

It might be presumed that Christian ethics are necessarily biblical in nature, and that Christian ethics and biblical ethics are one and the same. Not surprisingly, academics from all corners take issue with this assumption. However, the greater issue is the probability that the “stock characters”<sup>1</sup> of our own communities not only assume that an unarguable authority exists in religious texts, but that the moral claims they may or may not have gleaned from Scripture are universally valid. The contemporary problem of staking out a claim for the Bible's place in constructing Christian ethics has often been predicated on the absurdities of populism or self-righteous piety, or - often more to the point - that all such appeals to religious texts as a resource for moral assumptions are inherently detrimental to the exercise of doing ethics, Christian or otherwise.<sup>2</sup>

Consider the late James Nash's 2008 contribution to discussions of the Bible and bio-ethics.<sup>3</sup> Nash writes candidly about his belief not only that Scripture is rather non-committal on

---

<sup>1</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*. MacIntyre fully develops a theme of the “stock characters” of narrative and community self-understanding. MacIntyre “chooses the word 'character'... because of the way it links dramatic and moral associations.” 27. Also, “Characters are masks worn by moral philosophers,” 28, yet, he states that “the requirements of *character* are imposed from the outside, from the way in which others regard and use *characters* to understand and evaluate themselves.” 29. It should not be surprising that many political “conservatives” somehow identified with Archie Bunker as a legitimate character who could sympathize with their “suffering’ during a time of radical upheaval. The radical social elements of *All in the Family* were characterized by a daughter and son-in-law who always acted as a liberal foil to Archie's conservative assumptions.

<sup>2</sup> Jessica Taylor of National Public Radio covered a political event which provides an excellent example of how the Bible and an individual's assumptions can produce chaos in some circumstances, if not more simply a comedy of errors. On January 18, 2016, the populist candidate Donald Trump, while running for the Republican Party's nomination to the office of President of the United States, spoke at Liberty University, a fundamentalist Christian educational institution founded by the politically conservative evangelist Jerry Falwell. The professional and electronic media paid special attention to what were considered to be religious or theological missteps attributed to Trump's convocation speech. He showed a certain lack of biblical familiarity by referring to Second Corinthians as “Two Corinthians” citing 3:17 while saying, “that's the whole ballgame. ... Is that the one you like?” Trump asked. “Now the Lord is that Spirit: and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty.” Taylor wrote “There were a few stumbles during Donald Trump's sojourn to Liberty University on Monday. He mispronounced a book of the Bible. He cursed — twice. And on Martin Luther King Day, the GOP presidential candidate said he was honoring the slain civil-rights leader by dedicating to him the record crowds he says he drew for the school's opening convocation. (Students are required to attend.) “We're going to protect Christianity. I can say that. I don't have to be politically correct,” he thundered at the beginning of his speech at the conservative evangelical university.” Taylor, “Citing ‘Two Corinthians,’” para. 3-4.

<sup>3</sup> Nash, “The Bible vs. Biodiversity: The Case against Moral Argument from Scripture.” 215. Nash's criticism of “biblical ethics” is fully developed and indicting. The article focuses entirely on the whether the Bible authorizes earth care and the protection of biodiversity. He writes “the Bible, on the whole, fails the test as one should expect

the issue of environmentalism, but also that even the Christian proponents of earth care fail to produce credible biblical support for prioritizing the maintenance of biodiversity in any way. Nash does not believe this indicates a moral quandary, rather insisting that “Christian ethics is not synonymous with biblical ethics. Much more than Scripture is needed to do ethics.” In fact, Nash does away with Scripture altogether as the potential informant of Christian contributions to bioethics.

For many who identify as Christians, the Bible is anxiety-producing in matters related to articulating a vision to address the moral dilemmas of the United States. As indicated in the article by Nash, there are people of faith that write about Christian ethics without citing biblical support. Yet, for more than a century there have been ongoing ethical constructs that address the issue of Christian morality and ethics; and while being welcomed contributions to the discipline (especially, as I will show is the case with individuals such as Reinhold Niebuhr), remove the task from any biblical center. There is evidence that the Bible is now considered by many to present a problem for Christian ethicists. First, the Bible as an authority is as contingent as the interpretation of its meaning by diverse communities of faith. Second, the Bible has become enough of a political force in the United States that interpretation of the text is often undertaken with a latent authority given to political preferences and economic realities. Finally, the fact that systematic readings of the Bible, attempts at systematic theologies, and systematic ethics, have all failed to actually produce a systematically biblical anything, and often leaves those who would otherwise cite it as an authority embarrassed at its contents.

