

EDITORIAL NOTE VOX EVANGELICA 1962–1997

This year sees the final edition of *Vox Evangelica*. The first was published in 1962, when both the scholarly and evangelical worlds were very different from today. The journal, first published by Epworth Press, was conceived by members of the faculty of London Bible College as a way of injecting an evangelical voice into an academic conversation from which they had been largely excluded up until then. It was a vehicle for stating a distinctively evangelical position on topics of common academic concern, and for raising issues of significance to evangelicals that would not have found expression elsewhere.

From 1971, *Vox Evangelica* has published the annual Laing Lecture. The first of these was given by Professor F.F. Bruce on 'Some Thoughts on Paul and Paulinism'. Since then, many distinguished scholars have delivered the lecture, which has subsequently been published in the journal. Early lecturers included H.D. McDonald, Donald Wiseman, Alan Millard and R.T. France. More recently they have included Gordon Wenham, David Wright, N.T. Wright, I. Howard Marshall, Alan Kreider and David Cook. The most recent Laing Lecture, by Stanley Grenz, is included in the current volume.

I wish to express my thanks to those who have edited the journal over the years. Ralph P. Martin was its first distinguished editor. He was followed by the late Donald Guthrie, and then by Harold H. Rowdon. Most recently the editor has been Antony Billington, who undertook the task at a time when information technology was changing the way such publications were produced. He has not only solicited or received material and edited it, but prepared it in its final form ready for printing. The College also wishes to express its special thanks to Paternoster Press, who took over the publication and distribution of *Vox Evangelica* in 1983.

Academic journals have proliferated since 1962. Evangelical scholarship now has many journals to represent it, and has taken its place alongside others in a way which was not possible then. It is chiefly for these reasons that it has been decided to discontinue the publication of *Vox Evangelica*. Changes in communication techniques are also upon us, and the demise of the journal coincides with LBC's appearance on the Internet. It is hoped that the voices of those associated with the College will continue to find expression both there and in other journals.

In one sense it is sad to see it go. As a student, I benefited from some of the 'model answers' to scholarly questions that the faculty had the thoughtfulness to publish in it! Then, along with many others, *Vox Evangelica* carried the first piece of my own writing which I ever saw in print. For these very personal reasons, as well as for others, it is sad to bid farewell.

In another sense, however, the decision to cease its publication is simply an exercise in necessary pruning. Pruning leads to greater fruitfulness and, though it is painful in the short-term, it is foolish in the long-term not to do it. Bidding farewell to *Vox Evangelica* makes way for the faculty, research students, former students, and others associated with the college, to make their writings even more widely available. We trust that it will be so.

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CHRISTIAN INTEGRITY IN A POSTMODERN WORLD*

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'A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. All... will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.' (John 13:34-35)

An accident has robbed Lt. Worf of the use of his legs. In Klingon society, this means he is as good as dead. Therefore, in keeping with his own cultural mores, Worf plans to end his life, and he has asked his good friend, Will Riker, to assist him in the death ritual. Loath to participate in such a despicable act, Riker has gone to the ship's captain, Jean Luc Picard, for advice. The counsel the good captain offers to his second-in-command typifies much contemporary ethical thinking. Rather than invoking any notion of absolute right and wrong, Picard appeals to the concept of friendship. He urges Riker to make his decision on the basis of the fact that Worf is looking to him as a trusted friend.

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We are living in a time of transition. From pop culture to academia, a new intellectual and cultural ethos is emerging, one which now generally carries the designation 'postmodern'. The central task we share as Christians is to embody the gospel in the new postmodern context in which God has placed us. This task demands, however, that we think through the Christian ethic in a manner that takes seriously the challenge of the postmodern ethos.

I. THE SHAPE OF THE POSTMODERN ETHICAL LANDSCAPE

What exactly characterises the postmodern ethical landscape in which God calls us to live and minister? Two aspects of our changing intellectual context are especially significant. We are witnessing the re-

* The Laing Lecture 1997.

emergence of public interest in ethics. This newer discussion, in turn, is resulting in the restructuring of the ethical quest toward a community-based ethic.

1. The re-emerging public interest in ethics

By all outward appearances, the chief executive officer of the giant savings and loan association was a model citizen. He made generous gifts to worthwhile causes, such as the work of Mother Teresa. He was an ardent crusader in social issues, including abortion and pornography.

Above all the CEO 'cared for' his family, especially their financial needs. So prominent were his relatives on the corporation's payroll that during the 1980s the family took home some \$34 million for their services. His oldest son was one such beneficiary of the CEO's position. Although a college dropout with little experience, the young man ascended to the helm of the business, enjoying annual reimbursement in the \$1 million range.

The CEO's ardent conservative political loyalties did not prevent him from donating to the campaigns of those politicians whose ideology differed from his own. One powerful liberal US Senator was the special benefactor of his financial benevolence. When asked whether his generous contributions went to buy influence, he publicly replied, 'I want to say in the most forceful way I can: I certainly hope so.'¹

If the 1980s were the decade of decadence and narcissism, the 1990s are turning out to be the age of ethics. People throughout our society today appear to be growing acutely aware of the ethical dimensions of contemporary life. And many are now increasingly willing to speak the language of ethics. Hence, Christian moralists are not the only ones today who would find questionable the attitudes and actions of the CEO in our opening narrative. Many people who claim no connection to Christianity would likewise label such conduct blatantly unethical.

