

The Rev'd Canon Professor Vernon White

Reflections on ethics, 'public theology' and mission in a secular age



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'Sometimes I think the Church is like a morally constipated child jumping up and down at the back of the class, trying much too hard to get attention with the rest of the class, thinking it's got the right answer...' (Rachel Mann, article in the Church Times)

The implication of this rather striking, if unflattering, picture of the church is this. The church thinks it is distinct from the world, perhaps especially in its ethical views. It thinks it has distinct and right answers, which others may not have, and this Christian view needs to be heard in public ways. But it also implies that we may be going about it the wrong way. So this is what I want us to reflect on – by asking these questions:

- Is *distinctiveness* from the world always a necessary mark of Christian authenticity and integrity? In particular, what is the relationship between general ethics and Christian ethics? Are they always or necessarily so different? I will suggest that distinctiveness is contingent not necessary. There is a changing relationship between 'secular' and Christian ethics. I will also suggest that there has been a fairly recent shift in this relationship.
- How can and should the church react to this shifting relationship? How should it react in its public forms? Should we even be *trying* to 'get attention in class', doing what some people call 'public theology' at all? Or is faith (and theology) not really about ethics at all, especially not public ethics?

1 Is distinctiveness necessary?

The church is clearly distinct - both in the obvious sense the sense that it has historical particularity, and in the theological sense that it has distinct call and identity in God's purposes for the world as a whole. This is evident in the New Testament and the other founding documents of the Christian faith.

But that does not necessarily mean it must always be *distinctive*. Augustine did not seem to think so, at least not in every respect. His earthly city has two senses. One is wholly negative and has to be distinguished from the church. But the other merely denotes the actual mixed empirical reality of a mixed society, neither wholly good nor bad. It is the *saeculum*, the age in which we all live prior to the *eschaton* where the tares are allowed to mingle with the wheat. In this we find aspects the church in the world (just as we find aspects of the world in the church, of course). And that means the so-called secular world is not always and only 'the world': it includes the church, and even authentic churches will not necessarily be distinctive from it - nor should they be! Whether or not they are will depend precisely on actual historical conditions in the world - which change. Thus, as Nigel Biggar puts it, 'the integrity [of a church]

is therefore not the same as distinctiveness: one is a virtue, the other is an accident of history'.¹

2. The relationship of general and Christian ethics: a ready consensus?

The implication of this, specifically for ethics, follows. It means we could sometimes expect some sort of correlation in principle between what is generally accepted as 'good' and what is generally accepted as 'Christian', at least at some stages in our social history. This could be attributed to a residual natural knowledge of the law of God, uncontaminated by our fallenness, as Paul seems to envisage in Romans 2; in which case it is potentially universal and not contingent. But it can also easily be seen more contingently, simply as an outcome of historical circumstance (namely, that our society in the west has been Christianized so its values have inevitably permeated us all and *become* common values). Or it could be a mixture of the two, with some ethical insights gained historically through Judaeo-Christian teaching, and some 'naturally' or by some other route. Either way, we might well still expect a significant correlation, at least from time to time.

This is demonstrable, at least up to a point. For much of our recent history, what people in this country generally considered good values, good character, good behaviour, simply were Christian values, character and behaviour. To be a good person and to have Christian values was often reckoned synonymous. So there has been no particular need for the Church to make the case for its values, nor to be defensive about them. People may not have lived up to them (in church or outside), but most agreed with them in principle. This is true in all areas of ethics viz. personal virtues, rules of personal behaviour, and social ethics:

1. Personal virtues: e.g. compassion, love, humility; these are authentically Christian, biblical, virtues but they have also been generally agreed to be good. This has not always been the case. Go back far enough in western tradition and you could argue there wasn't always this consensus. Arguably, Judaeo-Christian faith had to introduce both *agape* love, in its most radical unconditional form, and humility as distinctive virtues (in almost all ancient Greek thought they tended to be thought of more as weaknesses). But now these have become generally accepted and admired. This is even true of humility. Celebrities and political leaders may become arrogant, but they are not generally admired for their arrogance: they are regularly taken to task and advised to learn more humility. General ethics and Christian ethics have been correlated here, at least for periods of time.

