

AM I MY BROTHER'S KEEPER? WHAT THE WORLD'S MAJOR RELIGIONS TEACH US ABOUT INCLUSIVE DESIGN

Seth CHRISTENSEN

Brigham Young University, United States of America

ABSTRACT

Inclusive design seeks to ensure that products, services, and educational environments serve diverse populations equitably. In engineering and design curricula, inclusion is often taught through technical standards (e.g., ISO 9241-210 [1]) and accessibility checklists (e.g., ADA guidelines). While these methods improve usability, they can reduce inclusive practice to compliance and risk-avoidance. This paper argues that the ethical teachings of major world religions (specifically Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism) provide rich moral vocabularies that can deepen designers' sense of responsibility. Drawing on inclusive design literature [2], engineering ethics scholarship [3], and design justice theory [4], alongside selected scripture passages [5], [6], [7], [8], we identify convergent themes such as relational responsibility, justice, duty, compassion, and non-harm. These religious motifs are interpreted as pedagogical heuristics. For example, "Am I my brother's keeper?" (Genesis 4:9 [5]) frames users as neighbours to care for, while Qur'an 4:135 [6] urges standing firmly for justice even at personal cost. We then outline how these themes translate into learning outcomes and assessment strategies (e.g., broader stakeholder mapping, equity audits) for design courses. Drawing on inclusive and participatory design and design justice principles [9], [4], the paper sketches a preliminary evaluative framework (reflective coding rubrics, co-design portfolios) for classroom implementation. In emphasising religion as a cultural ethical resource (not doctrinal dogma), we propose it as one path toward intercultural moral engagement. This approach reframes inclusion as an ongoing ethical reflection and aligns with calls to embed diversity and global perspectives in engineering education [4], [10].

Keywords: Inclusive design, religious ethics, design education, moral responsibility, equity, co-design, intercultural pedagogy

1 INTRODUCTION

Inclusive design is now central to engineering and product design education, reflecting broader commitments to equity and diversity. Standards such as ISO 9241-210 and accessibility legislation (e.g., ADA, AODA) institutionalise human-centred design and disability access [1], [2]. Professional guidance urges that accessibility be treated like any other engineering consideration, and UNESCO's SDG 4 emphasises respect for diversity in educational practice [10]. There is broad agreement that inclusion matters.

Yet instruction often remains procedural. Inclusive design can become checklist compliance rather than an ethical orientation. Students may learn to meet WCAG criteria without examining who remains excluded. Engineering ethics scholarship warns that rule-based training alone does not cultivate moral imagination or sustained commitment [15], [17]. Tokenistic inclusion can satisfy standards while failing marginalised users. Holmes and others argue that inclusive design must interrogate who is served and excluded by prevailing systems [11], [4]. The challenge is not awareness of standards, but depth of ethical engagement.

This paper proposes that the moral vocabularies of major religious traditions (e.g., Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism) can enrich inclusive design pedagogy. Globally, most people identify with a religious tradition [12], and religious narratives continue to shape moral intuition. These traditions articulate enduring ideals—justice, duty, compassion, stewardship, non-harm—that resonate strongly with inclusive aims. The Bible's Genesis 4:9 asks, "Am I my brother's keeper?" [5]; Qur'an 4:135

commands standing firmly for justice even at personal cost [6]; the Hindu scripture, Bhagavad Gita (2.47) calls for dutiful action without selfish attachment [7]; the teachings of Buddha, captured in the Dhammapada (verse 5), instruct that hatred is overcome only by non-hatred [8]. Such motifs provide culturally resonant frames for ethical reflection.

Our guiding question is: How might ethical principles from these traditions inform inclusive design pedagogy without proselytising? We treat religion as a cultural and narrative resource (not doctrinal authority) capable of expanding ethical imagination in plural classrooms. This approach complements secular frameworks such as care ethics [13] and value-sensitive design [3] rather than replacing them.

2 WHAT RELIGION ADDS PEDAGOGICALLY

Secular design ethics already offer robust tools. Religious ethics contribute distinct pedagogical strengths.

