Christian ethics in the face of secularism

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This article deals with the implications of modern secularism for the concept of Christian ethics. How does the decline of Christianity in modern Western societies impede the validity of a Christian ethical approach to contemporary social issues? The concept secularism is explained. The argument then moves to the meta-theory of Christian ethics, namely the revelation of God as it is expressed in the 'book of nature', the written word, and the incarnate Word, Jesus Christ. The article concludes that as long as Christian ethics remains faithful to this meta-theory, understands the modern macro-ethical questions and maintains a deep social focus, it will remain relevant in a secular society.

Introduction

The concept secularism is used to describe two predicaments.[1] On the one hand it is used in a juridical and constitutional way and refers to the separation of Church and State in the development of modern democracies. On the other hand it is used as a sociological concept and refers to the process of the decline of religious belief, and people turning away from God and the church (Taylor 2007:2).[2] Secularism as a sociological concept therefore describes the marginalisation of religion in society and the decrease of its sphere of competence (Laeyendecker 2005:903; Martin 2011:105). In this sense the term is mostly used in the sphere of Christian discourse and is historically associated with the decline of Christianity in the wake of the surge of rationalism, pluralism and relativism (cf. Bauman 1998:64). Modern secular thought and action understands itself as secular or profane in the absolute, not relative sense (Szerszynski 2005:815). In this investigation the term will be used in the sociological sense, in other words to describe the decline of the influence of the Christian religion in certain parts of the world. Secularism does not have a uniform character and can differ from place to place and within the various Christian traditions. However, it can be regarded as a new master narrative in its own right (Martin 2011:25). It is now a powerful force in regions where Christianity was historically the civil religion, such as Europe and the colonies of the European countries. To a greater and lesser (but growing) extent, Christianity all over the world faces the current of secularism (cf. Hölscher 2010:198). This tendency is illustrated by the popularity of the best-seller, *The God delusion*, by Dawkins (2006).

The current phenomenon of growing secularism provokes the question: Is there a future for Christian ethics, and if so, how can Christian ethics be a potent role player in the ethical discourses in this age of secularism? (cf. Wogaman 1993:277). But before any scholar can attend to this question the essence and nature of Christian ethics should be elucidated. What exactly is Christian ethics? It goes without saying that Christian ethics is not a comprehensive concept. The conception can be defined from the perspective of a Roman Catholic or Protestant angle of approach. Or it can be clothed in different words within the context of various theological paradigms such as liberal theology, liberation theology, radical orthodoxy, fundamentalism, or secular theology. Not all of these paradigms will feel threatened by secularism. For example, some strands of liberal theology see in the social trend of secularism an ally in the process of reforming religion into a reason-orientated social movement aimed at the moral development of society and the spread of humanism. In the latter part of the previous century theology was characterised by the vibrant debate about the secularisation of theology itself as an answer to the decline of Christianity. This discourse followed the publication of Cox's *Secular City* (1967).

In this study the focus will be on Christian ethics as the discipline is defined in the Reformed theological tradition. Within this tradition different approaches and accentuations can also be

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1. It is indeed a honour and a pleasure to dedicate this article to Etienne de Villiers. His ethical reflections and writings enriched my own thinking and he instilled in many students a love for the discipline Theological Ethics. Furthermore his thorough and well-considered views on many modern-day ethical problems enhanced the relevance and role of Christian ethics in modern society.

2. In his extensive book Taylor (2007:20) argues that a third definition of secularity can be identified namely a secularity that: 'consists of new conditions of belief; it consists in a new shape to the experience which prompts to and is defined by belief; in a new context in which all search and questioning about the moral and the spiritual must proceed'. His distinction is indeed interesting and worthwhile to discuss. However, this article will not venture into such a discussion but will deal with secularity as the sociological process of the decline of belief and practice.

discerned, but an analysis of what can be regarded as the foundational issues in every variation of Reformed ethics is possible. The question at hand is then: What is the future of Christian ethics as defined and practiced in the Reformed tradition in the face of a rapidly secularising society and the many ideologies on the market-place of ideas? And: how can Christian ethics be a relevant role player in the moral renewal of society?

The central theoretical argument of this investigation is that Christian ethics has a future as an important moral role player in a secularising society if the discipline is thoroughly founded in a well-defined and plausible meta-theoretical foundation. The investigation consists of two sections. Firstly, the modern trend of secularism will be explained and secondly a case will be made for a meta-theoretical framework that can be conducive to modern day Christian ethical reflection. In conclusion an answer will be ventured for the question: 'Is there a future for Christian ethics?'

