

## How to think Christian ethics

### *Distinguishing two ethical tasks*

Ethics, including religious ethics, involves two related but distinct tasks. The most fundamental or basic, but also the most ignored, task, requires standing back from what is happening in order to analyze and understand what is going on. Here the aim is seeing, perceiving, probing, taking apart how a particular issue makes sense in terms of values. Prior to any moral response or act, ethics initially *merely* probes reality -- an issue, a question, a claim -- in order to understand it.

This initial task proves surprisingly difficult. For moral questions or issues (controversies) usually come already named, labeled, stamped and framed in a value laden context. Moral issues tend to arise in pre-processed form. Like preprocessed food, we are actually getting more than we thought or expected when it comes to ethical controversy. Disguised as *facts*, moral meaning is already built into the data and the words. And getting an analytic and critical (evaluative) grip on what one actually faces requires objective, sustained and deep probing. Only after having made sense analytically and critically of what we face, or hear, perceive, read, note can we respond to it fittingly. The sequence looks deceptively easy: understanding what we face precedes deciding or responding to it.

The second task of ethics involves deciding and responding. This concerns right conduct or the shaping of our lives, individually and communally. The prevailing misconception of the meaning of ethics, even in Google, is that there is only one ethical task, namely the responding and the doing. That reduces ethics to a matter of doing, of choosing rules of conduct, principles, or in religious terms, commandments. This implies that the problem is clear enough. Just choose and do the right thing!

In plainer terms, before or underlying ethics-of-what-to-do waits the more important inquiry, namely the ethics-of-what-is-going-on. Before one can consider what to do, one must grasp what is going on. The most important move in ethics (and surely in law, in diplomacy, in marriage and in raising children) lies in getting an analytic and critical grip on an issue. Seeing, understanding, and naming a situation precedes and decisively directs reacting to it. The caution here is that nothing speaks for itself. We have to discern or ascribe meaning, value, and importance, even if every insistent voice claiming evidence on its own behalf suggests that that job is already done.

## An Example.

In late August and early September (2013) our country faces the military as well as moral issue of what to do in response to the conflicts and civilian suffering in Syria. The question is posed by our President: Will Congress endorse his recommendation that the United States respond with selective bombings of Syrian targets, specifically the locations and supporting systems for using poison gas?

That question takes a what-to-do format. Will Congress support its president? But that question assumes a range of unspoken supportive assumptions. Some of these refer to the means, the how-to, as well as the consequences of such action. Thus the question takes for granted that we, the United States, have the resources, ability, and the will for this mission. We can succeed, making things better rather than worse. And we can do this quickly and without boots on the ground -- and do no more. It assumes that the facts speak for themselves, even before the expected report of a UN delegation. It omits the possibility of retaliation by a country that has large stores of chemical and biological weapons.

Other assumptions prove to be more abstract, even idealistic with nationalistic and religious overtones. The United States stands for certain universal values and rights now violated by an authoritarian government oppressing and killing its own citizens. The community of nations can not remain passive when the Syrian regime violates our common humanity. The US is a nation with a mission to prevent the worst atrocities. This humanitarian motivation justifies intervention, even if there is no legal basis for it in international law and even if we stand alone. The President's challenge omits the context of US experience in recent wars in the Middle East and avoids the fact that any such bombing will be regarded everywhere but here as an act of war. Such unspoken assumptions are not exhaustive, but they will do to make the point that the question/challenge posed to Congress calls for action that only makes sense on the basis of a host of tacit assumptions (though some of these may appear if the Congress responds in the format of "whereas.... therefore....")

All these assumptions may be correct and sound. The point here is not to contest that but merely to describes how vital assumptions about what is going on and of who we and they are underlie or precede questions of what to do. To use a visual metaphor, the glasses through which we see these events precede, guide, and focus our vision.

Ethics-of-what-is-going-on probes the unspoken or given context of a contemporary issue. In colloquial terms, it seeks to understand where things *are coming from* and where they are headed. What is the given view of the world and what are the terms in which the issue or the moral problem arises? This assumes that facts (or texts, or realities) do not speak for themselves. Rather culture, careful use of words, selective seeing and valuing make the facts and everything else speak. In technical terms, metaethics, as the probing of the worldview and contexts in which an issue arises, precede ethics-of-what-to-do.

*A link with “How to read the Bible,” the initial essay in this series*

Distinguishing what we bring to a moral issue from what to do in response overlaps with the first topic of these talks, the question of how to read the Bible. To understand a biblical text one inquires about cultural assumptions, the linguistic and social glasses with which biblical texts were written as well as those through which we read those texts. In ethics that analysis concerns how we approach moral issues. Here, too, the voices of culture always pervade seeing, thinking, and understanding what is good or bad, right or wrong. Before any decision or action, the culture and the languages we speak affect how we see our world and our issues.

