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Christian Morality in a Pluralistic Society

Perspectives for Post-Soviet Cultures

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This essay addresses two fundamental questions for Christian ethics—namely: should Christianity seek to influence our pluralistic society with its values and morality and, if so, how do we avoid imposing them on others? The author shows the importance of distinguishing plurality and pluralism and suggests ways for the Church to create a context in which to impact the public forum with its worldview. The paper was first read at a conference in Crimea, Ukraine.
Editor

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WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?

Historically, Christianity was the dominant voice in both western and 'Orthodox' cultures. Broadly speaking, in these contexts Christian conceptions of reality formed both a common morality and the basic fabric of society.[1] This is no longer so. We are now in an age of plurality and pluralism. This means, among other things, that Christianity in general and its moral voice in the public arena in particular, has been relegated to one among many competing voices.

Some are fearful, seeing this as devastating for both the Church and society. Others welcome the shift. On the one hand, there are those who are glad to see Christian morality effectually removed from public life, feeling that ultimately this will be better for humanity in its moral and social functioning. On the other hand, there are those who, while still embracing Christianity and Christian morality, welcome the new situation (although cautiously) in the belief that genuine Christianity desires a level playing field and can stand on its own merits and show itself to be a (or the most) viable option.

The questions that arise with this new situation are whether Christianity can or should seek to have its values and morality influence the broader pluralistic culture? And, if so, how, can this avoid being seen an 'imposition'? These issues are addressed in turn in this essay. To do this, however, we must begin by considering what we mean both by Christian morality and by a pluralistic society.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY CHRISTIAN MORALITY?

[1] One may of course rightly debate the relative levels of syncretism and the influence of paganism from the surrounding culture upon Christian theology and morality throughout history. In this essay however, we proceed on the basis that whatever Christianity was (or became) in its various contexts, it proved to be a centrally unifying force in society and culture.

For examples of how Christianity has interacted with and influenced society see Richard H. Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper and Row, 1951) and R.H. Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*, 1937 ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 1922).

When considering Christian values and morality one might be tempted to think that the Church presents a monolith characterized by such concepts as faith, hope, love, or the like. It is certainly true that Christianity is universally concerned with these values among others, and that a common Christian morality can be demonstrated. It is not true, however, that there is one identical Christian approach to the questions of morality, ethics, or value.

There are broadly speaking *two* approaches to Christian moral theology. One has been called 'act decision' ethics, the other 'virtue' ethics.[2] In the act/decision tradition, the emphasis is on 'doing' ethics. The personal decision or the dilemma itself is central. The focus is on what 'ought' or 'should' be done to achieve the good—either as habitual practices (as for example in the case of normative work ethics) or in a particular crisis situation when key core values may come into conflict with each other and where some resolution must be achieved. One example of the latter would be a decision some may face of whether or not to abort an undesired pregnancy. In this instance, the values associated with the rights to life of the unborn come into conflict with the values of the parent or parents. Here, a crisis exists and some decision or action (each with certain consequences) must be made. Even a non-decision is a type of decision.

Further, even within act/decision ethics, there is disagreement as to how to decide what the good is and on what basis to resolve a dilemma. There are deontological approaches to ethics[3] which come to a decision based on either set rules, standards or principles, (whether scripture, tradition or something else), and there are teleological approaches to ethics[4] which determine a course of action by exploring the desired state (the good however defined) and then considering, apart from rules or norms, what the best way is to achieve that state.

In contrast to act/decision ethics is virtue ethics. The difference is that in virtue ethics the emphasis is placed on what type of persons the moral agents are to be and on the effects these persons have on the broader community. The focus is on 'being' a good, ethical or virtuous person in relation to others. When virtue or the virtues are the starting point of Christian morality, it is argued, the agent will 'be' moral and thus prone to make the best moral choices.[5]

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[2] For a more detailed discussion of the directions and issues involved in these two types of ethics see Ian C.M. Fairweather and James I.H. McDonald *The Quest for Christian Ethics: An Enquiry into Ethics and Christian Ethics* (Edinburgh: The Handsel Press, 1984), pp. 3–92. Here the discussion is structured around the categories: deontological ethics, teleological ethics and motive ethics.

[3] 'Deontological' is the adjective and 'deontology' the noun. The Greek *dei* (stem, *deont*-) means 'it is right', 'it is necessary'.

