

Christology and Moral Theology

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MY LATE COLLEAGUE AND FRIEND RABBI MICHAEL SIGNER, the Abrams Chair of Jewish Thought at the University of Notre Dame, once invited me to address a group of Jewish rabbis and scholars as well as some Christian scholars and clergy whom he had brought to campus at Notre Dame. The subject, so dear to his heart, was Jewish-Christian dialogue. Rabbi Signer wanted me to talk about Jewish-Christian relations in Africa. I accepted Signer's invitation with utmost trepidation because up to that point I had never given thought to the possibility of a dialogue between Jews and Christians in Africa of all places. Growing up in Nigeria, I had of course seen or known of some Israeli engineers and agriculturists who had come to work on contract in the country, but I had not seen any synagogues or known of any conscious attempts at a dialogue between African religions—Christianity, Islam or traditional African religion. When I subsequently took a look at the topic assigned to me, I quickly realized that there was indeed some interaction going on between Judaism and African religions and that Christianity was at the center of this mediation. African Christians feel a certain affinity with Judaism given that Christianity was, of course, born within the Jewish milieu. Through the Scriptures, Christian worship, continued Christian evangelization in Africa, and even the great practice of Christian pilgrimage to the Holy Land (which is very popular among African Christians), Christianity in Africa has become not only a discussion partner with Judaism but also a mediator between Jewish thought and African religious practices. It was for this reason then that I accepted the invitation to address Rabbi Signer's group.

My presentation was followed by a lively discussion which lasted for about two hours and could have gone on much longer had not Rabbi Signer reminded everybody that it was already past our bedtime. At some point during the discussions, one of the rabbis pointedly remarked that the world would be a much better and more peaceful place if Christians would only stop proclaiming Jesus as Lord and Messiah. He quickly turned to me and asked me what I

thought of what he had just said. I replied by pointing out to the rabbi that he was simply telling me that the world would be a much better place if Christians were to commit suicide or cease to exist. A prominent Anglican Archbishop in attendance supported my view and pointed out that what the rabbi was asking Christians to do was impossible also because his request was founded on very erroneous premises about Jesus and about Christianity. For hidden in the rabbi's remarks were a number of presuppositions which needed to be unmasked. The first is the obvious one, which states that Jesus is neither Lord nor Messiah and therefore that Christians are peddling a pernicious falsehood by professing him to be so. The second is that Christian claims about the messianic status and lordship of Christ are a source of friction between peoples and therefore that Christians are the problem of the world and not part of its solution. One might add a third implication which is that Christian claims about Jesus of Nazareth are utterly immoral.

The opinion expressed by the Jewish rabbi at the Notre Dame meeting was nothing new or unique. As Edward Schillebeeckx points out, confessing Christ as Lord and Messiah in the early church was the cause for "a new and spirited controversy with the Jews and after that more especially with pagans." For the Jews, affirmation of the divinity of a human being amounted to "casting aspersion on Jewish monotheism."¹ The problem was, not only for those Jews who had not become Christians, but also for Jewish Christians who had been brought up in a strictly monotheistic faith. It was hard for all Jews then and now to reconcile Christian confession of Jesus as the Lord, Christ, and divine Son of God with the strict monotheism of their more ancient faith.

The pagans on the other hand, saw the divination of the man Jesus as "something that impugned God's inaccessible exaltedness" or sometimes as a curiosity.² For example, like many Roman officials of his day, Gaius Plinius Cacilinus Secundus, also known as Pliny the Younger, found Christians in a way insufferable, and in another, quaint. Pliny the Younger was imperial legate to Bithynia and Pontus (c. 110-113) when Trajan was emperor in Rome. The more Pliny tried to deal with the "Christian problem" the more it seemed to grow. Pliny felt compelled to investigate this group further in order to be in the position to give a more comprehensive report to his imperial masters in Rome. In a portion of his letter, Pliny pinpoints the central issue in the Christian religion. He had in the course of his

¹ Edward Schillebeeckx, O.P., *Jesus: An Experiment In Christology*, trans. Hubert Haskins (London: Collins, 1979), 559

² Schillebeeckx, *Jesus*, 560

investigation discovered, he said, that Christians gathered on a fixed day, before dawn and together recited a hymn...

*to Christ as to a god, alternating back and forth... and commit themselves by solemn rite, not to anything criminal, but to avoiding theft, robbery, and adultery, to not breaking their word, and to not refusing to deliver up a deposit when summoned to do so. After that, they said they would disband, and come together again to have a meal, but with ordinary and harmless food...*³

It is therefore obvious that the confession of Jesus as Lord by Christians in the early years of Christianity did not go unnoticed, but it was also, even among non-Jews, a serious curiosity. More importantly for our purposes here, it is also clear that non-Christian observers of the Christian community noted a connection between what Christians believed and how they lived. Christians have not only affirmed the Lordship of Christ liturgically, they have always sought to honor it ethically as well.

SCRIPTURAL ROOTS OF THE CHRISTOLOGICAL PROBLEM

Within Christianity itself, the search for the identity of Jesus of Nazareth has deep roots in the life and ministry of Jesus himself. For example, Mark the Evangelist reports that once as Jesus went on with his disciples to Caesarea Philippi, he asked them, “Who do people say that I am?” And they answered him, ‘John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.’ He asked them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’ Peter answered him, ‘You are the Messiah.’ And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him” (Mark 8:27-30). The second part of the question Jesus put to his disciples (“But who do you say that I am?”) has received as many answers as perhaps there have been Christians down through the centuries. This is the essence of the Christological question—that is, of the conscious effort at articulation, elucidation of, and reflection on the Christian experience of Jesus as God’s self-disclosure and of its implications for Christian faith. Jesus did not directly provide an answer to the question he posed to his disciples on the way to Caesarea Philippi.

