharma', Dharmakara makes himself a meritorious repository of the supreme wisdom, rising to the challenge of spiritually powering the fulfilment of his outsized vow by practising the virtues of bodhisattvas for aeons (*ibid.*, 174–175). In an illuminating Buddhist way he agreeably does everything necessary to accomplish what we all (ideally) feel must be accomplished, completing the bodhisattva assignment.

(4) *Miaoshan* is a legendary Chinese princess who by the twelfth century CE was identified with Guanyin, the Buddha of the Thousand Eyes and Arms (originally Avalokiteshvara) who hears all cries of suffering and can help everyone (Dudbridge (2004), Idema (2008)). As a Buddha, Guanyin is a cosmic principle of compassion; as a human incarnation of that compassion, Miaoshan makes classic human choices and serves as a human hero. Contrary to her father's wishes, she refuses to be married, on the grounds that marrying would fail to address her fellow beings' three great misfortunes of ageing, sickening, and dying. She stands fast despite severe persecution by her father, who eventually becomes so exasperated that he orders her execution. At this crisis point her 'merit' (or we could say her exemplary responsibility) takes her to hell, where she vows to save everyone whose plight she sees – her goodness promptly turning hell into a heaven. Back on earth, her father comes to his own crisis of sickness and she sacrifices her eyes and arms for his benefit, thus demonstrating that Buddhist compassion grounds true filial piety (rebutting a standard Confucian objection to Buddhism).¹⁰ Once she is miraculously restored and reconciled with her parents, her relentless instruction enables her father to choose the path of perfection after all. She has fulfilled an ideal filial responsibility for her parent's responsibility (Dudbridge (2004), 108).¹¹

Miaoshan/Guanyin's explicit vows of compassionate responsibility propose a logic in the popular conception of sharable merit that is not merely wishful or sensuous: the fundamental salvific possibility to be embraced is not someone else's beneficence by which one would be helped, but rather one's own assumption of responsibility to help others.

Miaoshan is like Dharmakara in being conceived at an extreme of human responsibility reaching into divinity (and indeed Avalokiteshvara and Amitabha are regularly associated in the Pure Land divine trinity). But the monk Dharmakara embodies responsibility in a furiously masculine way, wishing to be the greatest of all Buddhas, acquiring exceptional merit through aeons of dharma study and piling up impressive vows that he will benefit everyone. He is the bodhisattva ideal of thrilling aspiration, whereas Miaoshan/Guanyin is the bodhisattva ideal of *having heard*, being wholly cognizant of need and responsible to meet it as it presents itself.¹² And whereas Dharmakara fits into a scheme of roles and tasks only by the special arrangement of Buddhist monasticism, Miaoshan is plainly legible to anyone as a responsible daughter.

In summary comparison: Dharmakara and Miaoshan are specialists in compassion. They belong to an opposite type from Aeneas, who is *pius* in a comprehensively pragmatic way. Kongzi has a desirable serenity that one would not attribute to the swelling Dharmakara, the self-mutilating Miaoshan, or the preoccupied Aeneas. He stands as proof of concept for a philosophically calm, diligently conversational style of maximal responsibility. It would be arbitrary to pick out any one of these exemplars as more profoundly responsible than the others. Collectively they display a religious profundity of responsibility in continuity with a variety of human susceptibilities, cultural commitments, and ultimate values.

The status of religious responsibility

While a humanly typical interest in responsibility seems to be an important element in religion broadly, there are at least two reasons to hold back from asserting that responsibility belongs to the dispositional essence of religion: (1) responsibility is not the only disposition that can participate in the constitution of religiousness, and (2) responsibility is not one thing. I have conceded both of these points. With each, however, there is something to be said on the other hand that points towards the universal relevance of religious responsibility.

- (1) It is true that a madly optimistic or abjectly humble person can be religious without being responsible. Yet a complete lack of interest in responsible collaboration counts as a deficit in the normative psychology of most religious communities – partly because it weakens the human collaboration that keeps the community going as a worldly enterprise, partly because it undermines the teachability of religious prescriptions to individuals, and partly because responsibility is spiritually supportive of the other religious dispositions: for example, an optimism that takes account of the exigencies of collaboration is a more robust optimism, even as a responsibility that expects good outcomes is a more robust responsibility. Thus responsible orientation is a constantly relevant religious ideal even though it is not a constant in actual religiosity.
- (2) Responsibility indeed comes in diverse forms. That the exemplars of responsibility are interestingly similar in having maximized collaborative roles does not remove the great difference between Aeneas' reverent relationship with his father and Miaoshan's patronizing relationship with hers, or between Kongzi's affiliation with impersonal Heaven and Abraham's personal loyalty to God. One cannot assume that a responsible style in religion will always underwrite the same ideology or promote the same conduct. On the other hand, we can recognize a general constraint here if it is predictable that religious

motivations will be at least partly convergent in the dimension of respect for others and conscientiousness; and this does seem to be predictable. While Aeneas and Miaoshan might disagree strongly about how to relate to one's father, it seems very likely that they would agree strongly on the importance of the issue and easily recognize each other's religious seriousness in that vein. Between them, that is where the religious action would appear to be: in responsibility.¹³

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Notes

1. Most influentially, Levinas (1981), Derrida (1995), Jonas (1984), and Niebuhr (1963). A landmark work on responsibility in Christian ethics emphasizing 'respecting and enhancing the integrity of life' more than orientation to the Other is Schweiker (1995), 32.
2. From the Chinese version of the Sutra in Gómez (1996), 16.
3. The Qur'an translation is from Haleem (2004).
4. The philosophical literature on responsibility is much more concerned with the causal status of agents and their blameability than with the positive meaningfulness of responsibility as I am here. For a useful overview, see Vincent (2011).
5. On the range of interpretations see Ganiban *et al.* (2012), 16–17, and for a pro-Augustan interpretation e.g. Grebe (2004).
6. *Aeneid* 12.839.

7. All *Lunyu* translations are from Slingerland (2003).
8. See also 1.14: 'The gentleman is . . . simply scrupulous in behavior and careful in speech, drawing near to those who possess the Way in order to be set straight by them. Surely this and nothing else is what it means to love learning.'
9. Gómez (1996), 67.
10. For the objection see Han Yu (1999) (early ninth century).
11. In one version of the story, Miaoshan gives her blessing to the executioner sent by her father and assumes the enormous demerit of what he meant to do (Levine (2013), 33–34). Here too she takes responsibility for someone else's responsibility.
12. She is represented in one account as a modest sort of perfection-seeker:

I desire nothing more than a peaceful retreat on a lone mountain, there to attempt the attainment of perfection. If some day I can reach a high degree of goodness, then, borne on the clouds of Heaven, I will travel throughout the universe, passing in the twinkling of an eye from east to west. I will rescue my father and mother, and bring them to Heaven; I will save the miserable and afflicted on earth; I will convert the spirits which do evil, and cause them to do good. That is my only ambition. (Werner (1922))

According to Sherin Wing, the definitive Buddhist account of Miaoshan in the twelfth century portrays her as a hero of *male*-gendered religiosity, making much the same moves in her situation that Shakyamuni Buddha would – the point being to show the superiority of Buddhism to family-prioritizing Confucianism (Wing (2011), 25).

13. I am indebted to Liz Egan, Howard Pickett, Shelli Poe, Charles Preston, Jason Rosenberg, Tamar Shirinian, Elise Smith, and an anonymous reviewer for *Religious Studies* for suggestions for improving this article.