*Clearing up an old misconception: science vs. religion*

The sciences do not do ethics. They investigate empirical (via the senses) reality but do not endorse values or pursue what is good or bad, right or wrong. I bring up sciences here as an aside. And the reader uninterested in the topic might simply proceed to the next section.

Describing what we bring with us in dealing with reality, crucial in understanding both texts and moral problems, offers an opportunity to untangle a conceptual knot. The assumption that there is only one true way to understand, to explain, and to name reality may account for the supposed conflict between religion and the natural sciences. EITHER humans evolved from earlier life forms OR humans were created by God. That logic has been critically compared with the notion that there is only one true or genuine game one might play with a deck of cards. But in fact both the variety of possible games as well as the various ways of understanding, explaining, and responding to reality seem limited only by human creative ingenuity rather than by a deck of cards or by whatever we confront as real.

The natural sciences themselves vary in how they see, name, and study our world, without ever encountering objections of incompatibility. Religious and ethical concepts of *truth* do not conflict with scientific meanings of that word any more than playing Canasta conflicts with Solitaire or poetry conflicts with Biology (describing trees comes to mind). There simply is not only one meaning of “truth.” Each discipline, whether any of the sciences, of religions, of various kinds of ethics relies primarily on its defining assumptions and rules more than any topic or subject. None of these could give up “truth” -- that fine word that holds all disciplines accountable. The meanings of this word and of all others in a discipline’s vocabulary are defined internally by the respective rules of inquiry (what counts as fact, as evidence, as truth, etc.). In short, any card in a card game derives its meaning from the rules of that specific game. The meaning of the Queen of Hearts varies depending on the game but does *not conflict* with the meaning ascribed to it by any other game. Canasta is to Solitaire as religion is to science. Religion and ethics play a different *game* with reality than the natural sciences. Therefore it makes good sense to claim that humans were both evolved and are God’s creatures. One simply needs to remember what game is being played.

I suspect also that the defining goals of the empirical sciences and of Abrahamic religions and ethics differ. The challenge to pre-med students: Try writing a love letter in biological terms. The challenge to the religious fundamentalist: Try to explain a fossil in religious terms. The language of faith or of love cannot be translated into scientific vocabulary. And one cannot literally do science religiously. They are both different games and different quests.

The sciences seek to understand, explain, predict, test. The scientific quest probes empirical reality with strict criteria of investigation and of verification. The sciences seek to know how empirical reality works. By contrast these historical religions and their ethics do not make understanding either God, neighbor, or the world their primary goal. To be sure, biblical texts offer narratives or stories that give human life meaning. Wisdom literature struggles with how to live and with theodicy. But biblical ethical priorities aim to sustain and to nurture relationships. Job’s quest for divine justice, for understanding God, is ultimately abandoned in the *presence of God*. The big biblical story attests to a God who creates, loves, redeems humans as children, kin, covenant partners. The meaning of human life itself is relational: to love God (back) and to love each other. Loving God and neighbor trumps understanding and

explaining either or both.

### *Summarizing and shifting to Christian ethics*

Ethics, including Christian ethics, involves the initial, crucial, and often neglected task of probing the meaning of ethical issues. This task is similar to what is called “deconstructing” in the contexts of literature and philosophy. It involves analyzing a text to expose its hidden internal assumptions and possible self-contradictions. The point, in the context of ethics, it misleads to begin moral reflection with what to do. For prior to and underlying that ethics-of what-to-do lie a host of assumptions about what is real and important.

The next sections now focus specifically on Christian ethics, beginning with a brief caution about words or of how to speak as believers. The analysis of “ideals” below offers language analysis or deconstruction from a religious perspective.

### *Testing religious and ethical vocabulary: how suitable is it?*

Paying attention to words need not be *mere semantics*. Analyzing words makes us aware of what words assume and where they lead. Indeed words are keys that open doors to reality. Religious or Christian ethics requires a language somewhat different from that of general or secular/philosophical ethics. Religious ethics speaks in the cadence of liturgy, hymns, and prayer. It finds life-giving truth in ancient narratives. Religious ethics, just as worship, is relational. It emerges out of and reaffirms covenantal communities. Ultimately it will be judged or weighed by whether it serves those communities as well as by whether one can show it to God.