In fact, the Gospels record only a few incidents where he deliberately disclosed his identity to his followers or to people around him. Instead, he let the actions and events of his life, including his death and resurrection, provide the clue as to his identity. The question of

³ C. Plini Caecilii Secundi, *Epistolarum Libri Decem*, ed. A. B. Mynors (Oxford: Clarendon, 1963). This translation is from Franz Josef Van Beeck, S.J., *God Encountered: A Contemporary Catholic Systematic Theology*, Vol. 1: *Understanding the Christian Faith*, 2nd ed. (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1994), 146.

the identity of Jesus, therefore, remains the first question at the beginning of any Christian confession or theology and an important one for Christian ethics. The question is: Who is Jesus Christ? Who is Jesus Christ for us today? More specifically for our purposes in this essay, the question is: What has Jesus got to do with ethics?, or to put it more specifically, what has the Christian confession of Jesus as Messiah and Lord got to do with moral discourse in the Christian community or in any setting for that matter?

Before we move on to other aspects of the topic of this essay, we must pause at this point to acknowledge a basic difficulty at the heart of our inquiry, namely that there is in fact not just one Christology among Christians; there are many. Christians believe that, in Jesus of Nazareth God, did a stupendous and unrepeatable thing—God became a human person in order to save the world. Christians confess Jesus as truly God and truly human, as “consubstantial with the Father;” that is, what is said of God is equally said of Jesus of Nazareth, that Jesus is the Christ, the human face of God, the one who came down from heaven “for our salvation.” Over the centuries, beginning from the New Testament times, Christians have articulated their experience of Jesus in various ways—hence I have spoken of various Christologies. The issue here is in some ways analogous to the Buddhist story of the elephant and the seven blind men who, on hearing of the presence of an elephant in their village, decided to go and “see” it for themselves. When they got to the elephant, they said to each other, “Even though we would not be able to see it, let us go and feel it anyway.” All of them went where the elephant was. Every one of them touched the elephant. Each touched a different part of the elephant and argued about what it was. However, a “wise man calmly explained to them, ‘All of you are right. The reason every one of you is telling it differently is because each one of you touched the different part of the elephant. So, actually the elephant has all those features what you all said.’”⁴

The point of this story is not that what one says of Jesus is simply a matter of perspectives or that all statements about Jesus are equally true and valid or even that every Christological statement is as equally weighty as the other. The point is rather that God’s self-disclosure in Jesus, this “stunning deed” of God, has left the Christian communities down the centuries searching for ways to articulate their experience of God’s self-disclosure in Jesus and for ways to understand the implications of how this affects their lives in this world and their

⁴ There are many versions of and many variations to this well-known story. The version that I am drawing from comes from a Jainism website, www.jainworld.com/education/stories25.asp.

appreciation of reality in general. The various Christologies we speak of are often emphases which provide entry or points of entry into the one mystery—the mystery of God’s incarnation and redemption of man through Christ.

Thus, although the question of the identity of Jesus remains a challenge for Christians, the church has continued to celebrate Jesus as Lord, Christ, and Savior. As Walter Kasper puts it, when we say that Jesus is the Christ, “we maintain that this unique irreplaceable Jesus of Nazareth is at one and the same time the Christ sent by God: that is, the Messiah anointed of the Spirit, the salvation of the world, and eschatological fulfillment of history.”⁵ Jesus of Nazareth is in many ways to the Christian still like the elephant; a reality so “big” that to totally comprehend it is quite a task beyond human imagination and creativity. Theology in general is the Christian community’s attempt at seeking understanding and comprehension of this reality in a creative way. Moral theology follows from this as the reasoned effort of the Christian community to understand the implications of the faith it has in Jesus for life in this world with regard to issues of right and wrong.

In this regard, moral theology is ethics; but it is ethics done from and in view of the community’s understanding of and response to Jesus, “the big elephant in the room.” Henry Davis, one of the foremost moral manualists of recent times “defines moral theology as that branch of theology which states and explains the laws of human conduct in reference to the supernatural destiny of the human person which is ‘the vision and fruition of God.’”⁶ Davis points to a number of elements which distinguish moral theology from other forms of ethical discourse. Among these are the fact of a “divine mandate;” that is, the fact that the moral claim or assertions on certain aspects of life and on what constitutes right and wrong come from or can come from divine revelation; that moral theology in the Catholic Church is part of an ecclesial tradition because it is one way the community of Christ tries to articulate its understanding of the implications of its faith in Jesus for moral action and sometimes to articulate alternative cultural patterns where necessary, or create an ethos of its own based on its understanding of reality. Moral theology presupposes a supernatural order in that human life and activity here on earth have implications for our eternal happiness in heaven.

⁵ Walter Kasper, *Jesus the Christ*, trans. V. Green (London: Burns and Oates, 1976), 15-16.

⁶ Henry Davis, *Moral and Pastoral Theology*, Vol. 1, 6th ed. (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1949), 2.

**LORD, TO WHOM SHALL WE GO?
YOU HAVE THE WORDS OF ETERNAL LIFE**

Some of the important insights which Henry Davis's position on the nature of moral theology articulates are also brought out in many passages in the Gospels. One notable example is the famous Bread of Life discourse which is found in John 6:25-71. In this story, the crowds who had been fed by Jesus on a previous occasion (John 6:1-15) return the next day looking for him on the other side of the lake. When they find him they say to him, "Rabbi, when did you come here?" Jesus answered them, "Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you" (John 6:25-7). When later in the chapter Jesus speaks of this food as "the bread of life which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world" (v.33), his audience says to him, "Sir, give us this bread always" (v.34). It was at this point that Jesus made the dramatic announcement: "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty" (v.35). The evangelist relates that "the Jews began to complain" about Jesus on account of what they had just heard him say (v.41) and "disputed among themselves saying, 'How can this man give us his flesh to eat?'" (v.52). Jesus continued to insist, however, that "unless you eat of the flesh of the Son of Man and drink of his blood, you have no life in you" (v.53). This teaching was so disconcerting to some of Jesus' hearers that many, including some of his own disciples, left him at that point. As the evangelist puts it, "Because of this, many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. So Jesus asked the Twelve, 'Do you also wish to go away?' Simon Peter answered him, 'Lord, to whom we can go? *You have the words of eternal life.* We have come to believe and know that you are the holy one of God'" (John 6:66-9, *emphasis added*).