The emergence of ethics as a concern throughout society is evidenced by front-page news items that repeatedly deal with ethical problems or situations that carry ethical overtones. For example, a recent instalment of the *Vancouver Sun* was awash in ethical issues. The featured stories spoke about elected officials receiving two

pensions, whether or not a political party should nominate a self-proclaimed witch to run for public office, a scandal involving a well-known sports figure, and the reflections of an AIDS patient who formerly was a pastor in a prominent conservative congregation.

As one of these headlines indicates, the concern for ethics has also invaded the political realm. In fact, common parlance during election campaigns is the quest to gain the 'ethical high ground' over one's opponents. The interest in ethics is likewise indicated by the recent inclusion of ethical aspects in public opinion polls. The November 1994 Maclean's/CTV poll of Canadians, published in the 2 January, 1995 issue of the magazine, included a section on ethics. Canadians were quizzed about a gamut of issues, ranging from cheating on exams to cheating on taxes and cheating on one's spouse. The poll's findings even bring out the moralist sentiments of the reporter, for the article overline bemoans that Canada is becoming 'a nation of greedy, amoral self-promoters'.

The blossoming of ethical concern is nowhere more evident, however, than in the renewed interest in ethics as a field of inquiry. We are witnessing a renaissance of the classical study of ethics. More importantly, ethics has invaded a variety of divisions of the academic curriculum. And entire new specialities have grown up almost overnight. Medical ethics, business ethics, environmental ethics, and legal ethics – which would have hardly found champions in academia a few decades ago – are not only serious endeavours, but required curricular components in respected professional schools across the land. This interest, in turn, has produced new areas of specialisation and new vocational opportunities. In short, these burgeoning fields have made ethics a 'growth industry'.

Underlying the mushrooming interest in the academic study of the ethical disciplines is a broadly based realisation that ethics has gained a new sense of urgency. Wearing his prognosticator hat for the New Year's weekend edition of the *Vancouver Sun*, columnist Douglas Todd joined many other voices in predicting that in the coming year the public ethical discussion would 'explode'. This discussion, he predicted, would be fuelled by the belief that our worsening situation requires concerted action: 'More than four out of five North Americans believe a decline in morals is the continent's gravest problem...'

Why a specifically *public* discussion? According to Todd, the old guardians of morality have lost credibility, a situation which casts us on our own to hammer out a new ethic: 'Most people no longer believe a single religious institution can be the final authority on morality. So

¹ See Robert F. O'Neil and Darlene A. Pienta, 'Economic Criteria versus Ethical Criteria: Toward Resolving a Basic Dilemma in Business', *Journal of Business Ethics* 13 (1994), 73.

discussion of ethics will shift more to the wider, public domain.' And what shape will this discussion take? Todd answered: 'Through thousands of courses, conferences, books, newspaper columns, government hearings and meetings, we'll struggle over values.'²

Todd's remarks underscore the postmodern condition. The gravest ethical questions in the history of humankind are confronting us at a time when our society lacks any foundational moral consensus. An Anglican priest recently voiced what many people today sense. 'We are bombarded with a host of problems', he said. 'Every problem that comes our way has an answer which is simple, easy to understand, and wrong.'

As is illustrated in the episode of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* we alluded to earlier, in the changing sea of postmodernity, we wonder if there remains any shared fixed point of reference – even if only theoretically – from which to track our course. The complexity of the ethical demands, and the feeling that beneath our feet lies only sand, lead many people today to feel like Charlie Brown. The baseball game was nearly over. The comic strip character was getting ready to pitch the final 'out'. Then Lucy sauntered to the mound. 'If you strike out this last guy, Charlie Brown', she moralised, 'you're going to make him very, very unhappy.' By this time, Linus had joined the party. 'That's right', he agreed. 'Are you sure you want to bring unexpected grief into that poor kid's life?' Faced with the burden posed by these questions, the hapless pitcher sighed: 'Just what I need – ninth inning ethics.'

2. The concern for a community-based ethic of being

Yet in the midst of the gloom and despondency, the recent resurgence of public interest in ethics does seem to lead somewhere. The public discussion has been paralleled by a reconsideration of the actual goal of the human ethical quest. In our day both professional and lay ethicists have grown increasingly uncomfortable with engaging in the ethical task in the manner their immediate predecessors pursued. Douglas Todd's remark, 'we'll struggle over values', bears witness to the nature of this transition. The renewed interest in ethical reflection has produced a reconceptualising of the ethical task. A crucial dimension of this shift involves the move from the focus on 'doing' that dominated

² Douglas Todd, 'What on earth happens next?', *The Vancouver Sun* (31 December, 1994), D11.

western ethical discourse during the modern era, to a concern for 'being'.³

Since the philosophical debates of ancient Greece, ethicists have been separated into two basic camps: those who focus on what we might call an 'ethic of doing' and those who elevate an 'ethic of being'. What divides them is their understanding of the basic *goal* of the ethical quest: Is ethical discourse primarily concerned with our actions – what we do? – or with our character – who we are? In other words, should we focus our attention on right conduct or on the cultivation of virtue?