Examples of the diverse approaches to deontological ethics include: Medieval Catholics scholastic ethics (500–1545 Trent) and the use of the Penitential Books. The ethics of Luther and Calvin. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*. Based on German sixth edition, 1963 ed., Translated by Neville Horton Smith (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1955), Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1961), sect. II/2, III/4, J. Fletcher, *Situation Ethics* (London: SCM Press, 1966) and Richard J. Mouw, *The God Who Commands: A Study in Divine Command Ethics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990).

[4] 'Teleological' is adjective and 'teleology' is the noun. The Greek *telos* means goal, and hence teleological ethics has the goal of moral action in view.

Examples of the diverse approaches to teleological ethics include: Thomas Aquinas, the utilitarianism of Jeremy Bentham, J.S. Mill and G.E. Moore.

[5] See Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), Stanley Hauerwas and A. MacIntyre, eds. *Revisions: Changing Perspectives in Moral Philosophy*, vol. 3. A Series of Books on Ethics (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983) and Alasdair MacIntyre, *After*

Initially, these debates may seem to undermine the possibility of common Christian values. Where one finds consensus, however, with respect to a common Christian morality is in thinking of Christian values and morality in relation to worldview. Prominent philosophers, scientists and theologians today agree that the idea of a purely valueless, 'objective' knowledge (in this case moral knowledge) is impossible.[6] It is a view from nowhere. Each person, and consequently community, whether Christian or not, has particular reference points and ways of looking at the world which answer the basic questions of existence: What is real? Who am I? Where am I and where did I come from? What is wrong? And what is the solution? How we answer these questions, whether consciously or not, forms our view of the world or, worldview.[7] These views of life, within our respective communities, provide the basis for our value systems which then in turn indicate for us various patterns of appropriate behaviour.

A Christian Worldview

Christian morality (or values) stems from a particular worldview, a Christian one.[8] And, despite the differences mentioned, there are broad and common values accepted across the Christian spectrum. We highlight two here, not because they are the only ones which can be agreed upon (for they are not), but rather because they are foundational to the overall task of Christian morality, and because they are particularly relevant to the crisis faced in today's society.

The first value is *human dignity and the sanctity of life*. A Christian worldview asserts that God created humanity in his image and likeness and gave to it certain responsibilities. Along with these responsibilities, however, was the possibility of not fulfilling them. Humanity was given freedom, and this freedom carried (and carries) with it certain consequences. Generally speaking, God does not violate this freedom. Further, these endowments, far from being annulled by the fall, were reaffirmed by Christ in his death on the cross. Here, God said yes to humanity. Further, when Christ returns he will ultimately vindicate God's overall purposes and humanity's place within the creation.

The implications of these ideas are innumerable, but they at least suggest that all persons, as created in the image and likeness of God, and as potentially redeemable, are given a transcendent value and have an inherent dignity. Further, as God does not usually violate their moral freedoms of choice, so we too should be careful to respect the freedoms and choices of others. This is so even when we disagree with the choices they make. Of course there is room for intervention, especially when others are put at risk by our choices. Care however must be taken so as not to violate the integrity of the person.

The second value is the *integrity and value of creation* or the material world. God created the world (material) as good and Christ's death on the cross is understood

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Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory, Second ed. (London: Duckworth, 1985). (MacIntyre's ethics are more philosophical than theological but many Christian ethicists use his work).

[6] See a summary discussion in Trevor Hart, *Faith Thinking: The Dynamics of Christian Theology* (London: SPCK, 1995), pp. 23–70.

See also for more detail A. MacIntyre, M. Polanyi, H. Frei and G. Lindbeck respectively.

[7] By a worldview technically we mean a set of convictions held either consciously or unconsciously, rationally or non-rationally, lived in a narrative and social context which answer the questions of ultimate reality (Metaphysics), how one can know and experience that reality (epistemology), and what is worth living for in light of that reality (axiology).

[8] For a discussion of worldview and ethics see Mouw, *The God Who Commands*, pp. 22–42. For a broader discussion see J. Middleton, Richard and Brian J. Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger Than It Used to Be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age* (Downers Grove, IL.: InverVarsity Press, 1995).

(beginning in Scripture) as having cosmic redemptive significance. Further, the fact of a promised new earth with embodied creatures inhabiting it suggests that material reality has both value to God and a significant place in eternity.

