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Ethics in international affairs: essential prerequisite, or oxymoron? The debate around this subject is intensive, and frequently inconclusive. The US statesman Dean Acheson said in 1964 that “The conduct of diplomacy should conform to the same moral and ethical principles which inspire trust and confidence when followed by and between individuals.” However, the distinguished US diplomat George Kennan opined in 1954 that moral principles shape the conduct of an individual, whether as citizen or as government official… but when that individual’s behaviour merges with others and finds expression in the actions of a government, then a general transmutation occurs… “in particular a government may not subject itself to those supreme laws of renunciation and self-sacrifice that represent the culmination of individual moral growth.” And that master of cynical realism in foreign affairs, Talleyrand, said that the only good principle is to have none.

The present book contributes to the debate by examining one specific but central factor in the conduct of contemporary international affairs—the role of the United Nations Secretary General (UNSG), and the way in which each office-holder’s ethical framework affected his behaviour while in office. An ethical framework is defined by the editor, Kent Kille, as “the combination of personal values that establish the beliefs, forms of reasoning, and interpretation of the world that guide an individual when making judgements about proper behaviour in specific contexts.” As Kille explains in his introduction, the office of the UNSG has been described as a needed voice in an international arena where moral principles are often seen as subservient to concerns about power and interest. Given that the UN lacks traditional forms of power, it is the moral authority of the SG which is vital if he is to influence events. It is therefore appropriate to examine the religious and moral values of those holding the office. A detailed comparative examination of the moral and religious dimensions of the office
has not until now been attempted. Accordingly each SG is the subject of one chapter which seeks to assess his ethical framework and whether this framework conditioned behaviour.

It is worth noting that while, in the book, the terms “ethics” and “morality” are used fairly interchangeably, not everyone would agree with this. Sir Michael Palliser, for example, has argued that ethics represent a code, such as the principles set out in the Charter of the UN. Morality, on the other hand, is subject to the touchstone of the individual or collective conscience, which is conditioned by factors such as religion, upbringing, and general experience of life. So it seems that what is being analysed here is the total moral personality of the individuals concerned.

In a further introductory chapter, Dorothy V. Jones sets out the two codes which claim the allegiance of a SG—his personal inner code (which I would call his moral personality), and the external code, based on the (largely state-centred) purposes and principles of the UN, enunciated in the Charter. The workings of the inner code are likely to affect the SG’s attitude to the external code: whether to see the latter as a dynamic instrument to be used to build a true international community, or as simply a framework to be maintained and preserved in balance.

Among the many strengths of the book are the scrupulous thoroughness of the analysis, and the integrity of its conclusions. It sets out to consider the wider implications of religiously and morally based leadership: it ends by supporting the contention that religion and ethics have an important place in the study of international leadership, and that the international community urgently needs moral authority. This reader sensed—perhaps unjustly—a yearning for more solid evidence that there is a direct role for religion in international affairs. But most of the specific conclusions are nuanced. The study shows that all seven SGs up to Kofi Annan had a strong religious component in their ethical framework (two Lutherans, one Anglican, one Copt, two Roman Catholics and a Buddhist), but that it was not always connected to decision-making. It acknowledges that “the argument that religion would greatly affect leadership for all SGs does not hold true.” The most devout SGs are identified as Dag Hammarskjold, U Thant and Kofi Annan, but even these, under the pressure of the external code and sometimes of naked power politics, had to take decisions which were difficult to reconcile with the tenets of their faith. However, the religious allegiance contributed to a state of mind (in U Thant’s case, one of serenity and calmness), which impacted on his conduct of affairs and the personal influence he exerted on interlocutors. The conclusion is
that religion and morality do play a part in shaping the SGs and how they handle the demands and dilemmas of office, but also that the connection is more explicit in some cases than others. This seems a suitably balanced and objective perception.

These are only some aspects of a richly detailed book which usefully describes the origins and principles of the UN, and, through the individual case studies, many of the key challenges which the organisation has faced since it came into being at the end of World War II. Despite the fact that its high-sounding principles are still often ignored, and that the hard-nosed realities of military and economic power still hold sway, in the state-centred international arena the UN can, and (as the book shows) does, preserve the vision of a different and more wholesome “global ethic.” In promoting this, exploiting a role placed (by universal consent) above interstate rivalries, and contributing to solutions (even if sometimes necessarily pragmatic) to the world’s most pressing problems, the moral authority of the “secular pope” is both real and crucially important.