Perhaps a way into this distinction is provided by an updated version of a question Aristotle posed in the fourth century BC. Consider the case of a man who has lived in fidelity to his marriage vow for the duration of their thirty years of marriage – in complete fidelity, that is, with the exception of one night. He was away from home on a business trip. In the midst of his loneliness, the businessman met a woman in the bar at the hotel where he was staying. One thing led to another, and the night resulted in a sexual encounter in his hotel suite. Is this man an adulterer?

Proponents of an ethic of doing may be led to interpret the query as calling for an ethical judgment about the man's *action*. Many proponents would reformulate the question: Has the man through this act violated some ethical norm? Did his action transgress, say, the seventh commandment (Exod. 20:14)? Posed in such a manner, the answer can only be 'Yes'. Other ethicists, in contrast, may follow Aristotle's own response. They interpret the question, 'Is the man an adulterer?' as inquiring about his *character*. One act of adultery, they conclude, does not mark an otherwise faithful spouse as an adulterer. The man, as to character, is a faithful husband who on one occasion acted out of character and against virtue.

The focus on 'doing' dominated western ethical discourse during the modern era. Many contemporary ethicists today, however – as represented by secular voices including Nel Noddings and Alasdair MacIntyre, and by religious figures such as Stanley Hauerwas – no longer view the rightness or wrongness of specific actions as the *central* feature of the ethical task. Instead, they are concerned about character

³ For examples of the turn-of-the-century focus on duty, see Henry E. Robins, *The Ethics of the Christian Life: The Science of Right Living* (Philadelphia: Griffith & Rowland, 1904); Newman Smyth, *Christian Ethics* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1906). Even some older works which speak of virtue in fact focus on duty. See, for example, A.D. Mattson, *Christian Ethics: The Basis and Content of the Christian Life* (Rock Island: Augustana Book concern, 1947 rev. edn.).

ideals – virtues – such as friendship and co-operation. Or they elevate the quest for ‘values’ as the central ethical concern. In keeping with this shift, J. Philip Wogaman recently declared, ‘The question is, where do we *ultimately* get our values?’ He then explained: ‘We do not have a basis for making ethical judgments until we can found our conception of the good and of moral obligation on an ultimate framework of valuation.’⁴

Paralleling this ethical revisioning is the advent of a new quest for spirituality. In the modern era, people expunged the remnants of the supernatural from their world-view and focused attention on the scientific method as the means of unlocking nature’s secrets. In recent years, however, the children of the Enlightenment have launched a search for the key that can unlock the door to *spiritual* vitality and power. People today rush from guru to guru in an attempt to learn how best to develop their own inner person. This search includes the goals of greater fortitude, higher virtue, personal character formation, and enhanced relationships with others. In short, like the new ethical mood, it focuses on ‘being’, rather than ‘doing’.

The transition from doing to being has paralleled the philosophical shift away from the Enlightenment quest for knowledge understood as dispassionate, objective certainty. In the eighteenth century, Immanuel Kant suggested that humans ask three central questions: What can I know? What should I do? What can I hope for?⁵ Enlightenment ethics sought to answer the second question – the question of the ethical life – on the basis of a prior answer to the first. Thinkers today are no longer sure that this method is feasible. For a more promising alternative approach, many are looking to the third question, seeing in it a possible foundation for searching out the answers to the question of ethics. And contrary to what we might expect, this proposal is not the exclusive domain of religious ethicists, but is gaining adherents among secular thinkers as well.

Robert Kane provides a case in point. As a chastened secularist, Kane declares: ‘We simply do not know enough to ground ethics necessarily in human reason and knowledge alone; and centuries of failure in trying to do so have led many to relativism, scepticism, and

4 J. Philip Wogaman, *Christian Moral Judgment* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1989), 13, 15.

5 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (London: Macmillan, 1933), 635.

nihilism.’⁶ Kane rephrases Kant’s third question to read ‘What should we aspire to?’ in order to determine the guiding principles for a new, postmodern ethic. For his vision of the ethical life, he draws from the Latin root of the term. In that ‘aspiration’ signifies a ‘going outward of the spirit’, Kane proposes the image of ‘our spirits reaching beyond the finite perspectives we inhabit toward an objective reality and objective worth that are always only partly revealed to us.’⁷ He explains: ‘By living in certain ways, by loving and seeking excellences in our various practices and traditions, cultures and ways of life, we may “embody the truth” in the sense of attaining objective worth, without being sure of having attained it.’⁸

With the new focus on character and virtue, as well as images of aspiration, the centre of ethics is shifting away from the individual actor and the quest for the one true, universal ethical theory. They are being replaced by a new focus on the *community* in the midst of which, and according to the ideals of which, personal character finds its reference point. In the end, the newer voices assert, ethical judgments arise from, and must be articulated in accordance with, the belief structures of the community in which a person lives. As Wayne Meeks remarked poignantly: ‘Making morals means making community.’⁹ Why? According to Meeks, ‘individuals do not become moral agents except in the relationships, the transactions, the habits and reinforcements, the special uses of language and gesture that together constitute life in community’.¹⁰

In this manner, the current restructuring of ethics pierces to the very heart of the modern ‘decisionist’ ethic with its focus on doing. The ethic of doing, communitarian thinkers argue, presupposed a basically Enlightenment view which understood the human person as a morally empty vessel waiting to be filled through the acts in which he or she chooses to engage. Communitarian ethicists repudiate this anthropology in favour of a community-based understanding of the moral life. They argue that personal identity and character do not first emerge as the product of choices we make as autonomous agents, but actually precede our acts. The Mennonite thinker Harry Huebner states

6 Robert Kane, *Through the Moral Maze: Searching for Absolute Values in a Pluralistic World* (New York: Paragon, 1994), 97.