---

when ancient texts are used... to legitimate contemporary concerns.” Also, Nash claims as “a Christian ethicist... who is deeply troubled by the misuse of Scripture” and somewhat disingenuously applies his criticism of the use of the Bible to his allies concerned with passion for bioethics as well as his enemies. Nash will not accept any positive contributions supported by the text, regardless of the hermeneutics involved in the construction of bibliocentric earth care mandate. He states “I know of no coherent hermeneutical process or principle that can transform this neutral or negative outlook into the justification of bio-responsibility.”

However, there is also evidence of problematic dogmatism in the secular world as it attempts to articulate a moral code that can be applied universally to any apparent dilemma before an individual or community. While Christian ethicists have moved away from the biblical text as a primary informant of ethics, they have accepted the assumptions of secular thought. As such, a Christian ethic may be difficult to discern when used to achieve the goals of secular ethical concerns.

### **Reason, Ethics, and Emotivism**

One of the first demands of the Age of Enlightenment and later Modernist thought was that individuals move beyond looking to Scripture or religion as primary resources for backing moral truth claims. Because the Bible and its assertions of morality, history and science, and truth were all historically and socially contingent - reflecting ancient knowledge and an unscientific worldview dependent on religious myth - it was not a trustworthy authority. Truth claims, it was proposed, gain their credibility through navigating the process of empiricism.<sup>4</sup> The scientific method became the anchor of moral discourse. Reason took the place of the Bible as the foundation for moral discernment and universal truth claims for most in the western world. Interestingly enough, the same claims that Christians made about the Bible and the notion of a god revealing itself in history were made by the Enlightenment and Modernist philosophers themselves – that there must be a universal truth that is not contingent on any human construct but stands alone as an existential authority unconstrained by the boundaries of historical time and

---

<sup>4</sup> Thiel, *Nonfoundationalism*. “Enlightenment thinkers cited the irreconcilable inconsistencies in Scripture as evidence that the sacred text was at best reasonably defensible collection of moral dictates, at worst, poor history, and by no means what the Christian tradition claimed it to be – the divinely revealed world of God.” 44. Modernism, being the offspring of Enlightenment ideals, operates according the following epistemological claim: “Modernists believe that there are asocial and ahistorical moral principles and that these principles are necessary if the moral appraisal of social practices is to be possible.” Ruf, *Postmodern Rationality*, 34. Ruf writes that modernist thinking demands that contingency-free “concepts, propositions, and meanings do exist. Furthermore, they argue that the socially invariable and the timeless must be postulated in order to account for socially different people at different times being able to say the same thing, for one person's ability to deny what another person says...” 33.

place, or social understandings. The differences are dependent upon how one discerns such truth – through reason and scientific method, or supernatural revelation.<sup>5</sup>

The aims of Enlightenment and later modernist agendas, negatively stated, remain to marginalize regional and localized narratives of truth in hopes of “liberating” individuals from the baggage of their own provincialism. What has occurred over time, and perhaps sooner than one could imagine, is that the Enlightenment, while promoting democracy as the most reasonable means of liberating humanity from the tyranny of religion and myth, has had to settle upon Utilitarianism as the philosophy that stakes out the claim as being most democratic in its aims and outcomes.

Also called Consequentialism, the thinking is that moral vision should be driven by the ability to produce outcomes that are favorable to a majority of stakeholders, in terms of increased happiness or absence of pain. (Some definitions prefer the term “welfare” to that of happiness.) Consequentialism is described as a “theory of responsibility,” meaning that consequences alone should be taken into account when making judgments about right and wrong.<sup>6</sup> More briefly,

---

<sup>5</sup> Some of the basic assumptions of the Enlightenment reflect the same basic assumptions of religious dogmatics. For instance, the Enlightenment was concerned with establishing universal truth, though such truth was based on logic such as evidenced by the rules of mathematics and physics rather than the “whims” of culture and myth. As we stand in the long shadow cast by science since the Enlightenment, Hauerwas writes that “we accord to science the primary status for the nature of truth. Subjected to sciences verification criteria, religion seems to be merely opinion. While science cannot establish the truth of certain hypotheses, it at least has tests for falsity...” Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom*, 14. Modernity insists upon data that is verifiable, or falsifiable, as a means to arrive at truth. As such, modernity has led to the discipline of science demanding a place of primacy as a means of asserting and legitimizing all truth claims. “One is a scientist if one can produce verifiable or falsifiable statements about referents accessible to the experts.” Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 25. Lyotard would identify religious claims as narrative claims. As to the authority or legitimacy of types of knowledge, while science appeals to itself as an authority, it holds all other knowledge to scientific standards if those narratives are to be considered for discussion, even when the subject is morality or ethics. However, since religious narratives are neither verifiable or refutable, science refuses to legitimize religious claims, and in the process, makes the scientific method just as self-legitimizing as religions, myths, or any other contingency-based claims. 25. As such, science establishes itself as what Lyotard refers to as a “meta-narrative,” an epistemological proposal that insists it is the center of all knowledge and relevant discourse.