The implications here are that Christian morality values the creation (the material aspect of existence) and seeks to function within it. Far from being a hindrance to spirituality and morality, the material is foundational to them. Christians have disagreed and will disagree at times as to what this means in practice. However, some form of this value is essential to any Christian worldview and morality.[9]

By calling for a worldview orientation to Christian morality, and by mentioning two particular values which grow from it, our purpose is not to nullify the broader tensions within the Christian family concerning how to approach the questions of morality. These are important questions. One should not find this diversity troubling however, for its existence ensures greater flexibility and demonstrates the possibility that Christian morality is sufficiently nuanced and comprehensive to address the complicated life and death issues faced today.[10] Further, even with such inter-family disagreements, it is important to emphasize that with a Christian worldview orientation, certain values (like the ones mentioned) emerge and point toward a common Christian morality. The general agreement amidst diversity suggests that there is a core Christian morality.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY A PLURALISTIC SOCIETY?

To avoid confusion one must be careful to differentiate between two uses of the term pluralism. On the one hand, there is undeniably the reality of a plurality of voices in society each claiming its rights to be heard and heeded. On the other hand, there is pluralism; a particular philosophy and programme for living in a pluralistic context.[11] At times it is assumed that pluralistic philosophy is a necessary component of a pluralistic setting. This, however, is not true. To demonstrate this we will look more carefully at plurality and then at pluralism.

The Plurality of Society

Wherever a society consists of more than one culture, sub-culture, or belief system there is by definition plurality. Indeed, historically even in 'Christian' cultures there has always been plurality of some sort. In our late modern and post-modern contexts however, where the differences between groups becomes a focal point, how to respond to and incorporate this plurality into the whole becomes problematic. The temptation is for the dominant group to seek to avoid anarchy by imposing its views on the minorities. Of course, the secular totalitarian state has been guilty of this vice,[12] but unfortunately so also at times has Christianity. The task and challenge therefore is to develop a system where a plurality of voices, an unavoidable given, can be heard and reasonably incorporated into the whole.

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[9] Potential resources for the exploration of such ideas from an Eastern Christian perspective include the Cappadocian Fathers as well as the writings of St Maximus of Confessor.

[10] For a further discussion of Christian ethics' adequacy in response to its critics see Brian Hebblethwaite, *The Adequacy of Christian Ethics* (London: Marshall Morgan & Scott, 1981).

[11] Ian S. Markham, *Plurality and Christian Ethics, New Studies in Christian Ethics*, ed. Robin Gill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 9–10.

[12] To explore further the difficulty of establishing a genuine plurality in Soviet and post-Soviet life see Carol R. Saivetz and Anthony Jones, eds. *In Search of Pluralism: Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics*, The John M. Olin Critical Issues Series (Oxford: Westview Press and The Harvard University Russian Research Center, 1994).

It follows on this view that in a society of plurality (if there is to be genuine plurality) there is no need for various groups to deny or sacrifice their unique vantage points and perspectives (although there will be times when they must compromise with reference to what can actually be translated into public policy). Indeed, each group is entitled to its own worldview, and for our interests, morality. This is promising for Christian morality, even though there is also the danger that its concerns will be minimized or overlooked by others. At least, what is guaranteed is that the voice of Christian morality has a place at the table.

A Pluralistic Worldview

Pluralism as a philosophical approach, whether religious[13] or secular, strangely enough denies and undermines this genuine plurality. By pluralism, we mean a particularly radical worldview which argues that every truth claim is relative to the context in which it is made. No truths are universal and thus universally applicable; this includes moral truths. It further argues that each position must accept as *equally* valid the positions of another. This is not a statement on whether each should be allowed a valid opportunity to present its perspectives. Rather, it is an epistemological commitment that no truth claims, moral or otherwise, can be said to be more true or valid than others. Thus, according to pluralism, any group making unique truth claims from its own worldview perspective is deemed to be exclusivist and thus unfit for the public forum.[14]

There are at least two problems with this type of pluralism. The first is indirectly offered by Alasdair MacIntyre in his scathing critique of modernity in *After Virtue*. MacIntyre's thesis is that when objectivity, or the possibility thereof, is removed from questions of morality, (as pluralism has done) morality itself is lost by virtue of the fact that the very language of moral discussion is lost (ie. right, wrong, should, ought. . . .) MacIntyre's thesis suggests that pluralism logically denies the possibility of asserting morality and thus, runs counter to the impulse of plurality which seeks multiple moral voices.