7 Kane, *Through the Moral Maze*, 98.

8 Kane, *Through the Moral Maze*, 98.

9 Wayne A. Meeks, *The Origins of Christian Morality: The First Two Centuries* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 5.

10 Meeks, *Origins of Christian Morality*, 8.

the point sharply: 'When we engage in moral activity, we act on the basis of our perceptions and our beliefs. We act on the basis of who we are as social/moral beings and on the basis of the characters into which our communities/families have shaped us.'¹¹

Communitarians do not deny the importance of the language of obligation. Instead, their concern is that such language find its proper ground. In their thinking, obligation is not primarily connected to the individual agent nor to the corollary concept of inherent individual rights. Instead, obligation flows out of a person's presence in a community and the implications of this presence for being a person of character. Although reflecting a specifically Christian perspective, Huebner's words nevertheless articulate the more general communitarian view:

If obligation is a community matter, that is, if what we ought to do derives from the kind of people we have committed ourselves to be – the body of Christ – then what we do or do not do is not determined by the rights we and others as individuals have or do not have. Rather, our moral obligation then comes from the character of the community which we have given shaping power over us. Then what we do does not have its origin in what we can legitimately claim, but in what we have been graciously given and in turn are inspired to give.¹²

In a multicultural context, the focus on a community-based ethic leads in turn to the new ethical pluralism of the postmodern ethos. In a situation in which a multiplicity of communities exist side-by-side, ethical discourse becomes a discussion of the moral practices of differing communities. The underlying assumption, of course, is that what appears wrong from one vantage point, when viewed from within the community that practises the act, may actually be right.

The episode of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* we noted earlier provides an especially illuminating illustration of this tendency. To Riker, Worf's proposed action constituted a reprehensible act of suicide. When Riker went to Picard for advice, however, the good captain sought to help his second-in-command view the situation from

¹¹ Harry Huebner and David Schroeder, *Church as Parable: Whatever Happened to Ethics?* (Winnipeg: CMBC Publications, 1993), 79.

¹² Huebner and Schroeder, *Church as Parable*, 82.

Worf's perspective within the context of the Klingon community with its unique set of beliefs, mores and rituals. What appeared immoral to Riker, given his embeddedness in one particular moral community, was perfectly acceptable to the Klingon Worf.

But this community-based understanding of morality appears to lead to an impasse. Do postmodern ethicists offer any way whereby we might move beyond the conflicts that would seemingly inevitably arise out of competing moral communities? Is there anything that transcends the multiplicity of social groups found within our global village and thereby can bring humans from differing communities together? The *Star Trek* episode presented one commonly expressed postmodern response – 'friendship'. Picard appealed to Riker to remember that he was Worf's friend. Riker must do whatever act would be most in accordance with the ideal of friendship.

Douglas Todd concluded the essay we cited earlier by invoking a similar postmodern solution to the problem of multiculturalism. He wrote: 'We'll debate everything from euthanasia to sexuality, poverty to business, in an effort to hammer out our shared values that will enhance neighbourliness and, let's hope, the common good.' With these words, Todd inadvertently appealed to the one goal that all societies share. He used the word 'neighbourliness' to characterise that common goal.

We could draw Picard's advice and Todd's prognosis together by invoking the postmodern buzzword, 'community'. As terms like 'neighbourliness' and 'friendship' suggest, all communities seek to foster a common goal – 'community'. They desire that humans live together in a spirit of neighbourliness and friendship. This goal is universal, even though the specific mores that determine what exactly 'community', neighbourliness and friendship are may be culturally determined.

II. CHRISTIAN ETHICS AS A COMMUNITY-BASED ETHIC OF BEING

The public discussions of ethics today appear to be taking a specific direction, namely, toward the goal of constructing a community-based ethic of being. What should we as Christians make of this development? Is the quest for a community-based ethic of being compatible with the Christian vision? And what specific perspective do we as Christians have to offer to the contemporary discussion?

1. The Christian vision of integrity

At first glance, we might be tempted to reject categorically the new emphasis on constructing an ethic of being. After all, isn't the Bible concerned with our conduct? Do we not find in Scripture a host of ethical imperatives? And will not the eschatological judgment be a divine appraisal of our *works* – that is, our conduct (Jer. 17:10; 32:19; Matt. 16:27; Rom. 2:6; 2 Cor. 5:10; Gal. 6:7-8; Rev. 22:12)?