Not everything in our secular or philosophical moral nomenclature will do. For example, the popular appeal of “ideals” will not do for Abrahamic and biblical religion. Ideals offer shining visions of bravery, of a classless and just society, of female beauty, of absolute honesty. They prove to be not only luminous but crystalline, impersonal, abstract, demanding devotion and discipline, unyielding and hard. Ideals prove hostile to human flesh and blood, demanding human sacrifice from anorexia to class warfare. Ideals offer no forgiveness. No wonder that a couple's resolve to always-tell-the-truth normally does not survive the first two weeks of marriage. For good reason.

Believers are called not to worship or serve ideals to whom we give life

but the living God who creates, redeems, renews our lives. Ideals are not relationship-friendly. Yet the very heart of biblical and Christian ethics is the commandment to love both God and neighbor. These action guides prove to be relational to the core. We are called to respond to the grace of God and reflect love received to the neighbor.

One may well be similarly cautious about using other general moral words in the context of faith. “Principles” or “duties,” for example, may suffer similar tendencies as “ideals.” Do such words point us to the Lord we are called to serve? Are they community-friendly? By contrast the word “responsibility” proves relationship-friendly.

### *Seeing, thinking, naming as Christians: the constructive task of Christian ethics*

The inclusive task for Christian ethics is to see, probe, and understand everything with the biblical God in mind. The constructive (rather than the analytic) ethics task is to conceive, name, and transform reality, the world, ourselves, politics, everything in ways resonant with faith in God. In a secular culture that remains difficult. For everything is always already claimed, named, staked out by our secular culture. Even more serious, believers just as other citizens breathe and share cultural secularism. We see, think, speak and surely theologize as contemporary Americans. Yet the challenge of biblical and Christian ethics is not only to recognize the *Voice-of-the-Times* in its traditions, in its own culture, in itself. It is also called to witness to a different voice. The way to judge and if need be to challenge voices of our times, is to find our bearings from Scripture, faith traditions, communal worship and reflection. As is said of conversion, all things become new. While God would be the agent causing conversion, believers have the task of thinking through its implications. The task of loving God with all of one’s mind (Luke 10:27) surely speaks to that. What follows below under religious reality renditions is a modest outline of how Christians might do that.

### *Religious reality renditions*

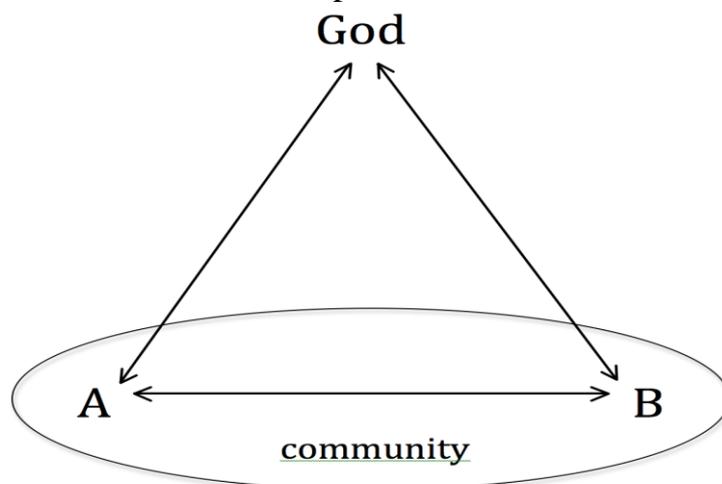
The next two sections concentrate on biblical ethics *first* to see what reality key biblical texts express and assume. The *second* focus is to seek fitting ethical responses given what is real in this context about God and humans. Rewording the second aim, it searches for basic themes through biblical texts for a ethical theological logic or guide. That would be analogous to the quest for a canon within a canon in *How to read the Bible*.

Biblical texts emerge out a range of contexts and speak in more than one theological way. The path I shall follow is a version of *salvation history* (*Heilsgeschichte*): Salvation history seeks to understand the personal and communal redemptive activity of God within human history to effect God's saving intentions. A less formal definition would be the quest to understand Ancient Israel's and the Church's experiences and biblical texts for clues of God's identity and intent for humans and for all of the creation.

Who, then, is this biblical deity and how is this God related to humans individually and communally? The biblical witness acknowledges God as good. God is good in two senses: the joy of being in God's presence (the non-moral meaning) and good in a moral sense as just, loving, judging, and redeeming. God seeks our good, individually and communally. Our good, the human good, lies in responding to God in kind: by loving God (back) and loving our neighbor. That is the double love commandment, expressing the biblical meaning of life. That may be the pervasive theme of the Bible as well. And it lies at the heart of Jewish and Christian ethics.