Peter's declaration of Jesus as one who has the words of eternal life constitutes a creedal statement, and in this sense, it also constitutes the dividing line between the Christian moral vision and any other. Although this encounter stems from a more or less doctrinal setting and issue, it has implications for all other aspects of the Christian life in that it clearly indicates the Christian attitude toward Christ as teacher and as guide. Even more importantly, it shows that whatever Jesus does or teaches has implications for the eternal well-being of the believer. This is where any discussion on Christology and moral theology must start. St Thomas Aquinas and indeed the best of the Catholic moral tradition insist on Christian morality as teleological in the sense that it provides the Christian a direction, not

only for the way to organize life here on earth, but also on how to act now in view of our eternal destiny which is eternal union with God.⁷

RECENT CATHOLIC MORAL THEOLOGY

Moral Theology in recent Catholic tradition has gone through several phases which are pertinent to the discussion, in this essay, concerning the relationship between the affirmation of Christ as Lord and the Christian moral life.

One phase can be said to have started with Joseph Mangan's 1949 article on the principle of double effect in which he attributed the origin of that principle to St Thomas Aquinas.⁸ It was, however, the well-known article by Peter Knauer in 1965 which fuelled the extensive discussion that continues in various forms today on the nature, meaning, and scope of moral norms.⁹ An offshoot of the debate on moral norms is the claim by some theologians that there was nothing distinctly Christian about moral norms and therefore no link between the Christian's innerworldly behavior and his or her eternal salvation.¹⁰

This position was wrongheaded for a number of reasons. In the first place, it missed an obvious point which was that Christians have always claimed a particular source for their understating of how they ought to live. That source is Jesus Christ. "For the Christian, God's will is revealed in Jesus Christ, who is the measure of the quality of life. For the Christian, to be good is to be faithful and obedient to the will of God revealed in Christ. This is the basis of all Christian reflection about what is to be done in any situation."¹¹ The second obvious point was that in line with Christ's teaching, Christians have always believed that the quality of our moral lives here on earth is closely connected to our eternal destiny. Even though salvation is God's utterly gratuitous gift, it is given not in spite of how we have conducted ourselves here on earth.

As Jesus puts it, the cup of water we give or refuse to give here on earth, or the refusal to treat others well or to do the right thing to-

⁷ See Paulinus Ikechukwu Odozor, C.S.Sp., *Moral Theology in an Age of Renewal: A Study of the Catholic Tradition Since Vatican II* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 2003), 271-303.

⁸ Joseph Mangan, S. J., "An Historical Analysis of the Principle of Double Effect," *Theological Studies* 10 (1949): 41-61.

⁹ Peter Knauer, "The Hermeneutic Function of the Principle of Double Effect," in *Readings in Moral Theology No.1: Moral Norms and Catholic Tradition*, ed. Charles E. Curran and Richard A. McCormick (Mahwah: Paulist, 1979), 1-39.

¹⁰ There is a lot of material on this issue in the literature. I have no intention of revisiting the matter here. For an extensive discussion of this debate see my *Moral Theology in An Age of Renewal*, 101-34.

¹¹ Earl H. Brill, *The Christian Moral Vision* (New York: Seabury, 1979), 8.

wards them here on earth, for example, can be the difference between being invited to inherit the kingdom or being asked out of it by God.¹² For Augustine of Hippo, as for many of the Fathers of the Church, the relationship between human beings and God is marked by reciprocity and gratuitousness. In this regard, as Gary Anderson points out, St. Augustine urges his listeners to “study the money-lender’s methods. He wants to give modestly and get back with profit; you do the same. Give a little and receive on a grand scale. Look how your interest is mounting up! Give temporal wealth and claim eternal increase; give the earth and gain heaven!”¹³ Thus, when Christ refers to himself as the way, the truth and the life he is simply saying that he is the one who is our eternal repose, the one who shows us how to get there and the one who provides guidance on how to get there.

A second phase in recent Catholic theology involves the turn to virtue ethics. James Keenan, one of the leading lights of this whole movement, explains the return to virtue in this way:

Renewed interest in virtue ethics arises from dissatisfaction with the way we do ethics today. Most discussions about ethics today consider major controversial action: abortion, gay marriages, nuclear war, gene therapy, and so forth. These discussions basically dominate contemporary ethics. [Ethicists tend to] belong to a variety of different schools of thought that measure whether a controversial human action is right or wrong.

Virtue ethicists are different. We are not primarily interested in particular actions. We do not ask “is this action right?” “What are the circumstances around an action?” or “What are the consequences of an action?” We are simply interested in persons.

We believe that the real discussion of ethics is not the question “What should I do?” but “who should I become?”¹⁴

It is clear therefore, that virtue ethicists are trying to wean the discipline of moral theology away from excessive concern with norms and normativity which characterized the earlier phase of recent Catholic moral theology described above.

The argument is that a virtuous character would always be inclined to do what is right in every situation because he or she would find choosing the right thing less of a burden than a less vicious person would. It must be emphasized, however, that there is no way we can completely dispense with ethical analyses or with attention to

¹² See, for example, Matt 25:31-46.

¹³ See Gary Anderson, *Sin: A History* (New Haven: Yale University, 2009), 187.