Further, the interest in traits seems to move the focus of ethics away from the biblical emphasis on being concerned for the needs of others to a seemingly selfish desire for growth in personal character. Gilbert Meilaender capsulises this difficulty: 'The focus of one who trusts in God's pardoning grace must, especially in the exceptional moment, be not his own character but the neighbour's need; for, otherwise, his character cannot be fully shaped by the virtue of faith.'¹³

While acknowledging the apparent biblical foundation for the interest in formulating an ethic of doing which dominated the modern era, we must place it in a broader scriptural context. Seen from the perspective of the whole, we must conclude that the biblical viewpoint does not lead to a concern solely for acts in themselves and hence for a pure ethic of doing.

In addition to an obvious interest in right actions, the biblical authors also display a great concern for what motivates conduct. This is evident in the repeated admonitions in Scripture that Christians seek God's glory (e.g. 1 Cor. 10:31). The important role of motivation likewise formed a central aspect of Jesus' critique of the religious leaders of his day. Outwardly they evidenced conformity to the Old Testament law, but their motives were wrong. They were only concerned about themselves; they were motivated by selfishness. This biblical concern has led certain ethicists to focus on the motivational foundation of conduct. Helmut Thielicke, for example, concludes: 'The specifically "Christian" element in ethics is rather to be sought explicitly and exclusively in the motivation of the action.'¹⁴

Yet, even the quest for right motives does not tap the central heartbeat of the biblical conception of the ethical life. Motivation is itself related to something deeper. According to the New Testament writers, the ultimate wellspring of action is our 'heart', or what

¹³ Gilbert C. Meilaender, *Faith and Faithfulness: Basic Themes in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991), 106.

¹⁴ Helmut Thielicke, *Theological Ethics*, ed. William H. Lazareth, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 1:20.

Jonathan Edwards referred to as our 'affections'.¹⁵ Jesus himself declared that God's intention for us does not stop with mere outward conformity to laws, especially humanly-devised legal strictures. A focus on outward obedience fails to acknowledge that the human 'heart' is the source of evil actions (Mark 7:14-23; Matt. 12:33-37). For this reason, Jesus – echoing the Old Testament prophets before him – decried the condition of the religious leaders of his day. They honoured God with their lips, but their hearts were far from his heavenly Father (Matt. 15:8).

His focus on the heart as the wellspring of action led Jesus – again following the Old Testament itself – to conclude that the two greatest commandments were to love God and neighbour (Matt. 22:37-40). In so doing, he reunited the inward and the outward. For Jesus, love meant an inward affection turned toward God and others, as well as the outward action such a godly affection produces.

This uniting of the inward and the outward which characterised Jesus' ethical teaching leads us to the concept of integrity. It suggests that a focus on integrity, and thus on character or virtue, must be central to our statement of the Christian ethic. For this reason, we can readily find affinity with contemporary thinkers like Alasdair MacIntyre, who speaks about the ethical life as involving 'singleness of purpose' or the virtue of integrity.¹⁶

But what is 'integrity'? The common dictionary definition of the term characterises it as 'uprightness in character', and speaks of traits such as honesty.¹⁷ Although these are important aspects, Christian integrity goes deeper. Basically, integrity has to do with authenticity. Persons of integrity are free from duplicity. With them, 'what you see is what you get'. You don't go away wondering whether they are motivated by 'hidden agendas'. Authenticity suggests that integrity means 'acting in accordance with one's stated beliefs'. People of integrity do what they say. To use the common parlance, they 'walk' their 'talk'. And hence, they are free from hypocrisy. There is in their lives a congruence between the *confessio fidei* and actual conduct.¹⁸ Likewise, integrity has to do with courage of conviction. Persons of

¹⁵ See, for example, Jonathan Edwards, *Religious Affections: How Man's Will Affects His Character Before God*, Classics of Faith and Devotion (Portland: Multnomah, 1984).

¹⁶ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984 2nd edn.), 203.

¹⁷ See, for example, Sidney I. Landau and Ronald J. Bogus (eds.), *The Doubleday Dictionary for Home, School, and Office* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1975), 374.

¹⁸ See Harmon L. Smith, *Where Two or Three are Gathered: Liturgy and the Moral Life* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 1995), 86.

integrity act on their beliefs, even when this exacts a great personal cost.

The wisdom literature of the Bible suggests that such integrity leads to a good reputation. The book of Proverbs points out the exceedingly great value of such a reputation: 'A good name is more desirable than great riches; to be esteemed is better than silver or gold' (Prov. 22:1).

Even with this focus on integrity as defined above, we are not yet at our goal. The ethical life may be the life of integrity, the coherence of inner conviction with conduct and action. But what is the source of a person's inner convictions? Do they arise *sui generis* out of the individual moral agent?

Here again we can readily find ourselves in agreement with, and can profitably draw from, contemporary ethical thought. As we noted earlier, communitarians are alerting us to the foundational role of the communities in which we participate in the building of personal identity and moral sensitivities. Communities, they argue, transmit from generation to generation traditions of virtue, common good and ultimate meaning.¹⁹

In this way, communities are crucial to the sustaining of character and values. Ultimately, we derive our personal convictions from the community from which we gain our understanding of virtue and goodness. This suggests that the life of integrity entails living out the principles or world-view of that community of reference.

