

## ET 2.1 – Introduction to Christian Ethics

### Some Names and Movements in Christian Ethics

1. “Christian” approaches to ethics are often, though not always, endeavours to gain attention for a particularly overlooked feature. For example, if a person were to emphasize the importance of

Creation Ethics  
Community Ethics  
Kingdom Ethics

then it would probably be an inclusive rather than an exclusive proposal which s/he was making.

2. Bearing this in mind, it may be the case that various “Christian” approaches to ethics tend to give greater weight to one of the three perspectives with which we have become familiar. Some Christian approaches emphasize the norms of ethics, others the goal of ethics, and others the personal renewal dimension of ethics.

Normative Perspective (deontological)	Situational Perspective (teleological)	Existential Perspective (virtue)
Christian casuistry Theonomy Right principles <i>Situation ethics</i>	<i>Relationism</i> Thomist ethics Creation / kingdom ethics Liberationism	Conscience-driven Spirit-antinomianisms Community ethics Discipleship ethics

(note: not all of these are “schools” of Christian ethics. Some, rather, are emphases which emerge in answer to the question, “what’s most important about identifying and living what’s right?”)

Q: It sounds great (spiritual trumps) when a Christian says, “the key thing about Christian ethics is that they should derive from / reflect / revolve around the Gospel.” What are the various things which they might mean by these words?

3. Some movements / emphases in Christian ethics

*Thomist ethics* – from Thomas Aquinas. Life about the fulfillment of our purpose / realising our telos (self-realization). This end is defined by God’s eternal law as to the nature of a human person and this in turn may be discerned by right reason from natural law. Sin is living contrary to right reason, pursuing an apparent good rather than the real good.

*Situation Ethics* – notorious when first articulated in the 1960s by Joseph Fletcher, situation ethics recognizes the love commandment as the only moral absolute and examines each situation carefully to determine what love requires then and there. Do the loving thing. A form of act utilitarianism. Demonstrates (negatively) the relativism of any single moral principle not submitted to and integrated with the whole ethical revelation of Scripture.

*Relationism* – associated with the Jubilee Centre in Cambridge and largely developed by Michael Schluter, Relationism suggests that ‘the principles of biblical law, interpreted in relational terms, provide a coherent basis for public policy and personal lifestyle decisions.’ Go to <http://www.jubilee-centre.org/>

*Theonomy / Reconstructionism* comes from a group of American calvinist presbyterians (R J Rushdoony, Greg Bahnsen, Gary North et al.) with a very high emphasis upon covenant continuity. It focuses upon the normative perspective. It shares with all covenant theology the presumption of the continuity of moral demands made in the OT (and indeed claims to be faithful to the Puritan / Westminster tradition) but is distinctive in challenging the traditional threefold division of the law, in applying Van Til’s epistemological insights to the realm of ethics and, therefore, in stressing the abiding relevance of OT civil law, for example, and in combining these emphases with a strongly postmillennial eschatology. (Bahnsen’s *By This Standard?* which is on the indicative bibliography is online at <http://freebooks.commentary.net/freebooks/>)

*Creation Ethics* - the endeavour to find ethical method and content with universal application / (appeal?) from the ‘creation order’ / from the way we’re built / the way things are. If we understand creation’s order and purpose correctly we will know what is right and wrong. Related, obviously to natural

law ethics. O' Donovan has something of this about his approach though it is combined with a clear "new creation" dimension too. (That's the "resurrection" bit of the title.)

*Kingdom Ethics* – the endeavour to take Jesus's Kingdom teaching (esp Sermon on Mount) as the foundation and heart of universal ethics. Pacifist, communitarian, 'radical', anabaptist. But c'mon, any Christian ethics will want to be kingdom ethics.

*Community Ethics* – does this exist? what might it mean?

*Jubilee Ethics* – does this exist? what might it mean?

*Conscience* – where virtue ethics meets deontological ethics – let conscience be your guide. (Joseph Butler, Kenneth Kirk).

*Casuistry* – by means of giving detailed answers to a multitude of questions which illustrate / embody the key moral dilemmas which will arise in a given area of life, casuistry demonstrates the necessity and possibility of a highly particularized application of moral law. (William Perkins, Jeremy Taylor, Richard Baxter, Samuel Willard)

*Liberationist ethics* – /eco-ethics / eco-feminist / biophilic mutuality / preference for the poor / ethics from the underside. Versions of interest group ethics expanded into a gospel perspective about the oppressed, wholeness, the nature of freedom and so on.

4. Great dogmaticians have necessarily influenced Christian approaches to ethics

Augustine

Aquinas

Luther

Calvin

Edwards

Barth

5. Some twentieth century Christians associated with particular contributions to ethics. Reading dictionary / encyclopaedia entries on these may be of interest / use.