<sup>6</sup> Mautner, *Dictionary of Philosophy*, 636-67, 119-20. Ogletree describes Consequentialism as challenging individuals “to calculate the likely result of their actions, and to assess their relative goodness (or badness) for human well-being. They drive home the point that the quality of the overall outcome of action is what counts, however that outcome may be achieved.” Ogletree, *The Use of the Bible in Christian Ethics*, 20-21.

Utilitarianism/Consequentialism aims to achieve results that produce favored outcomes for the majority with the hope that the unfavorable consequences are minimized for others. Perhaps another term is “situational” or “contextual” ethics.

Such a manner of “doing ethics” is not only contrary to the assumptions proposed by proponents of biblical ethics, but presents obstacles for most Christian ethicists who favor a firm and universal moral “justice” to an ethic based upon the realization of widespread happiness.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, it has become difficult to discern between Christian ethics and secular ethics, as the criteria for both has become a practice in personal preferences over a practice in reasoning or democracy. As MacIntyre writes, such a moral discourse was doomed to fail - and it has failed. The result, presented by post-modern thinker Lyotard as well, has been the replacement of moral discourse with emotivist argumentation, a manner of promoting a specific value over another based not upon evidence but upon the achievement of an individual's favored outcome. Both secular and Christian thinking has fallen victim to this “error.”<sup>8</sup> Additionally, in light of the individualism demanded by the proponents of empiricism and utilitarianism, any other ethical practices that assume an overarching or existential truth exists are bound to be frustrated.<sup>9</sup>

MacIntyre writes in *After Virtue* that “all moral judgments are *nothing but* expressions of

---

<sup>7</sup>Hauerwas, *Peaceable Kingdom*, 117. For Christians, situational ethics demands that one ought to ask themselves the question of what should be done in response to a particular event that demands a response. Hauerwas writes that this question “tempts us to assume that moral situations are abstracted from the kind of people we are and the history we have come to be.” Also, see page 9, “Our society seems to generally think that to be moral, to act in a responsible manner, is to pursue our desires fairly, that is, in a manner that does not impinge on anyone else's freedom.”

<sup>8</sup>MacIntyre, *After Virtue*; Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 12. Hauerwas writes that “Protestants could only assume that Christian ethics was little different from the consensus of whatever culture they found themselves a part. This is most strikingly illustrated by Protestantism's inability to be more than a national church.” *Peaceable Kingdom*, 52.

<sup>9</sup>Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 9-10. He should be understood as stating that all contemporary moral discourse is emotivist, and is therefore competitive. Lyotard cites Ludwig Wittgenstein's premise of language games. Moral discourse is the game board upon which participants calculate and persuade others by verbalizing preferences in a way that can trump another's argument with a final word that either wears down an opponent or wins new adherents to one's own side as a participant in the game. Such argumentation is most always reliant upon claims or statements intended to take advantage of another's emotions concerning a specific topic, which in turn excludes reasoning from the process.

preference, expressions of attitude or feeling, insofar as they are moral or evaluative in character.”<sup>10</sup>

Also, there is more to Utilitarian moral vision and ethics than facts and numbers, upon which empirical reasoning and Utilitarianism base their actions. The morality of emotivism is always to be differentiated from what is factual. Writes MacIntyre, “We use moral judgments not only to express our own feelings and attitudes, but also precisely to produce such effects in others.”<sup>11</sup> Excellent examples are found in debate over “hot-topic” issues like abortion, capital punishment, war, same-sex marriage, and a plethora of other “dilemmas” in the church. Christians often appeal to God's universal and undeniable moral authority, despite the consistent disagreements that often occur between Christians themselves. More interestingly emotivist is the process by which Christians pursue public policy with appeals to religious moral assumptions while basing their arguments upon empirical data or a manner of reasoning that conflicts with the very definition of faith.

---

<sup>10</sup>MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 12. Italics original.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid. MacIntyre further states that moral discourse is competitive (like the “language games” of Lyotard and Wittgenstein before), won by the individual who displays “the greatest appearance of clear, undoubting conviction” which in turn leads to the appearance of the victor's access to universal truth.” The problem of Utilitarianism is that moral discourse contains little more than a false sense of reasoned authority through an appeal to “an objective and impersonal criterion but in reality is simply a display of rhetorical skill.” 17.