¹⁴ James F. Keenan, “Virtue Ethics,” in *Christian Ethics: An Introduction*, ed. Bernard Hoose (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1998), 84.

moral action and moral norms, as the work of Jean Porter, a great exponent of virtue ethics, has shown.¹⁵ In the end, everyone (that includes anyone who cares about doing the right thing) would want to know about the morality of abortion, gay marriage, nuclear war, gene therapy, etc. and on what warrants to base ethical decisions on these and many other moral challenges which face us all today. In making these decisions, a community or an individual must rely on certain foundational assumptions for moral statements and positions. In other words, the meaning of the virtues and their desirability are also to a large extent determined by the context in which they are elucidated and practiced. This is to say that even a virtuous person must weigh particular acts, deliberate over and ponder particular issues, and judge the gravity of certain actions and situations. Above all, the virtuous Christian, properly so-called, must also listen to the voice of Jesus as Son of God Incarnate in making his or her choices.

WHAT MORAL ACTION DOES FAITH IN JESUS AUTHORIZE?

One important issue concerning the relationship between the Christian confession of Jesus as Lord and as the Way is that of determining exactly what this confession authorizes as a moral stance for Christians.

It is sometimes suggested that Jesus has nothing to add to morality or to the way society is governed except as a teacher of love—a type of love which makes no stringent demand on the individual and society. In an article in *Newsweek* which is found also in the online edition of the *Daily Beast*, Andrew Sullivan invites Christians to act like Thomas Jefferson who sought to reshape the New Testament by “painstakingly removing those passages he thought did not reflect the actual teachings of Jesus of Nazareth,” and pasting what remained into “a slimmer, different New Testament,” leaving “the remnants” behind.¹⁶ Jefferson’s intention was to reduce the Bible only to the various words of Jesus by expunging all other aspects of the Bible—to remove “misconceptions” of Jesus which people had been fed down the centuries from the New Testament times. According to Jefferson, the first followers of Jesus were “expressing unintelligibly for others what they had not understood themselves.” Sullivan argues that if Jefferson’s greatest political legacy was the declaration of independence, “this pure, precious moral teaching was his religious legacy.”

¹⁵ See Jean Porter, *Nature and Reason: A Thomistic Theory of the Natural Law* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 288-308.

¹⁶ Andrew Sullivan, “Christianity in Crisis,” *The Daily Beast*, <http://www.thedaily-beast.com/newsweek/2012/04/01/andrew-sullivan-christianity-in-crisis.html>.

The essence of this moral/religious legacy was Jefferson's "discovery," with which Sullivan agrees, that the moral teaching of Jesus "consisted in his teaching on the love of one's enemy and forgiveness of those who seek to do us harm; in giving up all material wealth; and in loving the ineffable Being behind all things." True Christianity gives up all violence in imitation of Jesus who in "his final apolitical act... never defended his innocence at trial, never resisted his crucifixion, and even turned to those nailing his hands to the wood on the cross and forgave them, and loved them."¹⁷ Christians should return to what this Jeffersonian Jesus asked them to do for it matters little how strictly people profess their faith in various doctrines about Jesus. It is more difficult to live as these doctrines demand.

According to Sullivan the leadership of the Catholic Church has lost much of its authority over the American flock "with the unilateral prohibition of the pill" by Pope Paul VI in 1968. What little authority the hierarchy had left has now "evaporated" because bishops have been found to be "enabling, and then covering up an international conspiracy to abuse countless youth and children." Sullivan insists that the honorable thing to do for the leadership of the Catholic Church is "to face their responsibility and resign." Rather than do this, they continue "to obsess about others' sex lives, about who is entitled to civil marriage, and about who pays for birth control in health insurance. Inequality, poverty, even the cultural climate institutionalized by the government after 9/11: these issues attract far less of their public attention."¹⁸ According to Sullivan,

Jesus never spoke of homosexuality or abortion, and his own remarks on marriage were a condemnation of divorce (now commonplace among American Christians) and forgiveness for adultery. The family? He disowned his parents in public as a teen, and told his followers to abandon theirs if they wanted to follow him. Sex? He was a celibate who along with his followers anticipated an immanent end of the world where reproduction was completely irrelevant.¹⁹

Therefore, for Sullivan, Christianity is in crisis today partly because it has gone astray from Jesus and what he taught. If Christianity is to come out of the deep malaise to which it has sunk, it must cease to concern itself "with the sex lives and heretical thoughts of others." It must expunge and edit out of the Bible, as it were, all its teaching and interest on abortion, homosexuality, and the family. Its members must live simply and "purely" like St. Francis of Assisi and other

¹⁷ Sullivan, "Christianity in Crisis," 2.

¹⁸ Sullivan, "Christianity in Crisis," 3.

¹⁹ Sullivan, "Christianity in Crisis," 3.

saints who became saints “not because of their success in fighting political battles, or winning a few news cycles, or funding an anti-abortion super-PAC,” but “because of the way they lived.” The guiding light here must be Jefferson who in his “deeply American insight” stated that “the life and essence of religion consists in the internal persuasion or belief of the mind.”²⁰

In an earlier interview on CNN in April 2012, Sullivan was asked to comment on the views expressed by Mitt Romney, the Republican presidential candidate, on the separation of church and state as it is understood by some people today in America. Romney had stated that “in recent years, the notion of the separation of church and state has been taken by some beyond its original meaning.” Some understand this to mean the removal from the public domain of any acknowledgment of God. “Religion is seen as merely a private affair with no place in public life. It is as if they are intent on establishing a new religion in America—the religion of secularism. They are wrong.”²¹ In his response to Romney, Sullivan begins by insisting that secularism is not a religion. It only means, he holds, that “when we are in a political space we translate our moral and religious convictions into arguments that could be accepted or disagreed with by people of other faiths or no faith at all.”

Sullivan then proceeds to provide the grounds on which religious people (meaning Christians) can be admitted to the conversation in the public square: “Religious people can still be in the public square in the way Jesus was—not by trying to be politicians but by bearing witness to what Jesus wanted us to be; by the church feeding the poor and homeless; by the people giving up their lives in service to others; by spiritual reflection.” This, for Sullivan, is the essence of Christian faith, the way we should live our faith as Christians. To act to the contrary is to venture into politics. For example, the church ventures into politics “when it gets down to minor issues like healthcare laws” and same-sex marriage and abortion. These are not consonant with the teachings of Jesus about love.