The features of contemporary secularism

Contemporary secularism has become a master narrative. However, Martin (2011) indicates that the process of secularism manifests itself differently in different places. He says:

> There are many other major examples of a particular history associated with a particular kind of secularization. Most obviously the history of liberal and republican France differs from the history of Protestant and Post-Protestant Britain and Scandinavia. There are great gulfs fixed between the histories of religion and secularization in Catholic Southern and Catholic Central Europe and what happened in Northern Protestant Europe. Protestant Europe also differs markedly from Protestant USA. (p. 27)

Still, in all these cases a pattern can be discerned which boils down to the decline of Christianity in the social sphere and the loss of influence of churches in the development of the moral fiber of communities. This pattern has certain major features that can be discerned in all the different manifestations of secularism.

In order to understand these features, the paradigm shift from modernism to post-modernism first has to be addressed. According to Kuhn (1970:viii) a paradigm can be defined as universally recognised scientific achievements that for a time provided model problems and solutions to a community of practitioners. Modernity was such a paradigm because it determined Western thought and culture for two centuries. When such a paradigm becomes unable to provide solutions to a community of practitioners, it has to make way for a new paradigm. The replacement of one paradigm by another is known as a paradigm shift. A paradigm shift occurs when the old paradigm becomes unable to provide solutions for new realities and problems (Kuhn 1970:111). Modernism became questionable because of the devastating effects of World War II and Western communities searched for solutions for the post-war chaos and the turmoil created

by the Cold war, the nuclear threat, and the dangerous arms race. Soon a new paradigm emerged, and it became known as post-modernism. Kuhn's thesis is well-known and widely accepted as a valid explanation of the emergence of this new post-modernist paradigm in Western civilisation (cf. Herholdt 1998:461).

Paradigm shifts have their own impetus and paradoxical influences. In the field of human thought and behaviour they do not take place by way of an abrupt end to an old paradigm and a beginning of a new paradigm, as is the case in natural sciences. The old paradigm rather phases out whilst the new paradigm phases in. For quite some time, the two paradigms will coexist and influence society (Bosch 1991:186). Both worldviews will in such a case have an effect on culture. Such a shift has certain paradoxical characteristics, which includes a simultaneous antitraditional thinking and behaviour versus revolt against change; a longing for the 'good old past' and a longing for 'new frontiers,' an experimenting with new moral norms versus a reaffirmation of the moral absolutes of the past. In the end the new paradigm will survive whilst the old one will fade away – if the new paradigm can respond to the new problems. In the meantime, both paradigms will have its effect on society. Contemporary Western society is in such a phase and is subjected to all the tensions and uncertainties of the shift from modernism to post-modernism. Some features of both paradigms will influence human thought and conduct, and will form the backbone of contemporary secularism. Due to the modernist paradigm the dominance of human reason and the influence of natural sciences constitute a prominent characteristic of secularism whilst the post-modernist paradigm adds moral pluralism to the fold.

The prominence of rationalism

The Enlightenment with its huge emphasis on rationalism and positivism introduced a new paradigm or master narrative into Western thought.[3] This paradigm became known as modernism. Although a paradigm shift from modernism to post-modernism is unfolding in Western society the modernist emphasis on the dominance of rationalism is still a major meta-narrative in Western thought. The paradigm shift from premodernism to modernism furthered the dominance of rationalism over faith and social science over theology. The dominance of rationalism is a major feature of this paradigm shift. Rationalism became the ambit of neutral science and the development of new social theories. Moreover, society became the new object of scientific approaches (Milbank 2006:51). Sociology sidelined theology and social theory became the popular prominent topic in the human sciences. Taylor (2007:21) refers to scholars who contend that modernity brings about secularity. Modern society, because of the dominance of rationalism, cannot but bring about the 'death of God'.