First, they are embedded in lived moral communities. Religious ethics are transmitted through story, ritual, and shared identity. Engaging these narratives acknowledges that students' moral reasoning is often shaped outside academic philosophy [13]. Connecting design dilemmas to familiar moral worlds can deepen engagement.

Second, religious narratives possess symbolic power. A verse such as “love thy neighbour as thyself” (Matthew 22:39) [5] evokes relational obligation more vividly than abstract directives. Stories cultivate empathy and emotional reasoning [13], [14]. Framing exclusion as a modern Good Samaritan scenario, for example, can render design consequences morally tangible.

Third, religious traditions have a global reach. The four traditions addressed here encompass a majority of the world's population [12]. Identifying convergent ethical themes—reciprocity, justice, compassion—supports intercultural dialogue and demonstrates that inclusion is not uniquely Western or secular [17].

These strengths require caution. Religious traditions are internally diverse and historically entangled with exclusionary systems. Our approach is selective and critical; foregrounding motifs aligned with inclusion while encouraging scrutiny of tensions and abuses. The aim is dialogical expansion, not moral harmonisation.

3 METHOD AND LIMITATIONS

This conceptual study synthesises inclusive design scholarship, engineering and information ethics, and selected primary religious texts. Using thematic coding, we identified recurring ethical motifs: human dignity, responsibility, justice, duty, non-harm, and compassion. We then mapped these motifs to inclusive design principles.

This study examines four religious traditions, selected in descending order of global population [12]. Each tradition encompasses substantial internal diversity; accordingly, our analysis focuses on widely recognised themes rather than offering a comprehensive account of doctrine. Future research should expand this scope to include smaller and Indigenous traditions.

We offer theoretical framing rather than empirical results. Proposed learning outcomes and assessment tools are exploratory and intended to guide future classroom research.

4 ETHICAL CONVERGENCE AND DESIGN IMPLICATIONS

Across traditions, five recurring themes align closely with inclusive design:

4.1 Christianity: Relational Responsibility

Christian ethics emphasise neighbour-love and stewardship. Cain's question, “Am I my brother's keeper?” [5], implicitly affirms mutual responsibility. Jesus' command to love one's neighbour as oneself and the *Parable of the Good Samaritan* [5] depict moral action as concrete care for the vulnerable.

Design implication: Inclusive design becomes relational stewardship. Users are neighbours whose dignity warrants equal consideration. Assignments may require students to narrate designs from marginalised perspectives or evaluate projects through care-ethics criteria [13]. The emphasis shifts from compliance to responsibility for real persons.

4.2 Islam: Justice and Structural Equity

Islamic ethics foreground justice and accountability. Qur'an 4:135 calls upon believers to uphold justice even at personal cost [6]. The protection of the vulnerable and the obligation of almsgiving (zakat) reinforce communal responsibility.

Design implication: Inclusion requires structural analysis [17]. Students assess distributional impacts: Who benefits? Who bears costs [17]? Projects incorporate equity audits and power mapping consistent with design justice principles [4]. Justice becomes a systemic lens rather than an afterthought.

4.3 Hinduism: Duty and Non-Harm

The Bhagavad Gita (2.47) teaches disciplined action according to duty (dharma) without attachment to reward [7]. The broader principle of ahimsa emphasises minimising harm to living beings.

Design implication: Inclusion is a professional obligation. Designers treat accessibility and equity as intrinsic duties rather than optional enhancements. Harm (whether physical, psychological, or social) is ethically unacceptable. Reflection exercises may contrast duty-centred reasoning with market-driven incentives.

4.4 Buddhism: Compassion and Interdependence

The Dhammapada teaches that hatred is overcome by non-hatred [8]. Buddhist ethics center on compassion (karuṇā), non-harm, and interdependence. All actions ripple through networks of relation.

Design implication: Participatory practice is an ethical necessity. Co-design, stakeholder collaboration, and mindfulness of unintended consequences embody interdependence [3], [4]. Students document how community input meaningfully reshapes design outcomes.