- Dietrich Bonhoeffer
- James Gustafson
- Stanley Hauerwas
- Martin Luther King
- Abraham Kuyper
- Jürgen Moltmann
- Richard Niebuhr
- Reinhold Niebuhr
- Anders Nygren
- Paul Ramsey
- Walter Rauschenbusch
- Rosemary Radford Ruether
- Helmut Thielicke

6. A health-check on a Christian “approach” to ethics will want to include a run through the following:
- a) the major doctrines of the faith to ensure that all are being given due consideration (e.g. authority, Scripture, noetic effects of sin, hierarchy etc)
  - b) the perspectives to ensure that all are being given due consideration
  - c) the periods of redemptive-history to ensure that due regard is being paid to the story of what God is doing with the world and what chapter we are presently in
  - d) the major genres / sections of Scripture-revelation to ensure that all are being given due consideration
  - e) the most obvious evaluative questions to be applied to all ethical frameworks to ensure that there are not glaring omissions / contradictions in the proposal under consideration
  - f) the leading alternative / complementary Christian “approaches” to ensure that the key emphases and learnings to be derived from them are given due regard.

7. *Oliver O Donovan's summary of Christian moral reasoning* is worth taking a look at ... (Oliver O' Donovan – “Christian Moral Reasoning” from IVP *New Dictionary of Christian Ethics and Pastoral Theology* (eds Atkinson and Field), 1995, pp.122-27)

- 122.a.1-2 Reflection is thinking about something; deliberation is thinking towards action. We need both.
- 122.a.3 Barth denied need these because moral knowledge is unconditioned. Doesn't want us to be the ethical masters / choice-makers.
- 122.b.1 But this guarded against when we say that reflection is upon a *given* reality.
- 122.b.2 Which is created reality.
- 123.a.1 **Reflection.** We need to know why the world is here and why we are here.
- 123.a.2 This is a philosophy/theology question.
- 123.a.3 How could we know the answer?
- 123.b.1 God tells us. His work of creation-redemption shows us his purposes. And his purposes shed light on the world we live and act in.
- 123.b.2 We reflect on what God is doing in creation-redemption and light is shed on, e.g., marriage, truth-telling, work etc. But we need Scripture to be able to do this.
- 123.b.3 We reflect on what's out there – fellow-humans, non-human nature, our body, our conscience. And we learn from that too. But it's subordinate to Scripture.
- 124.a.1 **Deliberation.** This is about whole life not just about specific decisions when in a dilemma.
- 124.a.2 Virtue/character language is the ‘whole life’ bit. We ‘frame policies for the conduct of our lives.’
- 124.b.1 But we need to form attitudes to particular areas/issues too – again, apart from or ahead of particular moral decisions. (e.g., nuclear weapons, sexual self-disposal, possessions.)
- 124.b.2 And these will present at various levels – our answers will have applications to self, others and society (which ought to be consistent).
- 125.a.1 **Moral Rules.** We work by dependence on ‘generic moral rules’
- 125.a.2 ‘Generic’ here means (sort of) ‘universal’ – applying to a kind of thing not just a particular instance of it.
- 125.a.3 We try to make rules as specific/precise as we can – saying exactly when they do and do not apply.
- 125.b.1 Some object that the ‘exceptions’ that this produces nullify the rules.
- 125.b.2 No – just helps us to understand the rule's scope and meaning.
- 125.b.3 And ‘exceptions’ demonstrate the validity/authority of the general.
- 125.b.4 Exceptions are not made but found. Thinking about rules is about their ‘real application’ to distinct circumstances. Rules as ‘chapter-headings for moral deliberation.’
- 126.a.1 Decisions, then, are a particular application of a generic rule.
- 126.a.2 Which requires an act of *recognition* – that *this* rule applies *here*.
- 126.b.1 This recognition is not automatic or always straightforward.
- 126.b.2 As example, how explain our sense that there might be a ‘justified life’?
- 126.b.3 Three possibilities:
1. there are genuine exceptions – NO rules apply here
  2. two rules conflict

3. the rule needs further precision/particularisation
- 126.b.4 Difficulty with 1. – this puts the action out of the realm of moral reasoning
- 126.b.5 Difficulty with 2. – how decide?
- 127.1 So 3. is what is happening. Which is fine.

1. Revise the paragraph summaries ...
2. Where do we see the a) situational b) existential and c) normative perspectives in O'D's piece?
3. Where do we see a) teleological b) deontological and c) virtue ethics in it?
4. What is the a) purpose b) authority and c) method of moral reasoning?

## 8. Rowan Williams

Some of you might like to do the 1000 word assignment from 2003/04 fun:

Give a 200 word summary of Rowan Williams' article, "Making Moral Decisions" in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Ethics* (ed. Robin Gill: Cambridge: CUP, 2001, pp.3-14) and write an 800 word critical appreciation of the content and cogency of his argument, restricting yourself to one or two positive and one or two negative points. (1000 words max. The 200/800 word split should be adhered to within 20 words one way or the other.)

## 9. On next pages:

- p.5 – Steve Jeffery's diagrammatic presentation of O' Donovan's *Resurrection and Moral Order*
- pp.6-8 – Oliver O' Donovan's *NDCEPT* article on "Christian Moral Reasoning"
- pp.9-12 – Rowan Williams' "Making Moral Decisions" from *Cambridge Companion to Christian Ethics* (ed Gill, 2001)
- pp.13-14 – couple of contents pages from Baxter's *Christian Directory* (1665-67)