2. Specific rules and principles of personal behaviour: e.g. fidelity in marriage, not lying or stealing, not bearing false witness, not 'coveting' or being greedy. These too

¹ Nigel Biggar, *Behaving in Public. How to do Christian Ethics* (Eerdmans, Cambridge 2011) p 8. He also notes, incidentally, that it is by conflating Augustine's two senses of the earthly city, and misrepresenting Augustine, that Milbank is led to idealize the church: *op.cit.* p97

are clearly authentic Judaeo-Christian ethics, not least because rooted in the 10 commandments, and again they have also been more generally agreed as right. Moral outrage about MPs expenses, Bankers' greed, regular cover-ups and infidelities of public figures, may often be hypocritical, but it still reflects a common moral perception about right as wrong in principle. In the case of these moral rules of behaviour it is much less likely that Judaeo-Christian faith can claim uniquely to have introduced them. But whatever their origin they illustrate a broad correlation between general and Christian ethics.

3 Social ethics: e.g. justice for the poor and fundamental equality of all people, regardless of race, gender, class etc. Again these are authentic Judaeo-Christian priorities, expressing both the prophetic tradition of justice and the central Christian conviction that Christ died for all, and we are all children of same heavenly Father 'from whom every family on earth takes its name'. But again they have also become more generally agreed and part of a wider public morality (in principle). They drove the great social welfare reforms of C19th & C20th, and still drive public debate about social reform in current disputes about health care or education policy. Few if any dare question the equal value of everyone *as a principle* - the disagreement is about how to achieve it in practice, and what priority is given to achieving it in relation to other economic and social goals. Here, as with some personal virtues, there is a good case for crediting Judaeo-Christian faith with this state of affairs.

It is a consensus which has survived for centuries, in spite of individual voices of dissent. It has survived a decline in church going, a decline in specific Christian beliefs about God, and even active attacks on the truth of Christian beliefs in 19th century. It has also survived obvious and repeated failings in the actual morality of church and Christian state and Christian individuals in history: e.g. corrupt Popes, Crusades, religious wars. None of these, on the whole, affected the basic consensus that good values and ethics are also Christian values and ethics and vice-versa (when they are lived up to!). It still survives to some extent, I suggest, particularly in older generations. 'I've been a good Christian' is still sometimes taken to mean not 'I belong to a church' or 'I subscribe to particular religious beliefs about God' but more simply 'I'm a good person' - as though these are the same thing.

What I want to suggest, however, is that this sense of consensus and correlation has begun to change, not just in academic or intellectual circles but more widely. It is a change which dates probably from the early 1960's, but has gathered momentum more recently. Before that, a word on the Church's attitude to this consensus.

3.The Church's reactions to consensus

On the whole established churches have, in the past, sat back and made the most of it, milking the consensus as an implicit legitimisation of faith itself. In other words, broad agreement about ethics is taken to mean, at least tacitly, that the church and its faith and doctrine can be considered significant in people's lives and in society, even though fewer actually belong or share its explicit beliefs about God. Public theology, then, has often involved finding the ethical connections already there, and reminding people to live up to them - *not* fundamentally challenging a status quo by

introducing new directions in ethics. It hasn't seen itself needing to jump up and down stridently at the back of class to remind everyone that it's there and sees things differently.

More radical churches have been wary of the consensus, fearing that it merely masks complacency with the *status quo* and reflects uncritical acceptance of a dominant culture.² More sectarian churches, especially those with a purist and evangelical doctrine & piety, have also seen consensus as a block. They have feared that the consensus has seduced people to thinking that a life of broadly Christian values simply *is* the Christian life, and there is nothing more to it. They have feared this has sidelined the importance of faith and belief itself, blunting the church's religious distinctiveness by hiding behind its ethical consensus. So - many evangelicals were taught not so much to rejoice and make common cause with people who shared Christian values but rather to challenge them, to question whether their ethics had any significance beyond that of discredited Jewish 'works'. Only that way could the church persuade people to make room for 'real' faith. Public theology in this tradition became largely the public preaching of the Gospel of grace and the call to conversion, rather than a direct attempt share and shape the social and ethical direction of society.