The new master narrative resulted in the growth of natural sciences and industrialisation. Although Martin (2011:119)

3. It is not the intention of this article to provide a well-argued critique of modernism and post-modernism. These concepts are described to picture the décor of the modern-day ethical discourses and the environment of Christian ethics. The question is not how Christian ethics should respond to rationalism and pluralism, but to indicate that it still has a plausible standing in the ethical discourses of this day and age.

suggests that there is no constant relation between the degree of scientific advance and a reduced profile of religious influence, belief and practice, the consequences of science for religion should not be underestimated. This trend resulted in a new appraisal of immanence at the cost of metaphysics and the interest in the transcendental. The emergence of the natural sciences with its emphasis on the explainable and a reality which is possible to subject to scientific investigation, moved the interest away from spirituality, the after-life and the Christian teachings of a new heaven and earth that will come with the second coming of Christ. Transcendence was moved out of the focus of scientific research into the domain of faith and religion.

Modernism also founded social planning and the necessity of management of structures on a macro level. In the centre of this adventure is the promotion, the advancement of an industrialised mass market economy (Bruce 2010:205) with its high regard for the consumer culture. This consumer culture developed into a new ideology and way of life that can be defined as consumerism. In a recent article on the implications of the manna-tradition in Exodus for modern consumerism (Vorster 2011:183), I dealt with consumerism at length and will therefore confine myself here with the essence of the social phenomenon. Consumerism is part and parcel of the modern neo-liberal economic philosophy. The term neo-liberalism is used as an indication of the philosophy of economy as developed by Friedman (1971:61, 1973:27; Feldberg, Jowell & Mulholland 1976:42). According to this philosophy, state initiatives in the economy should be limited as far as possible to let the markets control the economy. The philosophy departs from three important presuppositions: the complete freedom of the individual; the freedom of the markets to control the economy unhindered and the limitation of interference from the state in the economic sphere. All areas of life are managed according to business models. Even health care and education are shifting from non-profit to profit-seeking providers. All areas of public space are invaded by advertising and marketing efforts. Public services become privatised (Himes 2007:136). Advertising in emerging markets promote consumption as the way to a prosperous life.

According to the neo-liberal ideology the responsibility of the economy towards the poor is to 'make more and more profit' Küng (1997:191). The angle of approach is that growing and flourishing markets and more profit create job opportunities and that the poor ultimately benefit in this way. This philosophy is also called 'ultra-liberalism' or 'neo-capitalism' (Küng 1997:191). The neo-liberalist philosophy determined the economies of developing countries to a greater or lesser degree since the Thatcher- and Reagan eras. Meeks (1995:115) was correct in his 1995 assessment that the market driven economy will stay and will even expand in the foreseeable future. This philosophy became more and more influential and determines the economic policies of emerging markets. The market economy resulted in a market society (Antonaccio 2006:87). The success of such an economy is determined by

more and more consumption of produce in order to create growing markets. Coward (1997:266) characterises the global market economy as 'the most powerful contemporary world religion'. In his view the market economy is rapidly binding all corners of the globe tightly together into a common worldview with 'consumerism' as its dominant value-system. According to Himes (2007:132) consumerism has become the hallmark of American life. However, the same can be said about the developed world and the developing economies.

This policy therefore results in a lifestyle of consumerism, and Küng (1997) voices valid criticism against this detrimental aspect of neo-liberalism. He says that the total market economy easily develops into a total system and that all values become subjected to it. The total system leads to a 'domesticated' and 'depotentiated' ethics, and he is of opinion that:

> a domesticated and depotentiated ethic puts at risk its very own values and criteria; it serves only as a pretext and remains inefficient. And at the same time, as it is already proving to be the case in many areas and regions, a total market economy has devastating consequences: the law, instead of being grounded in universal human dignity, human rights and human responsibilities, can be formulated and manipulated in accordance with economic 'constraints' and group interests; politics capitulates to the market and the lobbying of pressure groups, and global speculation can shake national currencies; science delivers itself over to economic interests, and forfeits its function of achieving the most objective and critical control possible; culture deteriorates into being a contributor to the market, and art declines into commerce; ethics is ultimately sacrificed to power and profit, and is replaced by what 'brings success' and 'gives pleasure'; and finally even religion, offered as a commodity on the supermarket of ideas along with much that is para-religious or pseudo-religious, is mixed at will into a syncretistic cocktail for the convenient stilling of a religious thirst which sometimes overtakes even *homo oeconomicus*. (p. 212)

Modern consumerism poses huge challenges for Christian ethics. How should Christian ethics pave the way for concepts like altruism, stewardship, readiness to serve and obedience to God in an age and an environment where hard, rude pursuit of profits, wealth and prosperity are pursued under the banner of 'profits alleviate poverty'?