I have taken time to report extensively on the views of Andrew Sullivan for various reasons—because of what his claims say about his Christology and ecclesiology and by extension of his moral theology and because his views go to the heart of many of the misunderstandings between and among various segments of the Catholic population today. Sullivan is a Catholic layperson and a generalist whose views on issues of faith and culture are sought after by his colleagues

²⁰ Sullivan, “Christianity in Crisis,” 3.

²¹ Mitt Romney, “Faith In America,” (George Bush Presidential Library: December 6, 2007), <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=16969460>.

in the media. He writes extensively in *Newsweek* and is a frequent commentator on CNN. Therefore his views must be taken seriously; he is often introduced as a knowledgeable Catholic voice and seen by many as the one voice of reason who makes clear what the issues are with regard to the faith and how it should be lived today. Sullivan's Jesus or rather the Jeffersonian Jesus he espouses is a very ideologically "usable" Jesus. This Jesus is usable because he conforms to Sullivan's own view of religion: This Jesus is only allowed to speak or play a role in public or private life to the extent that he is allowed to by people like Sullivan—that is, when his views are in conformity with the views of Sullivan and Jefferson and the schools of thought and moral vision they represent.

What a Christian believes about Jesus has enormous implications for what he or she holds about moral right or wrong conduct. Sullivan is important here for us also because he is a good example of an attempt to restrict the canonical force of Scripture. This kind of restriction is the hallmark of many self-appointed "Christian commentators" today. One of the ways these commentators seek to constrict the canonical force of Scripture is to deny that it has much relevance given the realities of our time. Accordingly, another "Christian commentator," Wumi Akintide holds this view:

Many of us take whatever we read in the Bible as the gospel truth but there are a few contradictions in the Bible that many fanatics will never admit. I can understand the contradictions because the Bible is a compilation of the views of so many authors and writers who are human beings just like the rest of us and are therefore subject to human errors and contradictory positions. Their thoughts may be inspired by the Holy Spirit, I don't deny that, but they are still human and some of those authors and writers wrote their stuff after senility or dementia may have set in. Readers have to factor that into what they say or write. Yes, there are verses in the Bible that say that marriage should be between man and woman. *That was then. This is now. The definition of marriage as stated in the Dictionary can be easily revised to incorporate today's reality*" (emphases added).²²

In other words, for the school of thought represented here by Wumi Akintide, Scripture, even if it once had any significance, has little relevance and speaks with little significant authority in matters of faith and morals for our day. It is, at best, a loose guide about certain things and directions. The Bible is archaic, and its view of the human reality and situation can no longer be trusted.

²² Wumi Akintide, "Same-Sex Marriage," <http://nigeriaworld.com/feature/publication/akintide/051412.html>.

One of the most serious attempts to restrict the authority of Scripture in recent times has come from some feminist authors like Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. Like Jefferson, Fiorenza has advocated the slimming down of the Bible only to those aspects or sections that can support a particular feminist understanding and appreciation of reality. Whereas in the Jeffersonian/Sullivan case the criterion for slimming down the Bible would be whether a particular section is considered to be “apolitical” or not, meaning whether it says something against or about sex, abortion, homosexuality, etc., in the case of scholars like Fiorenza, the criterion would be whether a passage promotes or restricts women’s interests and welfare. Both approaches further expose some of the challenges in the relationship between Christology and moral theology, that is, between what Christians affirm of Jesus as Lord and the Bible as word of God and orthopraxis—the acceptable moral conduct which follows from this affirmation.

JESUS AND MORAL THEOLOGY

Jesus is important for moral theology not just because he reveals the mind of God to human beings or because he also has never-heard-before insights into the moral life. He is relevant to moral theology especially because as the old adage stays “Jesus saves.” He is a teacher unlike other teachers. Unlike the static sign which stands on the way and points to the next destination, he leads the wayfarer to that ultimate destination through his life and death. As the sacrament of God, Jesus not only witnesses to the presence of God in the world, he brings it about and leads people to God through his teaching, life, death and resurrection. Christology and soteriology are one. By his death and resurrection Jesus effects or brings about what he teaches. Thus his teaching is for the Christian not just another set of wise insights. Rather his teaching constitutes the way the truth and the life and therefore commands total assent from the believer.

Because, for the believer, Jesus is the way, the first line of action, indeed the dividing line between ethics done from a Christian theological perspective and other perspectives, is faith. Christian faith implies surrender to the person of Christ and a willingness to allow Christ to lead one to the ultimate destiny of humankind—God himself. The debate on the distinctiveness of Christian ethics—carried on as a quest for the discovery of moral norms which had unique Christian origins and applicability always and discernible in only Christian circumstances—missed the point. The point is that even when Jesus and by extension his community of faith (acting under warrants provided by Jesus himself) pronounced moral norms as true and right he was offering a very important criterion for both life in this world and

for salvation and life with God. He was not just repeating what everyone else had thought or said before him. Instead, he was giving the wisdom of the ages (specifically in the Jewish tradition) his stamp of approval or modifying it to suit his mission and intention.

Faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior “tells us who we ought to be, what values we ought to pursue, and what disvalues we should avoid, and the type of world we ought to seek. In short, it provides the framework that ought to shape the individual decisions which the Christian makes.”²³ When these decisions are separated from the context of the Christian story, they lose their perspective. They become “a merely rationalistic and sterile ethic subject to the distortions of self-interested perspectives and cultural drifts, a kind of contracted etiquette with no relation to the ultimate meaning of persons.”²⁴ As Richard McCormick would put it, insights from Christian faith are “confirmatory.” But unlike McCormick, I would add that they are also “originating.” These insights are confirmatory in so far as they provide the Christian with “a privileged articulation or objectification in Christ of what everyone else does or can experience,”²⁵ and they stand in judgment over “all human meaning and actions.”²⁶ But these insights are not just confirmatory, they are also originating in that they do, indeed, disclose to us new insights about the human person redeemed in Christ and called to new and challenging but exciting possibilities about what it means to be human.