Viewed from this perspective, the ethical life is integrally linked to a communal vision, a shared world-view, or what we might even venture to call a *theology*. This constitutes the great methodological innovation of postmodern ethics. In the postmodern world we are becoming increasingly aware that every ethical proposal – even ethics itself – is embedded in an interpretive framework which in the end comprises the shared belief structure – the theology – of a community. In short, every understanding of the ethical life is ultimately derived from a community-based vision, which links the personal life with something beyond.²⁰

¹⁹ For example, George A. Lindbeck, 'Confession and Community: An Israel-like View of the Church', *Christian Century* 107 (9-May, 1990), 495.

²⁰ The idea of an ethic of community has developed in the twentieth century. For example, already in the 1940s, the British ethicist Sydney Cave spoke of ethics as 'life in community'. Yet for him the term 'community' was merely a way of speaking about the older concept of the 'orders of creation', which he divided into Family, Industry and the State. Sydney Cave, *The Christian Way: A Study of New Testament Ethics in Relation to Present Problems* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1949), 175.

2. A Christian communitarian virtue ethic

These conclusions suggest that the contemporary quest for a community-based ethic of being has much to offer our reflections on the Christian ethic. Foundational to our understanding of the ethical life is the realisation that as Christians we constitute a particular community. We are a people who share a common acknowledgement or confession that Jesus is the Christ. This suggests that the Christian ethic, in turn, is the call to live out the world-view of the community that gathers around Jesus the Christ. It entails acting according to the foundational belief structure or convictions of this community, especially as derived from the Bible, the foundational text of the community of Christ.

In the ethical task, therefore, we are guided by the Christian vision, a vision that arises from the biblical narrative. At the heart of this narrative is the story of the God who is active in the world. This story plays a central role in Christian ethics. One such aspect is the reference point it provides Christians from which to understand or define central ethical concepts. For example, the biblical narrative depicts God's steadfast resoluteness toward humankind. The Scriptures speak of the God who enters into a special relationship – a covenant – with God's creation. Even in the face of human rebellion, God remains steadfast. God continues to act in accordance with God's good intentions for us. The biblical word for God's resoluteness is 'faithfulness'.

One foundation for Christian integrity, therefore, lies in the God who is faithful to the divine covenant despite human failure and sin. In the midst of his lament for the fall of Jerusalem at the hand of the invading Babylonian armies, the prophet Jeremiah reminded himself of God's faithfulness: 'Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness' (Lam. 3:22-23; see also Ps. 94:14). As the one who is faithful to this covenant, God is trustworthy. We can entrust ourselves to God, knowing that God will fulfil the divine promises. And we know what true faithfulness is by our experience of God's own covenantal faithfulness.

The God who is faithful to this covenant is also just. The biblical authors narrate a divine justice that is impartial. Rather than showing favouritism, God treats all persons fairly. God extends grace to all, causing the sun 'to rise on the evil and the good' and sending 'rain on the righteous and the unrighteous' (Matt. 5:45). God's impartiality also means that salvation is intended for all people, regardless of ethnic origin (Acts 10:34-35), social status or gender (Gal. 3:28-29). Divine

justice also entails compassion. All persons are the recipients of God's goodness (Ps. 145:8-9). Yet, God cares especially for the less fortunate (Ps. 146:7-8).

In setting forth a biblical ethic of integrity, then, Christians can appeal to the ways of the God of the biblical story for the foundation for understanding concepts such as faithfulness and justice. This provides a solution to a perplexing problem introduced by the loss of moral consensus that characterises contemporary society. In such a context, ethical terms no longer carry any agreed-upon transcendent reference point. For the Christian, in contrast, ideals like faithfulness, justice and even integrity itself can only be defined in connection with God's own character as depicted in the biblical narrative of the divine covenant-keeper.

Christians appeal to the example of the biblical God for another function as well. Perhaps even more important than serving as a transcendent reference point for ethical terms, God's way in the world forms a model for the Christian life in the world. For the Christian, integrity ultimately involves living in such a way that our lives mirror God's own nature and thereby show what God is like. In this task, Christians appeal above all to the life of Jesus the Christ, who is Immanuel, 'God with us' (Matt. 1:23), and the incarnate Word of God (John 1:14). To be an ethical Christian means to live consistently as one of Jesus' followers.

The foundation for the life of integrity is our personal sense of identity as derived from the community of Christ. The New Testament authors, especially Paul, describe the essence of the Christian life as union with Christ, or Christ in us, which constitutes our person (e.g. Col. 1:27). This means that we gain our foundational identity from the biblical narrative of Jesus. As we declare in baptism (Rom. 6:1-8) and repeatedly reaffirm at the Lord's table (1 Cor. 10:16), Christ's life *is* our life. Hence, our goal is to be formed by his values and ideals, to live in accordance with what motivated him, and to love as he loved. We desire that our affections be set on things above (Rom. 8:5), that is, that we be sincerely devoted to Christ and to the heavenly Father whom he loved and served. Thus, in all of life, we want to be conformed to his 'image' both in our inward being and in our outward conduct (2 Cor. 3:18).

On this basis the New Testament authors set forth a special concept of spirituality. The Christian life is 'walking in the Spirit' (Gal. 5:16): that is, being imbued with the same Spirit who guided our Lord Jesus himself. This indwelling Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Christ, forms Christ-

like character within the disciple and thereby becomes the author of the life of integrity.