4.5 Cross-Tradition Convergence

Despite doctrinal differences, the traditions converge on principles central to inclusion:

- Human dignity: Every person possesses inherent worth.
- Responsibility: We are accountable for the impact of our actions on others.
- Justice: Fair distribution and procedural integrity matter.
- Non-harm: Preventing suffering is a moral priority.
- Compassion: Empathy guides ethical action.

These themes parallel secular care ethics and value sensitive design [3] while grounding them in globally resonant narratives. Importantly, compassion must extend beyond sentiment to structural transformation. Design Justice scholarship reminds us that exclusion is embedded in sociotechnical systems [4]. Religious motifs intensify rather than soften this critique by framing inequity as moral failure.

5 PEDAGOGICAL APPLICATIONS

5.1 Learning Outcomes

Students exposed to these frameworks should demonstrate:

- Broadened stakeholder identification, extending concern to marginalised communities.
- Explicit ethical reasoning in design justifications (e.g., duty, justice, care).
- Structural analysis of inequities affecting user experience.
- Reflection on long-term societal impact and unintended harm.

These outcomes move beyond checklist compliance toward moral reflexivity.

5.2 Assessment Strategies

Possible evaluative tools include:

- Pre/post reflective coding of ethical language and empathy depth.
- Stakeholder mapping rubrics assessing inclusion breadth and power awareness.
- Equity audits applied to case studies.
- Review of co-design documentation demonstrating shared decision-making.

Rubrics integrate ethical reasoning alongside technical criteria, signalling that inclusion is a core competence.

5.3 Illustrative Classroom Application

In a design studio, students first apply standard accessibility guidelines. They then revisit prototypes using four framing questions: Who is my neighbour? Where is injustice embedded? What is my duty? Who may be harmed? Teams document how these lenses alter priorities and stakeholder engagement. Comparative analysis can measure shifts from compliance language to justice-oriented reasoning.

6 SAFEGUARDS IN SECULAR CONTEXTS

To preserve pluralism, participation should remain voluntary and analytical rather than devotional in nature. Religious texts can be presented as cultural case studies, similar to philosophical sources, allowing them to be examined critically rather than treated as doctrine. Juxtaposing multiple traditions helps prevent privileging any single narrative, while encouraging critical reflection on historical exclusions within religions fosters a more honest and inclusive discussion. Collaboration with humanities experts further supports accurate and responsible representation. Together, these safeguards ensure that religious ethics function as interpretive resources rather than as prescriptive authority.

7 DISCUSSIONS

Technology embeds values [15]. Making ethical commitments explicit counters technocratic neutrality. Religious narratives can reinforce participatory and justice-oriented design movements, offering culturally diverse rationales for similar goals. Their inclusion broadens moral vocabulary in global classrooms.

Empirical research is needed. Comparative studies could evaluate whether religion-informed modules increase stakeholder breadth, justice awareness, or participatory rigor relative to standard inclusion training. Such inquiry could clarify the pedagogical value of narrative-based ethical framing.

8 CONCLUSIONS

Engaging major religious ethics as cultural resources can deepen inclusive design education. Without replacing secular theory, these traditions enrich ethical imagination through stories of responsibility, justice, duty, compassion, and non-harm. When applied critically and pluralistically, they transform inclusion from a procedural requirement into a sustained moral stance. Inclusive design thus becomes not only a technical practice but an ethical dialogue attentive to human dignity across cultural boundaries.

9 EXTENDED ANALYSIS: STRUCTURE, POWER, & MORAL IMAGINATION

While the convergences identified above are conceptually compelling, their pedagogical force depends on how they are translated into sustained structural critique. Inclusive design frequently falters not because designers lack goodwill, but because institutional norms, market pressures, and inherited infrastructures channel attention toward dominant users. Religious ethical narratives can disrupt this narrowing of concern by reframing exclusion as a violation of shared moral identity.

Relational responsibility, for example, can be extended beyond interpersonal empathy to institutional accountability. If the “neighbour” includes communities historically marginalised by race, disability, gender, or language, then ignoring structural barriers becomes ethically untenable. Students can consider and analyse how procurement policies, platform monetisation models, or data collection practices advantage some groups over others. In this sense, the brother-keeper question becomes systemic: not only “Did I design well?” but “Does the system I am participating in exclude others?”