The second critique, which builds on the first, is that pluralism becomes self defeating through its logically inconsistency. Pluralism asserts that all truth claims are relative to the contexts which produced them and thus, by definition, are not universally valid. This assertion, of course, is itself a 'universal' truth claim which comes from a particular context. Therefore, it too is not universally valid. The assertion itself becomes self defeating in that it attempts to affirm what it in fact cannot. The only way around this dilemma is to claim that this one truth claim is the only a priori universal truth available. This however, rather than placing pluralism above other worldviews as is theintent, simply makes pluralism one more worldview competing for supremacy and thus, a victim of its own system. Pluralism, rather than being necessarily linked with plurality is undermined by both the nature of plurality itself, and its own inconsistencies.

CAN OR SHOULD CHRISTIANITY SEEK TO HAVE ITS VALUES AND MORALITY INFLUENCE THE BROADER PLURALISTIC CULTURE WHICH CONSISTS OF BOTH CHRISTIANS AND NON-CHRISTIANS

[13] See John Hick, *The Interpretation of Religion* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989).

[14] See for a further detailed discussion: Hart, Chs. 1–5.

This brings us back to one of the original questions of this essay. And the answer is without shame, yes. Both the nature of Christian moralityand the nature of a pluralistic society (not pluralism) demands that it does.

Christian morality, internal diversity notwithstanding, claims that its truths, though not universally accepted, are in fact universally valid. What Christian morality offers to the world is, in one sense, an alternative morality based on an alternative worldview. While not denying that other worldviews contain elements of this universal morality, Christian morality claims that its worldview and thus its values and patterns of behaviour are more adequate to the promotion of the good than others. It argues that its morality is more consistent with the available data of reality, more internally coherent, and more existentially viable (or livable) than the alternatives. Since this is the posture of Christian morality, it necessarily seeks to influence the contexts in which it finds itself.

Pluralistic society also affirms that Christian morality should be involved in the process of defining and promoting the public good. It seeks to have various worldviews (Christianity included) represent their concerns and morality from their unique perspectives. If Christianity refuses to participate in this process by adopting, even unconsciously, the faulty premises of pluralism, the result will be both a violation of Christian morality and of plurality itself. The consequences of this will be disastrous for a society of plurality and for Christianity.

HOW SHOULD CHRISTIAN MORALITY SEEK TO INFLUENCE THE BROADER SOCIETY AND AVOID BEING SEEN AS AN IMPOSITION ON THE VIEWS OF OTHERS?

Our purpose here is to suggest several directions which can serve as entry points into this complex subject. Our suggestions are not final answers, but are rather meant to be sign posts indicating possible ways foreword.

Of course the word 'influence' can mean many (often diverse) things depending on its context. Particularly appropriate to our current discussion are political and demonstrative forms of influence. By political influence, we mean in a generic sense the translation of Christian moral principles (such as were mentioned above) into public policy. By demonstrative influence, we are referring to the posture of the Church and individual or groups of Christians as they enter into the public arena.

The translation of Christian morality into public policy, in the end, requires skilled specialists. These persons must be devoted to understanding the nuances of moral theology as applied in particular and complex contexts. They must also understand the steps and procedures of public policy making. It is recognized that these people are rare.

Ways to Create a FavourableContext

There are however several ways for a society to create a context from which such people will emerge, and in which they will be nurtured. *First*, on a broad level the people in a given society, including its leaders at all levels, need to develop a context in the public arena where plurality is recognized and encouraged. There need to be contextually appropriate types of 'democratic', pluralistic structures where moral issues can be explored and where Christianity is allowed to participate. We are suggesting here that in the government, the educational system, in health care and so forth, there be places where open dialogue and experimentation can occur.

Second, we suggest that the disciplined study of Christianity and Christian morality be incorporated into society as a public discipline.[15] One way to do this is to develop theological faculties in the Universities and other institutions of higher learning. Another way, for example, is to form medical societies and/or journals where Christian morality and health care issues can be explored from various angles.