CHRISTOLOGY, LOVE, AND MORAL THEOLOGY

Mark reports an incident where a scribe came to Jesus and asked him, “Which commandment is the first of all?” Jesus answered, “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one: you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these” (Mark 12:28-31). Love is at the heart of Christian ethics. Scholars note that the summary of the law in the double commandment of love is probably peculiar to the message of Jesus even though the groundwork for such a summary may have been laid in Hellenistic Judaism.²⁷ Wolfgang Schrage argues that

²³ Paulinus I. Odozor, C.S.Sp., *Richard A. McCormick and the Renewal of Moral Theology* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1995), 34.

²⁴ Richard A. McCormick, “Theology and Biomedical Ethics,” *Église et Théologie* 13 (1982): 311-31, at 318.

²⁵ Odozor, *Richard A. McCormick*, 34.

²⁶ McCormick, “Theology and Biomedical Ethics,” 31.

²⁷ Wolfgang Schrage, *The Ethics of the New Testament*, trans. D. Green (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 70.

the law of love as stated in the passage from Mark 12 indicates that love of God and neighbor "is no longer just one in a series of requirements demanded by the Torah; it is greater than the others (v.31) and the first of all (v.29). The law of love is therefore something like 'a canon within the canon,' a hermeneutical principle and ethical canon by which the Torah can be judged."²⁸

In his life, teaching and actions, Jesus provides several examples of what the law of love of neighbor can look like. Love for Jesus embraces all "enemies" and those who persecute and abuse you (Luke 6:27-8). Jesus' law of love is unnatural in its demand and contrary to the demands of human nature. He would not even allow his disciples to call down fire on an inhospitable Samaritan village (Luke 9:51ff). Schrage points to the centrality, for Jesus, of the love of enemies.

[L]ove is not a matter of partiality... nor a consideration of what will be most advantageous... or the principle of *do ut des* ("I give so that you might give") as practiced by even the tax collectors and Gentiles (Matt 5:46-47). Love that seeks to receive love on the basis of mutuality—such love is not yet *agape* for Jesus. *Agape* loves without counting the cost or the reward, without worrying what kind kept in reserve and without limitation any particular group.²⁹

Thus it is not enough to say that the center of Jesus' ethics is simply the love of one's neighbor. People normally love those who are like them. Furthermore, "the more unconditionally, boundlessly, unreservedly, and uncritically we love our neighbor, our class, our nation, the easier it is to justify hating and killing their enemies."³⁰ On the contrary, Jesus' commandment of love ensures love that is more than managed social solidarity or sectarian and limited to those who are "insiders." For after all, Jesus himself was seen by many as "a friend of sinners and tax collectors" (Matt 11:19).

The teaching of Jesus on love must not be seen as offering a blanket approval to the sinner as sinner. Quite to the contrary, it often makes stringent demands on the sinner. To the woman caught in adultery, Jesus shows understanding and accommodating love, but in the end, he sends her away with the words, "I do not condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again" (John 8:11). In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus not only insists on the continued validity of the Ten Commandments, but often also adds even more stringent demands of his own (e.g., Matt 5:21-23, 27-28, 31-32, 43-47). Faced with the question of divorce and remarriage, Jesus decidedly

²⁸ Schrage, *The Ethics of the New Testament*, 71.

²⁹ Schrage, *The Ethics of the New Testament*, 77-8.

³⁰ Schrage, *The Ethics of the New Testament*, 78.

goes beyond the Mosaic Law and indeed to all practical purposes abolishes that law and restores the law to its original formulation which implies in his own words that in marriage “a man must leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife.” The two become one flesh, and he gives the absolute prohibition, “what God has joined together let no one divide.” Mark reports that the disciples were so shocked at this teaching that when they were back in the house they decided to reopen the question with Jesus. Rather than soften his stance Jesus piles on to it by insisting that anyone who divorces his or her spouse and marries another, commits adultery.³¹

CHALLENGES

The most important challenge which moral theology faces today is that of articulating a Christian theology and especially a Christian moral theology on any issue. This is so for a number of reasons. The first is that sometimes Scripture presents a number of views on the same issue. Take, for instance, the teaching regarding retaliation. Whereas Jesus forbids retaliation and abhors any kind of violence, there are passages and incidents in the Old Testament which seem to suggest that God sanctions or even orders violence sometimes. The same is true of other issues like divorce and remarriage, attitudes to wealth, etc. What is the Christian believer to take as final word on these issues? The simple answer is “look to Jesus.” This is neither a Marcionite approach to scriptural authority nor a flight from these “inconsistencies.” On the contrary, it is to acknowledge a number of facts.

The first of these facts is that the scriptural position on a number of issues took time to develop. In Scripture, it is God who speaks. Human beings, as receptors of God’s speech, understand it at their own pace and within their own contexts. There is for this reason a progression of human appreciation of divine intention. A classic example is the teaching on divorce and remarriage which took time to be understood. Whereas in Deuteronomy 24 Moses is understood to allow divorce and remarriage, Mark 10:2-12 indicates that Jesus offers a correction to this rule by insisting on the permanence of marriage. The same attitude is evident in the Sermon on the Mount on a number of issues, including retaliation, sexual morality, and the like. For the Christian then, the understanding of the scriptural teaching on anything must not only follow from a thorough hermeneutical reading and understanding of a particular biblical text or

³¹ See Mark 10:2-12.

issue over time, but also “give attention to the sense a passage has in a book taken as a whole” and in the Bible taken as whole.³²

The second fact a Christian must bear in mind when dealing with the supposed inconsistencies in the Bible is that Jesus as the way, the truth and the life, has the last word on the meaning of Scripture. This assertion requires an analysis of a broader problem concerning the way authority, any authority, is viewed today. “One of the effects of globalization is the marginalization of traditional authority in all its forms” including the scriptural.³³ On the contrary, as Pope John Paul II stated in *Veritatis Splendor*, some currents of thought “exalt freedom to such an extent that it becomes an absolute, which would then be the source of values.... The individual conscience is accorded the status of a supreme tribunal of moral judgment which hands down categorical and infallible decisions about good and evil.”³⁴ The problem of authority in morality has a peculiarly religious angle.