These are, naturally, oversimplified positions and many churches have combined elements of both. But at least they serve to highlight some of the issues at stake.

4. Anatomy of a change.

*Imagine there's no Heaven
It's easy if you try
No hell below us
Above us only sky
Imagine all the people
Living for today*

*Imagine there's no countries
It isn't hard to do
Nothing to kill or die for
And no religion too
Imagine all the people
Living life in peace*

The change which, notionally, I'm going to date from the 1960s, is nicely characterized in this song by John Lennon. This is not just an idealistic song about peace which, like motherhood and apple pie, we might all agree with. It's actually an attack on Christian ethics and the shape of a society framed by Christian beliefs. It is not so much an attack on religious people for failing to live up to their ethics, nor even an explicit attack on the truth of faith, but an attack specifically on the values and ethics that faith produces.

- It implies that the eschatological beliefs of faith, fear of hell and hope of heaven, do ethical harm: they skew our capacity to live fully in the present; 'living for today'.

² The late-modern theologian and ethicist who drives much of this sort of appeal to distinctiveness is Stanley Hauerwas.

- It also implies that religion is essentially an allegiance to one group over against others, which leads to aggression and discrimination. If we can get rid of that basic allegiance to a group then there's 'nothing to kill or die for', there are no 'others' to oppress (which can be extended to women, or homosexuals, or people of different race, as well as different nationalities).

In other words, imagine no religion and the world would not just be a truer place but a *better* place. This shows clearly the shift in its true colours: i.e. it is not just that religion is untrue in beliefs but still right about ethics (that had long been mooted, not least in Victorian times); it is actually immoral and ethically deficient; it is dangerous, and divisive.

This was not, of course, a wholly new thought in the 1960 & 70's. Marx's 19th century onslaught on religion was much the same: it saw religion as the opiate of the masses, dulling them into false acquiescence in the injustices of this life because of the hope of heaven, which contaminated motivation in the here and now ('living for today'). George Eliot had also echoed this critique: 'so far as moral action is dependent on belief [in immortality] it is not truly moral - it is still in the stage of egoism..'³ But Lennon's 1971 song shows that this view now had more popular dissemination. The moral attack on religion and religious social ethics has come out of the intellectuals' closet and into the popular airwaves. This is continuing now, post 9/11, with Sam Harris, Dawkins, Hitchens *et al*. Although they are intellectuals they are also involved in public debate, not just hiding in academic closets.

So - the consensus is no longer there. It is a change that must surely have an effect on public theology and public ministry. At the very least it means we may now sometimes need to make a case not just for the truth of our beliefs, but for the truth of our ethics.

But before saying more about these implications for mission and public theology, a little more about the wider context of social change and secularisation in which this shift about the morality of religion is taking place. For it would be over-simplifying to suggest that this has been a simple shift, and society is moving in one clear direction only: i.e. from faith to antagonism. It is much more complex than that.

5. Locating the change in a wider context – our 'secular age'

The best analysis I know of our current social condition is Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age*.⁴ He offers a vast narrative of twists and turns and spirals in the relationship of religion, society and morality in which there is no one trajectory, and no one set of attitudes emerging for us now to deal with. Instead, a variety of different co-existing attitudes emerges. Rather than trying to condense his huge history of ideas and social practices in his own terms, I will summarize it by suggesting some different *characters* we might now find around us as a result: i.e. I will characterize the 'products' of the history he relates. As such they should provide a more immediate

³ *The Essays of George Eliot* (1857)

⁴ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Harvard, 2007)

bridge to public theology and ministry, because they help show the dispositions and attitudes with which we are dealing, and to which we need to relate.