Similarly, Islamic traditions of justice underscore impartiality and courage in confronting power. In classroom dialogue, this may translate into examining how design teams themselves reproduce inequity—whose voices are heard in brainstorming sessions, whose labour is credited, and whose expertise is discounted. Justice becomes reflexive: students analyse their own positionality within collaborative work. This internal dimension complements external equity audits and aligns with calls to interrogate sociotechnical bias in algorithms and infrastructures [3], [4], [16].

Hindu notions of duty can also be reframed structurally. Rather than limiting dharma to individual obligation, educators may highlight its social dimension: professional roles carry responsibilities toward collective flourishing. Engineering codes of ethics similarly articulate duties to public welfare. Students might compare dharma with contemporary professional standards, asking whether current incentives

adequately reward inclusive labour. Such comparisons invite critical reflection on how institutional reward systems sometimes discourage inclusive practice.

Buddhist interdependence provides a powerful counter to individualistic design paradigms. Dependent origination suggests that harms propagate through networks; a seemingly minor exclusion may compound across time and space. Classroom exercises could map cascading effects of design decisions (e.g., how inaccessible transit affects employment, healthcare access, or educational attainment). Visualising these interconnections helps students perceive inclusion as preventative justice rather than reactive accommodation.

10 INTEGRATIONS WITH EXISTING DESIGN FRAMEWORKS

Religion-informed framing should not stand apart from established design methodologies but interweave with them. Human-centred design, participatory design, and Design Justice already emphasise empathy, stakeholder voice, and equity [4], [9]. Religious narratives can function as entry points that motivate rigorous methodological application.

For instance, stakeholder mapping exercises grounded in justice can be paired with ISO human-centred design processes [1], [4]. Value Sensitive Design's tripartite investigations—conceptual, empirical, technical—can incorporate questions of duty and non-harm [3]. Co-design workshops may open with narrative prompts that humanise technical constraints. Rather than adding separate modules, religious ethics can serve as interpretive overlays, enriching familiar practices.

Importantly, this integration must avoid superficial symbolism. Simply quoting scripture without altering the design process risks trivialisation. The measure of success is methodological change: broader stakeholder recruitment, more transparent decision-making, documented iteration in response to marginalised feedback, and explicit articulation of trade-offs affecting vulnerable communities.

11 INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE AND GLOBAL CLASSROOMS

Design and engineering education increasingly occurs in transnational settings. Students collaborate across continents and cultural contexts. Invoking multiple religious traditions can signal respect for diverse moral heritages and decentre exclusively Western ethical paradigms. In multicultural classrooms, comparative discussion of justice, compassion, and duty may foster mutual recognition and intellectual humility.

Such dialogue can also surface disagreement productively. Students may interpret justice or duty differently based on their cultural background. Structured debate, grounded in respect, encourages critical thinking and prevents homogenisation of ethical language. The classroom thus becomes a microcosm of global design practice, where intercultural negotiation is routine.

This approach aligns with educational movements promoting global citizenship and intercultural competence [10]. Inclusive design, framed through shared yet diverse moral vocabularies, prepares for professional practice in plural societies.

12 LIMITATIONS & FUTURE RESEARCH

Several limitations merit acknowledgement. First, textual selection inevitably simplifies complex traditions. More nuanced engagement would require collaboration with scholars of religion and area studies. Second, student reception may vary; some may welcome narrative framing, while others prefer strictly secular analysis. Mixed-method empirical research (including surveys, focus groups, and artifact analysis) should evaluate learning outcomes.

Third, care must be taken to avoid reinforcing majoritarian dominance by focusing only on large traditions. Future work should incorporate Sikh, Jewish, Indigenous, and humanist perspectives to broaden representation. Finally, measurable indicators of ethical growth remain contested. Developing reliable rubrics for empathy, justice awareness, and structural reasoning is an ongoing challenge.

Despite these limitations, the proposed framework offers a promising direction. It situates inclusive design within moral traditions that many students recognise, while preserving secular academic integrity. By linking narrative meaning with methodological rigor, educators can cultivate designers who see inclusion not merely as a requirement but as an ethical calling.