*A diagram of God-human relationships*

While diagrams lack the life of narratives and simplify unavoidable complexity, a triangle within an ellipse may aid in discerning God's purpose and the logic of perennial human responses. It demonstrates how faith and ethics are inseparably linked in biblical texts as well as biblical ethics. It may prove helpful for discerning a repeated pattern within God's character as well in human relationships with God and with



each other.

The three sides stand for personal and communal relationships between God and between humans. As such each side of the triangle points in two directions, to identify the lines as mutual relationships. The base line of

the triangle refers to the human community, the top of the triangle, where it all begins and centers, is God. The base of triangle is enclosed in an ellipse, labeled *community*, lest one assumes that the human relationship with God is individualistic only. The key point of the diagram is to show that these relationships prove to be inseparable: one cannot worship God without doing right by the neighbor. And one cannot harm the neighbor without rupturing the relationship with God. In short, one cannot be religious in the sense of biblical religion without a moral life.

To bring the diagram to life, the biblical story of Adam and Eve in the Book of Genesis, chapters 2 and 3, shows the logic or theology of biblical religion. This text is a story about humankind: humans are as Adam (A) and Eve (B). It begins with God, as do so many biblical stories. The initial lines emerge (downward) from God's loving intent for humans. That divine beginning is for human and for creation's good. We are created for God and for each other. The unbroken upward and horizontal lines affirm fitting responses to God and to each other when they exist as they were intended. This is how it all was meant to be.

Yet even for that first couple, the divine intent of loving and evoking love presupposes the human freedom to say NO to God and to each other. If there is to be a YES to God, the No is presupposed. And indeed this story-couple finds the whispered temptation, *you will be like God*, irresistible. To be sure humans are in God's image, called to love their progenitor and each other as God loves. But they remain creatures whose pride seduces them to risk everything as it was meant to be. They eat the forbidden fruit, breaking their relationship with God (the upward lines break). The consequence is anything but god-likeness. Adam hides, no longer able to face God. Moreover the fracturing of communal lines follows. The base line ruptures, their relationship with each other breaks down. From Adam's joyful, *This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh*(Gen.2:23) to his craven, *The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate* (3:12). Each of the relational lines in the diagram ruptures.

In other biblical texts this break-down can also be initiated in the human community base line, as in Amos' condemnation of oppression of the poor by the rich: *because they sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals...and trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth* (Amos 2:6-7). Breaking covenant in the human community, the base line, breaks the covenant with God: From Egypt back to Egypt (5:27). Tragically this pattern repeats itself again and again. It holds for David, Bathsheba, Uriah, and Nathan in 2. Sam.11-12. For the other

classical Israelite prophets. For the passers-by in the Story of the Good Samaritan in Mt. 25:31ff.

The diagram of the triangle assumes that both the nature of God and of humans is relational. We are made to love God and each other. Yet we choose against God and against each other. Pride would be the original (in the sense of ubiquitous and persistent) sin. But the biblical God lacks this quality and keeps on trying to move us to become what we are meant to be. Christians consider the life, teaching, death, and resurrection of Jesus to be God's greatest effort toward that end.

*From ethics-as-what-is-going-on to ethics-as-what-to-do*

The last topic here asks what might be moral patterns or ethical themes that this diagram implies. What moral help might the sketch of a triangular reality-pattern yield? God's character and human nature offer contrasting reality clues in the diagram. Keeping such character in mind may prove useful in both a cautionary and constructive sense for Christian ethics. This, again, is quite similar to the method of looking for a canon within a canon to interpret biblical texts. Pervasive biblical themes may offer coherent sense despite conflicting texts *and* troubling issues for Christian ethics.

The diagram points to God's loving and demanding character as well as to humans' failure to affirm their identity of being created in God's image and of being called to affirm that image. It is intended to show the indispensable links between believing or loving God and loving the neighbor. Believing and doing are inseparably linked, the Lutheran insistence on salvation without works notwithstanding. While salvation or God's redemptive love is an unmerited gift, faith without works is dead.

A note of caution. The task of moving from God's character to human imitation is not strictly logical since humans ...are humans and not God. The reasoned link with God remains indirect. Detecting *resonance* or noting dissonance takes careful listening and a good ear. Yet if we are created in the image of God, our lives should reflect or resemble God's character. Such resemblance will take the form of analogy more than logical deduction. It speaks and thinks in parables rather than applicable principles. Christian constructive ethics, finding how to think and respond as Christians to issues of contemporary life will be able to offer only likeness within unlikeness. Even at its best, that retains risk. God help us!

If this paper were to continue, one would need to test the triangular model of biblical ethics with a current issue, perhaps with the example of

bombing Syria offered earlier in this text. Perhaps we could try that in one of our Faith Formation sessions.