1. I'll describe the first character as the 'Thomas Hardys' of this world. Hardy himself was a late 19th century novelist and poet. But he's still around in many people, perhaps in us too. He (or she), is 'A Time-Torn Man', as Claire Tomalin's evocatively titled biography of Hardy describes him.⁵ That is, he is someone living in different eras *within himself*. He is torn by beliefs that he once lived by then came to reject on intellectual, moral and social grounds, but they still haunt him and in part still attract him. His loss of faith is real, but it is not total, and his new world-view does not wholly convince him either - so that, as his biographer puts it, 'although he could no longer believe, he still cherished the memory of belief'. If we know his poetry we will recognise this as a frequent refrain. Most famously there is 'the darkling thrush' who sings its heart out to express a faith and hope for Hardy, which he could not quite do for himself yet still rather wished he could. We will recognise this state of mind in people we know: people who can no longer believe, but who still cherish the memory of belief. We should not be surprised if we find this within ourselves as well.

2. But there other characters around too. You could describe these, if you want another literary figure, as the Ian McEwan characters.⁶ These are not just intellectual figures, or the characters in Ian McEwan novels, they are everywhere - they are the 17 year old Sally or Sean down the street. These are people who have never really had a faith to lose. Although the memory of faith is still around in their culture (church buildings and occasional brushes with religion at weddings or funerals or media stories) it is not around *in them*, and never has been. Faith and its associations with ethics is not that something he/she has personally lost because he/she has never had it. Faith for them would be a strange *new* option amongst many others. It might sometimes seem attractive, but more likely just alien, or neutral. For the most part it is not really significant at all. It is not something for which he/she sees any need. They have never had it, and above all they think they have constructed satisfying and moral lives without it. They are part of a large culture which is intellectually, socially, and morally satisfied without faith and its morality. The more people there are like this around - next door, at work, on air, online - the more it has become generally apparent to everyone that 'atheists [or agnostics] make ordinary and good neighbours':⁷ i.e. it has become commonplace that people are good and share similar values without ever needing to root this in religion. Whether in fact they received at least some of their values from a legacy of Christian tradition is largely irrelevant to them. They have them, they feel adequately motivated by them, and they seem not demonstrably inferior, and sometimes superior, to religious people and their morality.

⁵ Claire Tomalin, *Thomas Hardy: The Time-Torn Man* (Viking, 2006)

⁶ Cf. especially Henry Perowne in Ian McEwan's novel *Saturday*

⁷ Cf. David Fergusson, *Faith and its Critics* (OUP 2009)

There are other characters around. There are the self-conscious militant atheists, outright critics of faith, and there are committed religious believers. These mix with the Hardys and McEwans. And it is precisely the variety and mix of *all* these which, for Charles Taylor, characterizes our so-called secular age. Nevertheless, within that mix he does draw attention especially to the second category, which I have called the McEwans. He sees them as a defining feature - in this sense: ours is not an age with *any* dominant view of, or for, or even against, faith; faith is no longer the main default view which people are now wistfully leaving; nor is it a dominant view in its antithesis: i.e. through a militant opposition to it (the strident new atheism is too like the certainties of faith itself to have a lasting impact); *instead, ours is predominantly an age in which faith and its associated works and ethic is precisely and only an option.* It is seen as part historical curiosity, often irrelevant, possibly dangerous, possibly attractive, but *not* seen as necessary or fundamental for morality or meaning in life.

6. How to respond? How should we do ‘public theology’?

In such a context what follows for the church? We clearly cannot behave just in the conventional ways of an established religion. As we’ve seen, we cannot assume we all agree in ethical matters and simply build a religious dimension out of this existing ethical connection with people. That may still be part of the picture, and where we can make connections by affirming common values we should (as argued, we do not have to be distinctive all the time to be authentic!) - *but* the whole point of Taylor’s analysis is that this is not the whole picture: we now have to relate to many others, some who are antagonistic to religion and the ethics it generates, and those many more who are indifferent and ignorant ... But how?

We could begin with humility. We could admit publicly where religion, in practice, *is* ethically questionable. Beliefs about hell and heaven have sometimes been misused to manipulate people into acquiescence, and to devalue this life here and now. Religion has been wrongly identified with ethnic pride and identity to create an ‘other’ and fuel conflict. And it still is. Imagine a world without *this* sort of religion, whether in Islamism or the extremes of Christian fundamentalism, and it would be a better world.