13 TOWARD A REFLEXIVE ETHIC OF INCLUSIVE DESIGN

Ultimately, the value of engaging religious ethics lies not in citation but in cultivating reflexivity. Designers routinely navigate tensions among cost, feasibility, aesthetics, and timelines. Ethical reflexivity requires asking how those constraints are distributed across populations. Who absorbs inconvenience? Who bears risk? Who is rendered invisible? Religious narratives often dramatise precisely such moral crossroads: moments when comfort or loyalty conflicts with justice or compassion. Bringing these stories into design critique underscores that exclusion is rarely accidental; it is frequently the outcome of unexamined priorities.

Embedding reflexivity in studio culture can involve recurring ethical checkpoints. At major project milestones, teams might articulate which stakeholders have gained voice since the previous review and which remain peripheral. They may document decisions where efficiency was balanced against equity and justify those trade-offs publicly. Over time, such practices normalise ethical transparency alongside technical documentation.

Moreover, positioning inclusive design as a moral dialogue can counter professional burnout. When inclusion is framed solely as compliance, it may feel burdensome. When understood as participation in a broader human commitment to dignity and justice, it can become motivating. Religious traditions sustain moral communities through shared narratives of purpose. Similarly, design education can cultivate communities of practice oriented toward equity.

The framework advanced here, therefore, seeks to widen, not narrow, ethical imagination. By drawing from multiple traditions, it affirms that the aspiration toward justice, compassion, duty, and non-harm transcends single worldviews. Inclusive design education, enriched by these narratives and anchored in rigorous methodology, prepares engineers and designers to act responsibly, courageously, and imaginatively within diverse and deeply interconnected societies.

REFERENCES

- [1] ISO 9241-210. *Ergonomics of Human-System Interaction – Part 210: Human-centred Design for Interactive Systems*, 2019 (ISO, Geneva).
- [2] Clarkson J., Coleman R., Keates S. and Lebbon C. *Inclusive Design: Design for the Whole Population*, 2003 (Springer-Verlag, London).
- [3] Friedman B., Kahn P. H. and Borning A. Value Sensitive Design and Information Systems. In *Human-Computer Interaction in Management Information Systems: Foundations*, 2006, pp. 348–372 (M.E. Sharpe, Armonk, NY).
- [4] Costanza-Chock S. *Design Justice: Community-Led Practices to Build the Worlds We Need*, 2020 (MIT Press, Cambridge, MA).
- [5] *The Holy Bible: King James Version*, 1769 (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge).
- [6] *The Qur'an* (Abdel Haleem translation), 2004 (Oxford University Press, Oxford).
- [7] Easwaran E. (trans.). *The Bhagavad Gita*, 2007 (Nilgiri Press, Tomales, CA).
- [8] Buddharakkhita A. (trans.). *The Dhammapada: The Buddha's Path of Wisdom*, 1985 (Buddhist Publication Society, Kandy).
- [9] Bødker S. When Second Wave HCI Meets Third Wave Challenges. In *Proceedings of the 4th Nordic Conference on Human-Computer Interaction*, October 2006, pp. 1–8 (ACM Press, New York).
- [10] UNESCO. *Making Textbook Content Inclusive: Religion, Gender and Culture*, 2017 (UNESCO, Paris).
- [11] Holmes K. *Mismatch: How Inclusion Shapes Design*, 2018 (MIT Press, Cambridge, MA).
- [12] Pew Research Centre. *The Global Religious Landscape*, 2025 (Pew Research Centre).
- [13] Noddings N. *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*, 2nd ed., 2003 (University of California Press, Berkeley).
- [14] Vallor S. *Technology and the Virtues: A Philosophical Guide to a Future Worth Wanting*, 2016 (Oxford University Press, Oxford).
- [15] Winner L. “Do Artifacts Have Politics?” *Daedalus*, 1980, 109(1), 121–136.
- [16] Floridi L. *The Ethics of Information*, 2013 (Oxford University Press, Oxford).
- [17] Sen A. *The Idea of Justice*, 2009 (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA).