

Augustana College
Chapel of Reconciliation

Ethics and Religion: Friend or Foe?

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At a peace rally in 2004, Rev. Dr. Robin Meyers, pastor of Mayflower Congregational Church in OK city spoke these words: “I’m a great believer in moral values, but we need to have a discussion, all over this country, about exactly what constitutes a moral Value...I’m tired of people thinking that...because I favor civil rights and gay rights I must not be a person of faith.” In this speech meant to challenge those Christians who were claiming “moral values” for a particular political and religious agenda, Dr. Meyers highlights the all-too-common perception among people of various faiths that religion and morality are intertwined in some way. That a person’s morality will show the purity of a person’s faith and a person’s faith will necessarily lead that person into a moral life.

According to some recent polls, many people around the world agree with both Dr. Meyers and the Christians he is challenging. In a 2007 survey (conducted by the Pew Global Forum on religion) 57% of Americans said they believe that religious faith is necessary for moral values. This number is much higher in other countries like Brazil, Indonesia, and most of Africa, even reaching to the 90% range.¹ Another recent survey showed that a person’s moral attitude can actually be changed by religious beliefs. A 2008 Pew Forum survey found that nearly six in 10 white Southern evangelical Christians believed torture was justified in some circumstances. But when the surveyors asked again using the religious principle of the Golden Rule – “we

should not use methods on our enemies that we would not want used on Americans” – the number dropped by 15%.² Religion, it seems, does matter to morality.

These surveys, of course, must be taken with a grain of salt – or sometimes a whole salt shaker. They only provide a snapshot into the lives of specific people at a specific time. Nonetheless, they point to a belief by many in our world that religion has something to do with a person’s moral character and thus with ethics. Even the great anti-establishment thinker, Thomas Jefferson, believed that religion mattered for human morality – though he did think any religion would do.³

On the other hand, there are some who believe that ethics and religion not only aren’t related, they shouldn’t be related. According to the same Pew Global survey mentioned earlier, most of Western Europe and many of our Canadian neighbors think that religious faith has little to do with living a moral life. Only 10% of Swedes, for example, think religion is important to morality. Some of these people no doubt are critics of religion. They look at the history of Christianity, for example, and see the heinous acts committed in the name of God: The support of slavery, the oppression of women, the Holocaust, Apartheid, the Spanish Inquisition, the Crusades, the exploitation of the poor for cheap labor, 100 years War – all these represent human behavior at its worst. And it’s not enough to say that these were just some bad theological apples in an otherwise good barrel; closer views show that in many cases, these were systemic realities based in what were thought to be “legitimate religious beliefs” by good Christians. To these critics of religion, being religious does not make a person moral; in fact, theological beliefs can and do lead to immoral behavior.

But it’s not only those who are suspicious of religion who would keep religion and ethics separate. There are some Christian theologians, particularly amongst Lutherans, who are deeply

suspicious of ethics and its tenacious ability to lead faithful people away from God. In their view (and mine BTW), sin is a reality everywhere and no amount of ethics, religious or otherwise, is going to remove it. Only God can save us or make us “better” in any moral fashion. In this view, any program of ethics, though perhaps beneficial for maintaining some order in the world, will seduce the believer into thinking she needs to make herself morally holy so as to earn God’s favor or to prove that God has already done it for her. Ethics, in this view, is nothing more than a self-help program and consequently, ethics and a theology of grace shouldn’t mix.

So, given these two opposing points of view, then, the question I’d like to address this morning is: what do religion and ethics have to do with each other? Or better said, what *should* they have to do with each other?

My response to this question is a typical Lutheran response -- both/and. As a Christian and an ethicist, I suggest that ethics and religion should have both *nothing* to do with each other AND *everything* to do with each other – or at least something to do with each other.

On one hand, as a Lutheran, I take seriously the concerns about joining ethics and the Christian faith. I trust deeply in the Christian promise that God alone saves and that nothing I can do on my own will bring about my moral perfection or prove it to God or others. I also take seriously the suspicions of those who would point to the immoral behavior enacted by deeply religious people. Ethics and religion are not the same entity and when it comes to our relationship with *God*, they really have nothing to do with each other.

Yet, when it comes to our relationships with our neighbors, I also take seriously the belief that religion and ethics can and do have something positive to do with one another. It’s not enough to dismiss ethics from religion or religion from ethics. Human beings are living practitioners of both. Faith will inform what we seek, do, and become in this world; and what we

seek, do, and try to become will influence our faith -- regardless if we say it should or not. Thus faith and ethics do have something to do with each other. The question is: what?

When faced with this question, I often find myself sitting in Jesus' parable of the wheat and the weeds. Despite the disciples' later focus on what's going to happen to those nasty weeds in the end, the main force of this parable as Jesus tells it concerns not the final judgment but is about living life in the here and now. Or as a Lutheran preacher might say, this time between "the already and the not yet." Christian faith trusts that God has already kept God's promise of new abundant life in and through the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is the gospel, the good news that Christians proclaim. At the same time, however, the fulfillment of that promise is not yet complete and sin still has sway in our world. So we live now in a time between -- in a world full of moral ambiguity, shades of gray, wheat and weeds together, when we humans -- yes, even Christians -- often can't tell the difference between the good wheat and the evil weeds in our field of life.

This doesn't mean we can't make moral claims -- strong ones even, and I would argue that in the face of what we perceive to be evil, we should -- Racism is wrong, Sexism is wrong, killing is wrong, coveting is wrong! But the problem comes when get into the nitty-gritty details of what these claims mean for everyday life. Take the commandment against coveting -- one of the big ten in the Judeo-Christian Decalogue -- taken at face value, it is a positive moral principle that is meant to protect our lives and property. And yet in an economic system that requires its consumers to covet lest the whole system collapse into recession or depression, suddenly the command against coveting become morally ambiguous at best. Or what about the command against killing -- does it include times of war, capital punishment, self-defense, euthanasia,

abortion? These are questions that people of all faiths and no faith continue to wrestle with in some way or another.

In the face of this unsettling ambiguity, I submit that ethics during this time between is not finally about the pursuit of the universal and absolute principles of right and wrong so that once we discover and fulfill them, all our problems will go away. Nor is it a self-fulfillment program designed to bring us closer to God. Rather, I suggest, ethics is the on-going human conversation about finding ways that we can and should live together without destroying each other – physically, emotionally, psychologically, spiritually -- in a world filled with both wheat and weeds. And Christian ethics is this conversation grounded in the trust in the promise of new life given in Jesus Christ.

This doesn't deny the pursuit of principles and goals; in fact it invites the ongoing communal search. But it does place the search solidly in the middle of the field of wheat and weeds. Jesus' portrayal of the field of moral ambiguity is finally not an invitation into moral paralysis or quietism. We can't just stand by wringing our hands in fear of doing the wrong thing or in a faith that God will do the right thing without us. Instead, we are called to actively participate in the negotiation of our social world, trusting in God's guidance to make the right and good choices and in God's forgiveness when we don't. Biblical scholar Terence Fretheim shows in his study of the Hebrew scriptures that humans are called to be co-participants with God and with one another in the formation and reformation of the social order in which we live.⁴ In fact, God has designed humans in God's own image to be created co-creators of our social world -- for good and for bad. The call "to be fruitful and multiply" in Genesis 1 is not simply about procreation. It is about the freedom and responsibility to continuously evaluate our existence together and join with all humans in the conversation to find ways to construct

relationships and communities that support life rather than destroy it. All humans hold some responsibility in structuring how we live together in this time between, and Christian humans can participate as voices among many other voices despite – and perhaps even because of -- the moral ambiguity of doing so.

How then do Christians in particular speak an ethical voice into the world along side the many other voices? Christian ethicists throughout history have turned to various theological and philosophical tools in their faith tradition's toolbox. The tool I turn to today is the concept of vocation.

To have a vocation is to be called. For Christians, this call comes from God through baptism into Jesus Christ. While ethics in general asks with all people of the world, what should we seek in this life; who should we be; what should we do?, Christian ethics responds to these questions through the lens of faith by asking: what is God calling us to seek, become, and do as we live together in the promise given in Christ? Martin Luther believed that the central answer to this question is that God calls us to serve the neighbor in the various relationships in which we live. I believe we can fill out this call more fully using three theo-ethical principles.

First, we are called to SEEK shalom. *Shalom*, often translated simply as peace, is relational life at its most vital and abundant, where, as Walter Brueggemann describes, all creatures live "in harmony and security toward the joy and well-being of every other creature."⁵ Of course, only God can finally create this shalom. In sin, humans are able to see *shalom* only through a "glass darkly;" yet only by following God's call to seek *shalom*, can we participate in its formation. It's like the mountains of MT – I don't create them, carve them, shape them – but I can only participate in their wonder and beauty by seeking them out and hiking through them.

Second, vocation is the call to BE righteous, or better "right-relateded," with God and neighbor. For Luther, right relationship is finally a person, the person of Christ, who becomes the believer's right relation with God and empowers the believer's right relation with the neighbor and the self.⁶ God's call to be right-relateded is a call that gives what it asks – this call is an identity given as gift, where each person becomes who they are created to be with and for the neighbor. Of course, due to human sin, right relationship with God and the identity it confers is experienced now in ambiguity. But once given and known through faith, our right relation with God becomes the identity that empowers our right relation with the neighbor.

Third, vocation is the call to DO love in relation with God, with neighbor, and with self. In her discussion of neighbor-love, Lutheran ethicist Cynthia Moe-Lobeda defines love as the "steadfast, enduring, active commitment to the well-being of who or what is loved."⁷ We should be careful, though, not to define the actions of love too closely. For example, Luther offered many examples of love in action, but he believed that to define love too rigidly was to take away its power. He writes in a Lenten sermon:

“So this commandment of love is a short commandment and a long commandment, a single commandment and many commandments. It is no commandment and all commandments... If one regards works, it is no commandment at all. It has no special works of its own which can be named. Yet it is all commandments because the works of all the commandments are its works and must be so.”⁸

Finally, then, love is flexible and discerns in each context and situation what is best for the neighbor.