The prominence of moral pluralism

The essence of postmodern thought should be revisited if one wants to understand the emergence of moral relativism and religious pluralism. What is posmodernism? The term became popular after the publication of Lyotard's book *La condition post-modern: rapport sur le savoir* in 1979. Since then virtually all disciplines in the humanities and social sciences accepted the reality of a new emerging postmodernist paradigm, which implied a new direction in Western culture. However, it is worthwhile to mention that Taylor (2007) in his thorough analysis of the secular age does not discuss this topic as a major new paradigm. Thus not all philosophers accept the thesis of a post-modernist paradigm. But let us listen to the initial conceptualisation of this idea by its major

exponent Lyotard. According to Lyotard (1991:xxiii) the time of the meta-narrative, which was the strength of modernism, has elapsed. He defines the emerging postmodernism as incredulity towards these meta-narratives of the past (the Enlightenment, Christianity and Great Western Institutions). He says:

> The narrative function is losing its functors, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, and its great goal. It is being dispersed in clouds of narrative language elements – narrative but also denotative, prescriptive, descriptive and so on. Conveyed with each cloud are pragmatic valencies specific to its kind. Each of us lives at the intersection of many of these. (Lyotard 1991:xxiv)

Postmodernism is in his view a new condition that questions the suitability of the meta-narratives of the past. It questions both Christianity and the Enlightenment, both the Western ethos and its great institutions and the premise of rationalism and its scientific methods. It became a new paradigm with new features and with a new meat-ethic, although, as has been said, it did not replace the essence of modernist thinking. It rather introduces the notion of pluralism. The fact is that the great narrative of Christianity is questioned and the emerging new paradigm runs against the core values of conservative Christians. Just like modernism, it paves the way for a secular age not in the sense that religion is seen as out-dated (as in the case of modernism), but in the sense that religions are but just a part of human experience and spirituality (cf. also Cliteur 2010:172). Therefore, some scholars typify the emerging paradigm in Western culture as post-Christian. Cupitt (1999), for example, expresses the reason for this new description of the modern age in the following words:

> Because we are now settling down into our new post-modern condition, even taking it for granted as normality, we are becoming aware that a rupture has occurred. History has 'ended'; in the sense that we suddenly find that we no longer have any form of the old belief in progress or in linear eschatological time. That is, we are no longer gripped by any of the old stories about a better thereafter. Such stories used to fill us with hope. They justified present faith, present action, present disciplinary authority, and they helped to make tolerable present hardships and incompleteness's (sic!). But now the stories – whether Catholic, Marxist, or liberal – seem all to have lost their strength. (p. 218)

Cupitt is of the opinion that in this radically postmodern world, philosophy, religion and ethics need to be drastically rethought. The validity of this statement becomes clear when the relevant features of postmodernism is unfolded. For the purposes of this study it is not necessary to enter into a thorough explanation and evaluation of the total philosophy of postmodernism. However, two features of postmodernism are worthwhile to discuss shortly in this debate dealing with its relevance to the phenomenon of religious fundamentalism today. Firstly, postmodernism posits that truth is relative and that moral codes can never be seen as fixed codes (see Gill 1997:153). In his incisive explanation of this new condition, Gill (1997:17) says that the notion of secular, rational progress implicit in much of the Enlightenment tradition has become increasingly implausible. In addition, more ancient

assumptions that the European countries are fundamentally Christian in ethos has also become implausible. According to him postmodernism claims that no single meta-narrative can hope to secure consensus in a postmodern culture. However, this notion can be questioned and it may be asked whether pluralism itself does not become a meta-theory. Nevertheless, both secular rationalism and Christian belief are now seen in the postmodernist discourse as faith positions held variously by individuals who lack any common meta-position. Therefore, ethics and rationality have now more generally become privatised. Instead of relying on and promoting the great meta-narratives of the past, postmodernism presents the credibility of pluralism. This is indeed a weak link in the postmodernist moral discourse, because a privatised morality and scattered moral communities will not be able to sustain society

This fundamental argument of postmodernism is the result of an antimodernist view of the condition of knowledge (Lyotard 2004:123). The best way to explain this condition is to discuss the postmodernist view of doing science. According to the postmodernist view of the methodology of science, the focus of scientific research should no longer be on the premise of objectivity in doing science, but on the subject, the scientist themself. Postmodernism is not interested only in the object of research, which could be approached objectively according to modernism, but in the scientists with their presuppositions. The reason for this lack of interest lies in the fact that all knowledge is gained through the filters of presuppositions. Presuppositions play a determining role in science. Whilst meta-narratives have ceased to exist, the scientists approach their field of study from certain angles or presuppositions that in the end determine their results. Due to the interaction between the presuppositions and the results the matter of truth becomes relative. No concept can escape this structure (Derrida 2004:148). How can one result be elevated to the true fixed result when it is inherently determined by a presupposition? What gives it more credibility than any other result reached through another presupposition? In the area of culture it leads to the viewpoint that if there are no meta-narratives, it is likely that there will be no common understanding of meta-ethics (Gill 1997:18). Everyone will in the end determine their own truths that can suit them in their own situations and environments. There can be no fixed truths or ethical norms. What is perceived as morally sound in one community may be regarded as immoral in another. This pattern of reasoning poses a new environment for Christian ethics that claims to be essentially deontological in nature.

But postmodern thought also differs from modernism because it asserts that rationalism cannot claim the truth over and above religion. Just as modernism questioned religion, postmodernism questions rationalism and the 'reasonable claim to truth'. Although rationalism is still prominent in contemporary culture, postmodernism moves religion back into the fold of human experience because truth is relative. More than one truth can be plausible at the same time. More than one moral norm can be acceptable in the same situation.

Therefore, postmodernism rejects the idea of absolute truths, principles and norms. It professes the validity of diversity and relativity in the definition of truth and moral virtues. The strict distinction of virtue and vice and the grand narratives of modernism are replaced by a nuanced view of the 'virtues of some' and the 'virtues of others'. Relativism replaces absolutism of certain invariable truths and norms. Humankind has to accept that diversity, and pluralism has become a fact of life. Küng (1991:20) asserts that humankind moves in the direction of a post-ideological culture, which in future will be a culture more orientated towards an overall plurality. Therefore, 'everything goes' and 'nothing is sacred'.

The prominence of rationalism (modernism) and the prominence of moral relativism (postmodernism) are the two fundamental features in contemporary debates that challenge the foundation and practice of Christian ethics. How can Christian ethics with its claim of transcendental anchors, spiritual overtones and moral absolutes function in an academic environment where rationalism and moral relativism have become the main attributes? Should all religious ethics be replaced by what Cliteur (2010:173) calls 'moral secularism'? The recent study of Pope (2007:76) ventured to deal with this question in the face of human evolution. The next few paragraphs will aim to address these questions from a meta-theoretical angle of approach.

Meta-theoretical presuppositions of Christian ethics

After explaining the grand narratives of secularism, Martin (2011:60) asks the question of what matters for the future of Christianity. He answers that it depends on whether a tent of salvation pitched in the vulnerability of the body, offered once for all in the wilderness of history, still invites humanity to come, and sit down to eat. His metaphor speaks for itself. To my mind one crucial issue is of the utmost importance if one wants to conclude that Christian ethics indeed has a future. This issue is the extent and the content of the revelation of God as the basis of Christian morality and the guideline for Christian conduct.

The revelation of God

What do we mean by the revelation of God and what are the characteristics of this revelation? This question is important in the discourse about secularism, because when both Christian ethics and secular critiques err on this topic the relevance of Christian ethics is at stake. Let us first pay attention to a popular but dangerous view in Christianity that has exactly this result. This is the view of divine revelation in the (emerging) Christian fundamentalism. According to fundamentalism the revelation of God is embedded in Scripture, and especially in a literal and a-historical reading of the Biblical text. This view of Scripture is also called Biblicism. According to Ritschl (1999:255) this term is commonly used to denote a particular way of dealing with the Bible, especially the expectation that it can be transposed directly into modern thought and forms or lifestyles. In his thorough study on

the ethical meaning of the Ten Commandments in modern society, Douma (1996:363) also warns against the dangers of Biblicism for the understanding and application of Christian ethics. By Biblicism he understands that appeal to Scripture which uses the biblical texts in an atomistic (isolated) way by lifting them out of their immediate contexts or out of the whole context of Scripture. Biblicism is characterised by its neglect of the difference in circumstances between then (the time in which the texts being cited were written) and now. With regard to Christian ethics the literal Bible is seen as the only source for Christian ethical reflection. This use of Scripture evokes valid criticism against Christian morality from a secular perspective, for example, the issue of the violence in the Old Testament as a result of divine commands. Cliteur (2010:105) raises many questions about the morality of the Old Testament. But both Biblicism and Cliteur's critique are the results of a wrong approach to the Biblical revelation (cf. also Vorster 2008:46–57).

Wogaman (1993:278) reminds us that Christian ethics may certainly not abandon the Bible, because it remains the sine qua non of basic theological insight. But he pleads for a more open and deeper use of Scripture that commits Christian ethics to theological reflection that is more than exegetical. The theological task must employ Scripture tradition, experience and reason. According to the classic Reformed confession, the Belgic Confession, based on Calvin's *Institutes* 1.6.1.26, reveals, God reveals himself in two ways. The article reads:

> We know Him by two means: first, by the creation, preservation and government of the universe; which is before our eyes a most elegant book, wherein all creatures, great and small, are as so many characters leading us to contemplate the invisible things of God namely, His eternal power and divinity, as the apostle Paul saith (Rom 1:20). All things are sufficient to convince men, and leave them without excuse. Secondly, He makes Himself more clearly and fully known by His divine Word, that is to say, as far as is necessary for us to know in this life, to His glory and our salvation. (Beeke & Ferguson 1999:8)

In view of John 1:1 and the contents of this confession one can conclude that the revelation of God has three manifestations namely, (1) the creational word (the book of nature), (2) the written word (the Bible), and (4) the incarnate Word (Jesus Christ). All three these manifestations of the revelation of God are necessary for a Christian ethical epistemology in the face of the current secular outlook. It is therefore essential to focus shortly on each of these.

The 'book of nature' (creational gifts or natural law)

The revelation of God in the book of nature entails that God has bestowed on every human creature a sense of morality. These gifts were called natural law in the early Reformation (Witte 2007:156). I prefer the term creational gifts, which entail gifts that were given by God to all people, not to bring about their own salvation, but to preserve law and order in human society. Therefore any person can formulate good norms and live by good moral norms and every government, irrespective of persuasion, can make a good law. Moral views

depend on deeply held notions of the good. Everyone draws on such sources (Taylor 2010:405).

The recognition of natural law or creational gifts in the furtherance of a Christian Reformed epistemology is important because it safeguards Christian ethics from an exclusive claim on moral authority and Biblicism. In a recent study Grabill (2006:3) discusses the new interest in the concept of natural law in Protestant ethics. There was a phase of Barthian rejection of natural law in its answer to the theological justification of National Socialism in Germany by the Reichskirche. However, since then a new interest has grown in this concept, especially as a source of Christian moral thought. Christian ethics can draw from natural law (creational gifts) in a secular environment. In this respect the value of natural law in the Christian ethical discourse about bio-ethics and eco-ethics comes to mind. However, the use of natural law in the Christian ethical approach must answer to one condition. Such a morality should not run against the thrust of the other sources of Christian moral thinking, namely the written word and the incarnate Word. In this respect Barth's criticism of the use of natural law is relevant. Natural law cannot supersede the great commandment and the biblical message of reconciliation in order to provide a religious and moral backbone for ideologies. This erroneous use of natural law was evident in the Christian justification of National Socialism in Germany in the 1930s and Apartheid in South Africa in the 1970s. The morals derived from natural law must function within the ambit of the great commandment, which is the deepest foundation of Christian ethics.

The written word

In the use of the written word (Scripture) the utilisation of 'proof texts' is always tempting because it is an easy way to come to terms with certain obvious moral issues and to give credibility to a certain point of view by claiming the authority of Scripture. The Larger Westminster Catechism (1648) provides a guideline on how the Bible should be interpreted (for the text of this document cf. Beeke & Ferguson 1999:11). According to this confession the Scriptures manifest themselves to be the Scripture by inter alia, the consent of all the parts (Ac 10:43; 26:22) and the scope of the whole.

In the classic Reformed view Scripture is seen as a book containing a continuous message. It is the message of God's renewal of the fallen world in Jesus Christ. Various underlying themes unfold this main message, such as God's election of his people, the Covenant, judgement and grace, transience and resurrection. The main theme is the kingship of God, which means God's kingship and his entering into a personal relationship (Covenant) with mankind. Bright (1973:7) echoes this conviction with his well-known statement that the concept of the kingdom of God involves in a sense the total message of the Bible. In spite of the fact that Bright's emphasis on the kingdom as the main thread in the Bible can be questioned, the fact is that he clearly proves that the Bible should be approached as a source with a continuous message, and that individual texts should be read against this background.

It seems that for this reason Scripture was not written in a linear historical or a logic way. There are repetitions of stories, for example in the books of Kings and Chronicles. There are four gospels, and it seems that the apostles deal with certain issues repeatedly and even in seemingly conflicting ways. No account is given of certain phases in the history of Israel. However, it is not the intention of Scripture to present a historical survey. It deals with the themes important to understand the whole message. Some accounts will approach a topic from a different angle than others. Certain writers wrote for different audiences. However, the main message is the same and the various parts are in harmony when the part is argued against the background of the whole. There is in the end mutual consent between the authors and their messages. Seemingly conflicting parts can be reconciled when viewing them against the background of the whole message.

The justification of the authority of the Scripture, in the 'scope of the whole', flows from the acceptance of the 'consent of all the parts'. Scripture has authority as a developing organism containing a basic message by way of various sub-themes. That is the reason why the 'scope of the whole' is presented as an argument in favour of the divine authority of Scripture. This view has severe implications for biblical interpretation. Scripture cannot be interpreted without taking cognisance of the scope of the whole.

This message is not a chronological story, but a story in a revelation-historical sense. Some speak of salvation-history. The history of revelation is the unfolding of the creation, renewal, up-building and future of God's kingdom. Understanding this story involves both an exegetical and a theological component if it has to be carried out to completion. Kaiser and Silva (1994:193) point out that the exegetical part of the interpretative process examines the grammatical, historical and literary aspects of the texts. Once these tasks have been concluded, they need to be related to the overall thought of the individual book being studied and to the whole canon of Scripture. In other words, biblical texts can be interpreted through an exegetical process, taking into account the grammar of the original languages and the cultural background of the particular text, but eventually they must be reconciled in view of the whole story.

To utilise the revelation in the book of nature and the written word, does not entail that Christian morality do not depend on reason also. The 'gifts of creation' brings reason into the fold. People may use reason and also a secular moral norm to choose between good and evil. But the difference between Christian ethics and secular ethics is that Christian ethics has an additional source of morality as well as a guideline to evaluate the morals of reason. Christian hermeneutics should therefore also be open to the influence and value of the role of cultures, tradition and experience as long as these withstand the test of the book of nature and the written word.

The incarnate Word

Thirdly, Christian ethics draw on the incarnate Word, and that is Jesus Christ himself (Jn 1: 1). God revealed himself in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Waters (2010:5) calls the incarnation of the Word of God the formative moment of the Christian moral life. He continues to say that in this act God completes the reconciliation with creation and its creatures that were initiated in the covenant with Israel. Christ indicates the 'way of his father' in his teachings and conduct. He is given as the example of true Christian morality. Christians should follow in the footsteps of Christ. Filled with the mind of Christ they should imitate his attitude (Phlp 2:5–11) which is an attitude of self-sacrifice (kenosis); servanthood, humility and obedience to God. (cf. Martin 1997:171; Schrenck 1984:193; Vorster 2007:17).

Many noble principles in the Christian moral theory flow from the teachings and conduct of the incarnate Word. In addition to his example of self-sacrifice, servanthood, humility and obedience to God, Christ teaches Christians the way of repentance, forgiveness, reconciliation and restoration. Following in his footsteps, Christians should promote peace and bring hope. They have to be the custodians for justice for the poor and the oppressed and the watchdogs of the powers of the day. The morals of the incarnate Word give new meaning to all other Christian ethical principles. Whatever a Christian moral teacher derives from the 'book of creation' and the written word, such as the violence in the Old Testament, it can never contradict the morals taught by the incarnate Word, Jesus Christ. He gives full meaning to all other Christian moral teachings.