In this task, however, the Christian community plays an essential role.²¹ The narrative of Jesus is passed from generation to generation by the historical community of which we are the contemporary expression. More importantly, however, the biblical narrative comes to be formed in us as the believing community becomes our primary social context, our ultimate community of reference. For the Christian, the life of integrity is more than merely 'Jesus and me for each tomorrow'. It is living according to the ideals of the Lord as embodied in the life of the community that embodies and transmits his vision.

For this reason, Christian integrity is never an isolated, purely personal ethic. Rather, the life of integrity begins as the Christian develops an awareness of personal identity within the context of the fellowship of believers. Indeed, integrity means living out a sense of foundational status (Who I am as a child of God) and a sense of calling or vocation (Who I am in the programme of God). But even this identity cannot be isolated from that of the group. The Christian participates in a particular people. And even when living 'in the world' we are responsible to be representatives of that people, the community of faith.

3. The potential pitfall of a communitarian Christian ethic

This short sketch of a Christian ethic of integrity suggests that the move to a communitarian understanding holds promise as a way of articulating the Christian ethic in the emerging postmodern context. But one potentially devastating problem surfaces immediately. The community-based approach seems to undercut any claim to express a universal ethic.

The loss of universality appears to be inherent in any understanding that views the ethical life as integrally embedded in the life of the social group. Such a focus serves to highlight the multiplicity of communities, and hence the diversity of ethical visions, present in our world. This multiplicity, in turn, seems to lead us headlong into a communitarian pluralism. The multiplicity of community-based ethical visions appears to call into question any attempt to claim that one is somehow more correct than the others. Rather than promoting the

²¹ For a recent philosophical discussion of this, see Alistair I. McFadyen, *The Call to Personhood: A Christian Theory of the Individual in Social Relationships* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 61-63.

search for the one, universal human ethic, the various interpretative frameworks or theological visions seem to offer equally valid foundations for ethics in the postmodern context.

For this reason, embarking on the communitarian pathway may risk casting us into the murky waters of a new 'conventionalism'. In such a situation, each social group determines its own rules of conduct in accordance with its own customs (or conventions) which in turn are based on its own unique vision of reality. Taken to the extreme, such a conventionalism leaves each community with the prerogative of requiring uncritical conformity to such social authority.²²

Forming the intellectual foundation for this new situation is what Jean-François Lyotard elevates as the defining characteristic of the postmodern condition: 'incredulity toward metanarratives.'²³ Postmodernism involves the rejection of all overarching stories. Its ethos emerges through the discounting of all claims to universality and every overarching belief system that attempts to encapsulate the story of all humankind.

This situation is especially grave for Christianity, with its inherent tendency to universalise its own transcendent narrative of the divine-human drama. To the postmodern mind, the Christian story is only one such imperialistic metanarrative. The categorical rejection of every metanarrative does not deny us as Christians the privilege of upholding the biblical story as the defining narrative for our specific community. But the postmodern ethos demands that we give up every ambition to bring all other communities under the umbrella of the biblical story of creation-fall-new creation. In this context, the Christian vision can be only one among the many.

By implication, the postmodern critique demands that Christians also refrain from subsuming all other visions of the ethical life under the rubric of 'Christian ethics'. Any talk of the universality of the Christian conception of the ethical life is abhorrent to the postmodern mind. Like the Christian narrative, the Christian vision is thereby reduced to being merely one of a manifold number of 'tribal' ethical systems found in our global village.

²² For a succinct summary of conventionalism, see Raziel Abelson, *Ethics and Metaethics: Readings in Ethical Philosophy* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1963), 303-304. See also Scott B. Rae, *Moral Choices: An Introduction to Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 86-87.

²³ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), iv.

The move to a communitarian ethic, therefore, raises perplexing questions for Christians. If every conception of the ethical life is embedded in the belief structure of a community of reference, then which community? And whose theology should we 'privilege'? In short, how do we deal with the seemingly unavoidable pluralistic conventionism of the postmodern ethos?

4. The Christian ethic and religious ethical traditions

Our response to the crucial challenge posed by the postmodern context requires that we tackle head-on the question of the relation between the Christian ethic and the ethical systems of the multiplicity of religious communities present in our global village.

(a) *Ethics and the religions*

Our beginning point in addressing this question arises from the connection between ethics and the religions.²⁴ The foundation for such a connection lies in the crucial role in human life played by culture, understood – to quote Clifford Geertz – as 'an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life'.²⁵ Religion, in turn, is a central, formative dimension of culture.

Modern sociologists have pointed out that all religions provide a foundation for ethics, in that they mediate a sense of the transcendent both to the individual and to the social dimensions of life. Emile Durkheim, for example, theorises that religion creates and maintains social solidarity, for it provides the common symbols by means of which a specific people understand their world.²⁶ Further, it affords a sense of cosmic unity necessary for such solidarity.²⁷ By furnishing the

²⁴ For a discussion of this topic from the perspective of philosophy of religion, see James F. Smurl, *Religious Ethics: A Systems Approach* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1972).

²⁵ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 89.

²⁶ See, for example, Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, trans. Joseph Ward Swain (New York: Collier Books, 1961), 463-87. For a helpful summary of Durkheim's view of religion, see Robert N. Bellah, 'Introduction', in Robert N. Bellah (ed.), *Emile Durkheim, On Morality and Society: Selected Writings* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), xlv-lix.