By moving in these directions, Christian thought and morality is opened to the broader society of both Christians and non-Christians. This is not to imply that Christian morality should compromise itself to other worldviews. Nor does this mean that Christian morality need be divorced from the life of the Church and faith. Rather, it means that the Church makes herself available to others (in at least one respect—her rational aspect), and that she enters into dialogue with other worldviews on more 'neutral' ground.

A *third* suggestion for creating a context in society where Christian morality can have influence, is for society's leaders to consider carefully their own worldviews. All leaders should be critically aware of what convictions and values influence them in their decision making. Some worldview (or 'religious' belief system) lies behind every decision made in the public sector, for every decision is made by a person or group of people. Once this 'view from somewhere' is recognized, (in addition to a leader wanting to consider carefully whether or not his or her own worldview is adequate and accurate), he or she will enter into public debate more personally humble and sympathetic to the views of others.

This will not necessarily mean that Christian values will be adopted into public policy. It will however mean that Christian morality will be given as fair a chance as any competing view. Then, the responsibility is on Christianity to show that its values better fit the data and provide a better way to the good than the others.

The Church Impacts the PublicForum

This leads us to consider what posture the Christian Church should adopt while moving into the public arena. We suggest that the way of demonstration or persuasion is a more effective, and a more appropriate method of influence than that of power/party politics.[16] Demonstration or persuasion suggests that Christians work with the people they want to influence, not through threats or imposition, but rather at a worldview level. If Christian morality corresponds to truth or reality at any points, and if it is a better way to the good than the alternatives, it should at least be able to demonstrate satisfactorily these points to itself, and to some degree, to others.

Here the Church needs to involve itself, not as a 'powerful' institution seeking to pressure others, but rather as believing Christians and fellow members of society seeking to bring their worldview to the public forum. For this task the Church needs to produce skilled theologians, apologists and ethicists who are able to participate in the debates. For it is only through persuasion that these Christian men and women, and thus Christian morality in general, will retain integrity, and thus be a distinctively Christian influence on the surrounding culture.

In conclusion, we emphasize that the task for Christian morality in a pluralistic society is enormous and yes, often dangerous. However, it is also characterized by hope; but not

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[15] See: Hart, *Faith Thinking*, Lesslie Newbigin, *Truth to Tell: The Gospel as Public Truth* (London: SPCK, 1991) and Brian Hebblethwaite, *The Problems of Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980) and David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1981), pp. 3–46.

[16] For a further discussion see John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Wm.B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1972).

a naive utopianistic hope that we can make society perfect. Rather, the Christian hope believes that because of Christ's death and resurrection there is the possibility of bringing any society (at least for a time and to some degree) under the Lordship of Christ and thus in line with Christian morality. Nonetheless, Christians are also realistic and affirm that until the return of Christ and the consummation of his kingdom, any progress that we make will be both imperfect and incomplete. At this point in history however, any progress would be welcomed.

Cyber-Theology: DoingTheology with a Personal Computer

David Parker

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This important article points to the paradigm shift that is now taking part in the way we understand our theological task. The author lifts our horizons beyond using the computer as a word processor to the ever- expanding technological possibilities of multi-media operations, the range of software available and the potential for the Internet using email and web. He suggests ways in which the computer can enhance theological teaching and administration but cautions the need for skill and patience, security, privacy and copyright, the stewardship of funds, and the danger of over reliance on high technology. The Theological Commission is looking at using the Internet extensively to facilitate its activities such as publications, study units and consultations. Editor

Keywords: Technology, Christian ministry, hardware, software, program, printer, Internet, e-mail, the Web, word-processing, database, missiology, administration

INTRODUCTION

One of the greatest gifts of modern technology is the personal computer (PC), especially for theologians and others who are in the business of working with words and ideas. Personal computers, which now have enormous power compared with those available only a short time ago, have revolutionized access to and processing of information. This article[1] is a general introduction to some of the main ways a PC can be used by theological students and educators, administrators, pastors, missionaries and others in Christian ministry. It concentrates on the mainstream rather than the highly specialized applications, and makes suggestions which readers can follow up on in their own local context. The information given here applies generally to both IBM-compatible computers

[1] Acknowledgment is made of trade and brand names mentioned in this article, which are registered trademarks of their respective owners. Mention of a particular product does not imply endorsement or otherwise.