In the light of this explanation of the revelation of God as the source of biblical ethics and the conditions set for the understanding of Christian morality, the criticism of Cliteur against Christian morality can be addressed. He can be seen as an exponent of critique against Christian morality from a secular perspective. Cliteur (2010:110) chooses, amongst others, the story of Phinehas in Numbers 25:1–18 to prove that in this respect the Bible justifies biblical terrorism. Such a justification, amongst others, convinces him that Christian ethics are prone to the justification of violence in the name of God and enhances him to find solace in a secular outlook. But how does he interpret this passage in Scripture? To explain his point of view more precisely: Cliteur (2010:107) describes Phinehas as a 'religious terrorist' because Phinehas is prepared, on religious grounds, to use violence against the citizens of the state, thereby violating the law of the state and defying legitimate authority. He uses the definition of Guiora (terrorism is the conflict between nation-states and non-state entities) to come to this conclusion. Furthermore, what Cliteur finds even more disturbing is that God rewarded Phinehas for his actions. The whole worldview underlying this occurrence is in his view hard to reconcile with modern freedom of religion, freedom of speech, freedom of conscience, free inquiry and other fundamental rights ingrained in the concept of liberal democracy. Cliteur employs this critique on the biblical passage, amongst others, to question Christian morality.

However, as said earlier, his own hermeneutical approach is Biblicist because he lost sight of the 'consent of the parts' and the 'scope of the whole' and God's revelation in the incarnate Word. Read within the hermeneutical paradigm discussed above, the moral implications of the Phinehas-story will be quite different from Cliteur's perspective. In this story God protected his honor amongst his people. As the God of the covenant he demands a sacrifice for evil committed. In the Old Testament dispensation reconciliation between God and his people was founded in repentance and conversion after an offering. The norm does not lie in the offering, but in the intention to reconcile with God. The New Testament sheds new light on the requirements of the covenant. The final sacrifice is Christ. He introduces the eternal covenant between God and his people, the believers from all nations on earth. Christ, the incarnate Word, becomes thus the centre of Christian morality. The 'people of God' in the New Testament dispensation is the church which is a 'community of moral being' (Wogaman 1993:297) and a 'community of character' (Hauerwas 1991). As said above, all Christian conduct should answer to the essence of the revelation in the incarnate Word and should not run against the fiber of this revelation. Can a Christian be a religious terrorist according to the Phinehas narrative? Certainly not, because the ethics of the incarnate Word teaches Christians the commandment of love also towards the enemy, and to turn the other cheek. What the Phinehas narrative does teach is that God should be honored and glorified by way of the conduct and lifestyle of Christians. Cliteur (2010:107) does not employ sound hermeneutical principles in his evaluation of Scripture and this deficiency in his argument leads to a distorted picture of what Christian morality entails.

A future for Christian ethics?

Should Christian ethics be replaced by what Cliteur (2010:173) calls 'moral secularism'? Such a shift should not be pursued because Christian ethics is essentially a religious ethic and is deeply founded in the revelation of God. Without this foundation Christian ethics is unthinkable. The fact is that as long as Christianity exists, Christian ethics will be a moral role-player. Martin (2011:43) is correct when he says that the future of Christianity depends not on what scientific advance may show, but on whether the Christian drama continues to make sense. The question is rather whether Christian ethics will be relevant. Relevance is the issue. Can Christian ethics contribute in solving the macro-moral issues of the day? Will it be able to understand and teach a faithful Christian moral perspective? (Wogaman 1993:277). Can it still make sense in the contemporary world?

My conclusion is that Christian ethics can indeed do so when it is practiced as a religious ethics, founded in the revelation of God as this revelation is given to humans in the book of nature, the written word and the incarnate Word. Christian ethics departs from a position of faith (just as all other ideologies), but provides a corpus of ethical principles and norms conducive to the moral development of society. The foundation in the revelation of God does not mean that

Christian ethics is irrational. To draw on the 'book of nature' means to employ human reason in the establishment of moral codes. Developed within the framework of the full revelation of God, which includes human reason as a creational gift, it can transcend the critique from a rationalist position and also the fundamentalist perspective. The revelation of God provides ethical principles that can be applied to modern macro-ethical questions. Christian ethical discourse must therefore be more than a cheap superficial Biblicist discourse. It has to grapple with the full revelation of God. It must come to a deep understanding of the moral issues of the day and must answer the call of humanity for moral directives in this age where inhumanity rules in many spheres. Christian ethics should be founded in the revelation of God as a paradigm-driven ethics with a deep social focus. With a meta-theory, based on the threefold revelation of God, Christian ethics can be relevant and has a valid standing within the contemporary ethical discourses. With this mea-theory, Christian ethics can still make sense.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

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