But having admitted this, surely we can also put up our hand in class to say it is not all like that! There is a theological task here. We need to correct the misperceptions. The hope of eternity and of resurrection, properly understood, should help us live more fully in the present, not less. The sort of collective identity, which Christian faith should generate does not set us over against others but *for* the ‘other’. The Gospel narratives, a proper Trinitarian theology, Paul’s revolutionary vision of inclusiveness, all insist on this. There is an apologetic task here too: we should also show that the charge is not always fair in practice, as well as in principle. As already indicated, there is a case to be made that the history of faith has included the drive to liberation and social justice, not just divisiveness and social damage.

However - this kind of combative apologetics assumes we are responding to attacks on the ethics of faith. The point is, we also need to remember these are not the only characters around. We need to remember those other characters: the wistful people

who have lost faith; and above all those who have never really had it, who see faith as irrelevant to morality. For these, combative apologetics may not be relevant. McEwan himself is an interesting spokesman for them. His own response is not to despise or attack all religion in itself, but to question its public collective form when it fuels the sort of passion and possessiveness which belongs to public groups. Combative apologetics alone might the effect only of reinforcing these fears. So what should we do to connect with these other characters?

One possible response is for religion to restrict itself. Perhaps it should not attempt to commend itself collectively in the public arena: perhaps it should strip itself of public passion and public collective action. Perhaps it should not even be trying to get attention *in class*. And this is a tempting response. As I have already hinted, some churches do, in effect, take this view. The theological grounds for this would be that faith is not primarily about ethics, especially not public ethics. So the debate on public policy ethics, whether health policy, economic priorities, or asylum seekers, is largely left to the secular sphere. The focus instead is on personal faith, and purely 'private' ethics. Should we go down that route?

I do not believe so – for all sorts of reasons:

- Theologically we simply cannot evade the challenge that though we may be called as individuals, we are called to be a public body, to act in the public sphere. That is what Christ *did*, and we are the body of Christ. It is also what Christ *taught* when he preached about a Kingdom.
- We know (from sociology as well as theology) that collective belonging does indeed produce passion and motivation: but this is motivation for all the good action that springs from faith, not just for aberrations of bad religion. Belonging to a group with a collective public identity demonstrably motivates 'social capital' of hospitality and generosity, and public service in communities. Are we to deny this motivating power for good, just because we fear its potential for ill?
- If we take away the public moral motivation and expression of faith we also remove a connection with God. A sense of God and of transcendence is integrally connected with visible and collective moral passion and commitment.⁸ The wistful ex believer, the indifferent agnostic, and the atheist can all respond to a moral passion acted out for the public good. Whether they see it in a l'Arche community, a youth club operating on mean streets, a political passion for justice embodied through a Tutu, or 'just' an unswerving commitment to hospitality and community life by a local church - any or all of these touch a deep chord about human mattering which can awaken a sense of transcendence. Generous moral action elicits a sense of metaphysical wonder and meaning. In short: when religious faith is expressed powerfully in ethical public action this offers people a transcendent grounding for their own deepest moral instincts and motivations, which they cannot otherwise explain.

⁸ Something perceived, in their very different ways, by traditions of thought as disparate as Kant and the new school of 'transformation theology' at King's College London, as well as Taylor

So of course this now leads to the obvious positive response. What will surely matter most is embodied action; the integrity of word and deed, the living out of justice and *agape*. This must always be high on our priorities. This can connect. And it will connect especially, I suspect, with those for whom both combative apologetics and pietistic withdrawal will always fall short.

7. Conclusion

Consensus may well have gone. Faith and its ethics is now critiqued, and even more commonly sidelined, considered merely an option. In this situation we cannot respond by retreating into safe private piety (nor sectarianism). We may need some robust apologetics. But more significant will be public and collective faith expressed with conviction and passion, especially in social ethics. At its best, this sort of public theology is not just jumping up for attention with a different view in ethics. It is helping to make sense of the depth of human mattering which informs *all* real ethics and social life, whether in believers or unbelievers. As such it is an evocative expression of the life of God Himself – and it will help lead people to God.