The issue in this regard is how to understand the authority of Jesus who asserts in passages such as Matthew 28:16-20 that all authority in heaven and on earth had been given to him, or who describes himself as the way, the truth, and the life in “a society as complex as our own.”³⁵ Put even more specifically the issue is how to present a Christian position in the modern public square where several other presumably persuasive ideas are also on offer with regard to the same issue. One can easily understand that this is the question with which Catholic commentators like Andrew Sullivan are concerned. For Avery Dulles, the central question here, apropos of the discussion on the authority of Christ and that of culture in modern society, is “whether the church... should become more countercultural, as the traditionalists and radicals would wish, or more accommodationist, as the liberals and some neoconservatives propose.”³⁶

My view is that the approach which Andrew Sullivan advocates is not the way to take. For, if Christianity is in crisis as Andrew Sullivan suggests, it is partly because a large portion of the Christian church has done precisely what Sullivan wants to do—“slimmed-down” Jesus to a point where what remains are only “misconceptions” of him.

³² Raymond E. Brown, S.S., *The Critical Meaning of the Bible* (New York: Paulist, 1981), 30.

³³ Paulinus I. Odozor, C.S.Sp., “Classical Catholic Theology and the World Church: Some Suggestions on How to Move Forward,” *Louvain Studies* 30/4 (2005), 287.

³⁴ John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor* (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993), no. 32.

³⁵ Leo J. O’Donovan, S.J., “Christ, Culture, and the Foundations of Authority,” in *Riding Time Like A River: The Catholic Moral Tradition Since Vatican II*, ed. William J. O’Brien (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University, 1993), 3.

³⁶ Avery Dulles, S.J., “Catholicism and American Culture: The Uneasy Dialogue,” *America* 162, no. 3 (January 27, 1990), 59. Quoted in Leo J O’Donovan, “Christ, Culture, and the Foundations of Authority,” 10.

The Jesus that is left in the Sullivan/Jeffersonian scheme is no more than a champion of or a cheerleader for all post-enlightenment positions on sex and sexuality—all in the name of “love,” “justice,” “mutuality,” and many other such jargons. This dumbed down Jesus can be a force for social change no more; nor does he possess the power to lead people beyond their whims and caprices and is only invoked for an affirmation of norms and positions already arrived at on other grounds.

The answer to the question which Dulles poses is this: Christians do not engage in counter-culturalism just for the sake of doing so. In fact such a stance would be contrary to Catholic teaching which believes that cultures are the loci through which human beings can come in contact with the divine. As expressions of the human spirit, cultures harbor a lot that is good even though they can by the same token contain a lot of sin and distortions which also characterize their human creators. Thus, there are times to embrace and celebrate culture, and there are times when the appropriate response for the Christian would be to be counter-cultural such as when the Christian is clearly faced with a choice between Christ and a particular cultural trend or attitude. If and when pressed for such a declaration of loyalty the Christian must instinctively opt for Jesus, his gospel, and church.

WHAT MUST WE DO?

Christology and moral theology need the mediation of ecclesiology. As Edward Schillebeeckx points out repeatedly, it is the church which has kept the memory of Jesus alive all these centuries. In other words the image of Jesus is a mediated one—mediated by the community which addresses him as Lord and God. As Walter Kasper insists, “we should not remove the Jesus tradition from the context of proclamation, liturgy and parish practice of the Christian churches,” for the testimony of the New Testament as living witness can be understood “only where the message of Jesus is alive and believed, where that same Spirit is alive who enlivens the writings of the New Testament”³⁷—the same Spirit who has spoken through the prophets. It is true that individual Christians have always not lived up to the faith of Jesus they profess. It is even more true that at certain points and on certain issues over many centuries the church itself has sometimes appeared to be more an obstacle to faith than a shining witness to the teaching of Jesus. Still the best mediation of the teaching of Jesus on anything is not done from the insights of any particular per-

³⁷ Kasper, *Jesus the Christ*, 27.

son including the most brilliant theologians and thinkers among us acting solo or going rogue.

The best mediation of the teaching of Jesus is done through the collective wisdom of the community called church. This wisdom has a deposit to which subsequent ages add. But, as St. Paul cautions any addition to this deposit must respect the foundations already established—Jesus Christ as Lord and Master to whom we all go because we believe him to have the words of eternal life and because we believe him to be the way the truth and the life. When I speak of church here I do not mean the “abstract idealized church” we sometimes think should exist. I mean instead, as John Cavadini, puts it, “the concrete visible communion of ‘hierarchic and charismatic gifts,’ at once holy and always in need of purification, in which each bishop represents his own diocese and all (of the bishops) together with the Pope represent the whole Church.”³⁸ An ecclesial mediation of the relationship between Christology and Catholic moral theology, involves “a collective reading” of Scripture as guide “within” the Church by all segments of the Church and with the Church’s magisterium as final arbiters of the meaning and teaching of Scripture, considering their role as “authentic” teachers of faith, that is as teachers imbued with the authority of Christ (*Lumen gentium*, no. 25).