²⁷ This is most obviously the case with monotheistic religions, which look to the one God as the foundation of cosmic, and hence social unity. But polytheistic religions can likewise offer a unified cosmic vision in so far as they elevate one god above the others.

foundation for the social community in which we live, a specific religious tradition mediates to us the framework for group and personal identity formation. As a result, religion undergirds morality by providing a transcendent foundation for conceptions of the ethical life. In short, as Geertz succinctly states: 'Religion supports proper conduct by picturing a world in which such conduct is only common sense.'²⁸

The foundational role of religion to human society and by extension to ethics has led some thinkers to consider the possibility of developing a religiously-based 'global ethic'.²⁹ This project would appear possible in so far as each of the many religions has a 'community-producing' function. We could then hope to arrive at certain conclusions about a global ethic of community derived from the common vision of community the religions share.

Although it originally arose as the outworking of the modern pluralist ethos, this goal looms even more conceivable in the postmodern climate. We noted earlier that contemporary thinkers seem quite able to close ranks around the communitarian ideals, such as friendship or neighbourliness. In fact, if there is one nearly universally accepted guiding principle for ethics in the postmodern context, it is that the ethical life is the life which builds community. Thus, Douglas Todd spoke for many when he held out the hope that today's public ethical discussions would foster 'neighbourliness' and promote 'the common good'.

The seemingly universal quest for community and the social role of religion in human life lends us the criterion by which we can appraise all religious visions. The common goal of community suggests that to evaluate the transcendent vision of every community (including Christianity) we need to determine the extent to which the beliefs it inculcates and the practices it fosters promote social cohesion.

While appeal to a universal criterion such as the promotion of community is plausible in our postmodern world, the construction of a global ethic – that is, a universally acknowledged understanding of the ethical life – remains difficult. As the postmodern focus on 'difference' or multiplicity reminds us, despite their common quest for community, the various communities remain quite different from each other. They

²⁸ Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 129. See also Geertz's classic definition of religion (90).

²⁹ This possibility was discussed at the Parliament of the World's Religions which met in Chicago in 1993.

espouse differing transcendent visions, and consequently they embody differing understandings of what actually constitutes true community.

Such divergence reintroduces the 'impolite' question of truth. It leads us to ask, Which religious vision carries within itself the foundation for the community-building role of a transcendent religious vision?

(b) *The uniqueness of the Christian ethical vision*

At this point, the Christian gospel provides a unique answer. Like other community-based visions, a central goal of the Christian ethic is the advancement of social cohesion. And in keeping with other community-based ethical proposals, it speaks of this goal as 'community' (or fellowship). Taken as a whole, the biblical narrative speaks of God at work establishing community. God's *telos* is nothing less than gathering a reconciled people, nurtured in a renewed creation and enjoying fellowship with the eternal God (Rev. 21:1-5).

This biblical vision of community suggests that Christians can affirm all religious traditions to the extent that they provide social cohesion (and hence some measure of 'community'). We might also admit that the various religions can even mediate to their devotees fellowship with God to the extent that through the religious practices they come to know the only God as the Most High God. Thus, we can affirm each social group in so far as it fosters the one divine goal of establishing community and thus becomes a community of people that gathers around a vision of the only true God.

The Christian message does not stop with any such generic vision of the transcendent, however. We firmly believe that the Christian ethic reveals more clearly God's goal for humankind and hence the nature both of community and the good life which all human ethical systems seek to foster. In addition, we humbly declare that the religions cannot provide community in its ultimate sense, because they are beset with a theological problem. They do not embody the highest vision of who God is, namely, God as the triune One.

Foundational to the specifically Christian theological vision is the acknowledgment of God in God's triune fullness. We declare that the only true God is none other than the social Trinity. The Christian vision speaks of humankind, in turn, as 'created in God's image'. The divine design is that we mirror within creation what God is like in God's own eternal reality. The goal of human existence has been revealed most completely in Jesus Christ who in his life, death and resurrection

modelled the divine principle of life, namely, life in intimate fellowship with his heavenly Father by the Holy Spirit who indwelt him.

In this manner, the Christian vision of God as the social Trinity, and our creation to be the *imago dei*, provides the transcendent basis for the human ethical ideal as life-in-community. Consequently, the reciprocal, perichoric life of the triune God is the cosmic reference point for the idea of society itself. Just as God is a plurality-in-unity, so also to be human means to be persons-in-community. The task of every society, therefore, is to bring a higher unity out of the multiplicity of individuals, as is reflected so well in the motto of the United States – *e pluribus unum* ('out of the many, one').

In short, the biblical vision of God at work establishing community is not merely a great idea that God devised in all eternity. Instead, it is an outworking of God's own eternal reality. As a result, the human quest for community – which is often expressed today as 'neighbourliness' or 'the common good', to use these somewhat pale and vacuous terms – is not misguided. At its heart it is nothing less than the quest to mirror in the midst of all creation the eternal reality of God and thereby to be the image of God. Ultimately, this vision lies at the heart of the Christian ethic of integrity. And it is this vision of the human community living together in the midst of the new creation in full integrity – that is, humankind showing forth the eternal fellowship of the triune God – that Christians have to offer as the foundation of a truly constructive ethic in the postmodern context.