In this view of vocation, the guiding ethical principle that Christians can bring to the conversation is that we are called by God serve the life of the neighbor, both local and global.⁹ God's ongoing call gives us permission and empowers us to join the human conversation that seeks human flourishing and acts toward it. Christian voices, as well as other religious voices,

have a legitimate place in forming human communities – they are not the only voice, nor does any one religion have a corner on the morality market. Often religion and its followers can be more a part of the problem than the solution – religious people can be the weeds, or worse yet believe that they are God’s appointed weed pullers. To quote Christian ethicist James Gustafson, “there are [both] moral clods and moral virtuosos among Christians” and, I would add, among all religious believers. Religious ethics, Christian ethics included, is fraught with moral ambiguity and thus must be engaged in respectful and humble modesty, with one ear listening to its faith and the other listening to the various voices speaking in the conversation and acting in the world.

But Christians do have an important perspective about God’s relation to the world to offer, one that we are called to share in our communal and individual search for ways to live together in this field of wheat and weeds. Christian ethics isn’t Christian because the people doing it are special or have some connection to God that others don’t. It’s Christian because of its starting point which asks: What is the God of Christ empowering and calling us to do and be in this place and time? For the Christian, this is a search grounded in faith in the promise of new life given through Christ. For other religious communities, this search will necessarily be grounded in beliefs, narratives, and principles of that faith tradition. And while this multitude of voices will usually lead to more moral ambiguity than less, we must resist the urge to silence all other voices but our own. Participation in this conversation is not only necessary for living together in this world – from the Christian perspective, it is part of who God has called us to be.

Thank you!

¹ “The Pew Global Attitudes Project,” October 4, 2007, <http://pewglobal.org/reports/pdf/258.pdf>, p. 36ff.

² “Poll shows support for torture among Southern evangelicals” (Sept 11, 2008), www.pewforum.org/news/rss.php?NewsID=16465

³ Frank Lambert, *The Founding Fathers and the Place of Religion in America* (Princeton: 2003), 286.

⁴ Terrence Fretheim, *God and World in the Old Testament: A Relational Theology of Creation* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2006) 276-277.

⁵ Walter Brueggemann, as quoted in Bruce C. Birch, *Let Justice Roll Down* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1991) 83.

⁶ Tuomo Mannermaa, *Christ Present in Faith: Luther's View of Justification* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 5. As Finnish Lutheran theologian Tuomo Mannermaa writes, "*Christ himself*, both his person and his work, is the Christian righteousness."

⁷ Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, *The Public Church For the Life of the World* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2004), 24. Cf., also Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, *Healing a Broken World: Globalization and God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002), 11.

⁸ Gustaf Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, trans. Carl Rasmussen (Evansville, IN: Ballast Press, 1999), 147.

⁹ Luther, "Freedom of Christian," in Lull, 619-620.

MORNING WORSHIP
Monday, February 9, 2009

Prelude

Welcome/announcements

Invocation

Gospel Matthew 13: 24-30

Hymn *“Blest Be the Tie that Binds”* ELW 656

Message *“Ethics in the Academic Disciplines”*
Laurie Jungling,
Ethicist, Dept. of Religion

Lord’s Prayer

Benediction

Postlude

CAMPUS MINISTRY ANNOUNCEMENTS

CAMP FAIR - Representative from many camps will be in the Siverson Lounge from **10 am to 4 pm on Tuesday, Feb. 10th**. They will be recruiting for summer positions. These are magnificent summer jobs---great learning and great fun! Augustana offers a scholarship for all students who work at ELCA camps. Contact financial aid for details.

MILLENIUM GOAL #4 - Reduce child mortality - In an effort to raise funds for a food program, Campus Ministry will be sponsoring a **bake sale on February 12th and 13th. 9:30 am - 2 pm, in the Commons**. Every dollar raised will be matched times nineteen by the United States Agency for International Development. (USAID) If you would like to assist with this project, please contact Kayla Rockwell - 605-359-3812, kerockwell07@ole.augie.edu

SEMINARY REPRESENTATIVES - Tuesday, February 17th

representatives from all eight ELCA seminaries will be at Augustana. At 10 AM you may hear the distinctive programs of study at each. Individual appointments for exploration and discernment are available throughout the day. **Contact Carol, 274-5403, to make appointments.**

CHAIR OF MORAL VALUES SERIES - "*Ethics in the Academic Disciplines*" series begins on Feb. 9th and continues on Mondays through Mar. 16th. The preachers will represent various departments on campus. There will be a panel discussion to wrap up this series on Mar. 19th.

CHAPEL SCHEDULE

Monday (9 th)	Chair of Moral Values worship, 10 am - Laurie Jungling, Reli
Tuesday (10 th)	Roman Catholic Mass, 10 am - Fr. Scott Traynor, USD Newman Ctr. <i>Camp Fair, 10 am - 4 pm - Siverson Lounge</i>
Wednesday (11 th)	Holy Communion, 10 am - Pr. Jeff Eisele, Spirit of Joy Luth.
Friday (13 th)	Halcyon Bjornstad, Sr. Spkr
Sunday (15 th)	Worship, 11 am - Pr. Paul