Therefore, in a discussion on Christology and morality the first element is faith, as already indicated earlier—faith in Jesus Christ as the word of God, faith in Jesus Christ as the light for my steps and light for my eyes. As Pope John Paul II puts it “each day the Church looks to Christ with unfailing love, fully aware that the true and final answer to the problem of morality lies in him alone. In a particular way, it is in the crucified Christ that the Church finds the answer to the question troubling so many people today.”³⁹ In the words of Walter Kasper,

Christology can approach and tackle the legitimate concerns of the modern era and resolve its problem. That, to be sure, is possible only on the basis of a decision: the basic decision between belief and unbelief. Liberating reconciliation, as it occurs in and through Jesus Christ, is primarily a divine gift and only secondarily a human task. Here precisely is the borderline between Christian theology and ideologies or utopias.... The decisive option is the sword or faith (Albert Camus), promise or achievement.⁴⁰

³⁸ John C. Cavadini, “Open Letter to the University Community”, *The Observer* (April 19, 2006, updated September 12, 2012), <http://www.ndsmcobserver.com/2.2756/open-letter-to-the-university-community-1.265347>.

³⁹ John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, no. 85.

⁴⁰ Walter Kasper, *Jesus, the Christ*, 16-17.

The Christian option for faith is a Christological statement about both the universal relevance and significance of the redemptive work of Jesus and its persuasiveness to human reason. As Richard McCormick put it:

The Catholic tradition reasons about its story. In the process it hopes to and claims to disclose surprising and delightful insights about the human condition as such. These insights are not, therefore, eccentric infractions limited in application to a particular historical community. For instance, the sacredness of nascent life is not an insight that applies only to Catholic babies—as if it were wrong to abort Catholic babies, but perfectly all right to do so with Muslim, Protestant, or Jewish babies. Quite the contrary. Reasoning about the Christian story makes a bolder claim.⁴¹

In other words, insistence on the importance of faith in the relationship between moral theology and Christology is not an invitation to flee from reason. As Pope Benedict XVI puts it in his address to the British Society at Westminster Hall in London, “the Catholic Tradition maintains that the objective norms governing right action are accessible to reason, prescinding from the content of revelation. According to this understanding, the role of religion in political debate is not so much to supply these norms, as if they could not be known by non-believers... but rather to help purify and shed light upon the application of reason to objective moral principles.”⁴²

The role of reason and faith in the search for moral truths can be symbiotic. Reason can save religion from fundamentalism and sectarianism which create serious problem for religion and makes it difficult for non-believers to accept truly religious insights. Thus, in Benedict’s words, religion needs the “the purifying and structuring role of reason” to save it from distortions. On the other hand, reason can easily fall prey to distortions and ideological manipulations or to being applied in a partial way “that fails to take full account of the dignity of the human person” without “the corrective supplied by religion.” It is, as the pope puts it, “a two-way process.” Therefore, as Pope Benedict XVI argues in his address, people should stop treating religion as if it were a problem. “Religion... is not a problem for legislators to solve, but a vital contributor to the national conversation.”

⁴¹ McCormick, *The Critical Calling: Reflections on Moral Dilemmas Since Vatican II* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown, 1989), 204.

⁴² Benedict XVI, “Meeting with Representatives of British Society, Including the Diplomatic Corps, Politicians, Academics, and Business Leaders” (Westminster: September 10, 2010), http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/-2010/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20100917_societa-civile_en.html.

In that same speech, Pope Benedict expresses concern “at the increasing marginalization of religion, particularly of Christianity, that is taking place in some quarters, even in nations which place a great emphasis on tolerance.” He notes:

There are those who would advocate that the voice of religion be silenced, or at least relegated to the purely private sphere.... And there are those who argue—paradoxically with the intention of eliminating discrimination—that Christians in public roles should be required at times to act against their conscience. These are worrying signs of a failure to appreciate not only the rights of believers to freedom of conscience and freedom of religion, but also the legitimate role of religion in the public square.⁴³

Finally, the pope invites his audience, in their various capacities and spheres of influence, “to seek ways of promoting and encouraging dialogue between faith and reason at every level of national life.”⁴⁴

It must be acknowledged that the myth of “pure” reason is purely that—a myth. Reason, including moral reason is always influenced by some form of presuppositions. As the Congolese theologian Bénézet Bujo puts it, we all speak from some form of cultural cave or the other. The enduring challenge is how to come to a minimum agreement about certain realities and basic assumptions about life and how to live together. The solution is not to ask a certain set of voices to abdicate the public square or to give up the right all together to have their voices heard in favor of the other voices even if those are in the majority.

The route from Christology to “christopraxis” has often in Christian history passed through Calvary—the way of the cross. As Tertullian put it long ago, “the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church” [*sanguinis martyrum, semen christianorum*].⁴⁵ Many of these martyrs gave their lives on dogmatic grounds; others suffered persecution and even death for refusing to yield to the demand to do moral evil. The link between Christian confession of Jesus as Lord and Savior and morality is that moral life gives credence to faith. As St. James puts it, “Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith” (Jas 2:18). Pope John Paul also asserts that “through the moral life, faith becomes ‘confession,’ not

⁴³ Benedict XVI, “Meeting with Representatives of British Society.”

⁴⁴ Benedict XVI, “Meeting with Representatives of British Society.”

⁴⁵ Tertullian, *Apology and De spectaculis*, trans. T.R. Glover; Minucius Felix, *Octavius*, trans. H. Rendall, Loeb Classical Library no. 250 (London : W. Heinemann Ltd., 1984), 50.

only before God but also before men: it becomes witness”—a witness that can sometimes be very costly.⁴⁶

A friend of mine has a big bold sign posted on her refrigerator to try to deter her teenage sons from too many trips there. It reads: “Caution! The contents of this fridge might be injurious to your health!” I honestly do not know how much of deterrence that sign provides to these young men who, like most young people at that age, tend to eat like condemned men. Sometimes I think we need to have a similar kind of label posted on every believer’s door to remind each of us, not about the dangers of over-indulgence with food, but of the reality that belief in Jesus as Lord can and often does come at a price. From the very beginning of the church Christians have had to pay a price for being different. The reason is not just that they confessed Jesus as Lord and Savior (although that is a major one) but that this faith comes with a desire to change society by sometimes going against the grain, so to speak, and upsetting the social order. A moral theology which is conscious of its Christological mooring can never lose sight of this fact. **M**

⁴⁶ John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, no. 89.

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