

The distinctiveness of Christian morality – Reflections after 30 years

Author:D. Etienne de Villiers¹**Affiliation:**¹Emeritus Professor, Faculty of Theology, University of Pretoria, South Africa**Correspondence to:**

Etienne de Villiers

Email:

etienne.devilliers@up.ac.za

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7196, South Africa**Dates:**

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I completed my doctoral dissertation on *The distinctiveness of Christian morality* in 1978. In this article, now more than 30 years later, I critically examined the extent to which the view that I developed in my doctoral dissertation is still valid today and to what extent it stands to be corrected in the light of developments in Christian ethics in the meantime. Firstly, I provided a brief summary of the view developed in the dissertation. Secondly, I discussed the influential alternative view of Stanley Hauerwas and attempted to identify ways in which his view necessitates corrections to my own view in the dissertation. Thirdly, I criticised the one-sidedness of Hauerwas's view on the distinctiveness of Christian morality and discussed ways in which we need to go beyond Hauerwas's view in order to develop a more satisfactory and also more inclusive approach.

Introduction

I commenced my doctoral studies at the Free University (VU), Amsterdam, in April 1972, with the intention to specialise in Systematic Theology and – like so many other South African theologians – write my doctoral dissertation under the supervision of the renowned Gerrit Berkouwer. Events did not turn out that way, however. I was, from the start, fascinated by the doctoral seminars in Ethics conducted by a younger colleague of Berkouwer, Harry Kuitert. Kuitert had a rare gift for stimulating critical thought and discussion amongst students. He introduced us not only to Christian ethical thought, but also to the challenges posed to Christian ethics by analytical moral philosophers, evolutionary ethicists, anthropologists and sociologists. Coming from a conservative Reformed theological background, I felt myself challenged to counter Kuitert's view that there is nothing distinctive with regard to the content of Christian morality and that only the motivation Christians have for doing what is morally right could be described as distinctive. The result was that I became increasingly drawn into the academic field of Christian Ethics. In my final paper for the doctoral examination, I supported Wolfgang Pannenberg's criticism against Gerhard Ebeling's – but also Kuitert's – view that the rightness of moral guidelines for action is self-evident. And, in the end, I decided to write my doctoral thesis on the topic of 'The distinctiveness of Christian morality' (De Villiers 1978). Such a decision had the ironic result that Kuitert – being the professor in Ethics – became the supervisor of my doctoral dissertation – much to the dismay of my father and some of his theological colleagues in South Africa.

The view in the doctoral dissertation

I thought it wise in my doctoral dissertation not to confront the arguments of Kuitert against the distinctiveness of Christian morality head-on, but to rather adopt a more indirect approach. I departed from the renewed emphasis on the distinctiveness of Christian morality in Protestant theology during the first part of the 20th century, on account of the influence of especially Karl Barth and, in Roman Catholic theology, as a result of the influence of especially F. Tillmann. Christian morality was regarded as distinctive in these theological circles in at least three respects (De Villiers 1978:8–9):

- Christians gain insight into what they ought to do morally in a distinctive way, namely by means of the revelation of God's will through his Word.
- Christians justify their moral convictions in a distinctive way, namely by appealing to God's will as the foundation of their moral convictions.
- Christian morality has a distinctive content in the sense that they have moral duties not subscribed to by non-Christians.

This emphasis on the distinctiveness of Christian morality was, from the 1960s, increasingly questioned in both Protestant and Roman Catholic circles. An alternative view gained influence in Christian ethics, which supported one or the other version of the thesis of the autonomy of morality in relation to Christian doctrinal beliefs (De Villiers 1978:9–14). On account of these divergent views I set myself the task, in the first part of the dissertation, to find out to what

extent morality can be said to be autonomous of, or rather dependent on, religious beliefs and, in the second part, to what extent one can justifiably speak of the distinctiveness of a specifically Christian morality.

Although I did not engage in any direct dialogue with Kuitert, it is, in hindsight, clear to me that the strong attention I gave in the first part of the dissertation to research of a purely philosophical, cultural anthropological and religious studies nature, had much to do with the fact that he based most of his arguments against the thesis of the distinctiveness of Christian morality on such research. I endeavoured to demonstrate in my dissertation that no convincing philosophical arguments or research evidence from cultural anthropology and religious studies could support the thesis that religious beliefs have no influence on the content of morality. I criticised two versions of the theory on the self-evidence of moral rightness, developed by Thomas Aquinas and G.E. Moore respectively, which ruled out the influence of religious beliefs on the content of morality. I defined the *morality* of a people as that part of their values and action guidelines that has reference to the consideration of the well-being of others (De Villiers 1978:60). On the basis of this definition, I identified three factors that contribute to differences with regard to the content of the moral values and action guidelines of individuals and cultural groups (De Villiers 1978:64–73):

- Divergent beliefs on what the well-being of human beings entails.
- Divergent beliefs on the consideration that ought to be given to the well-being of others in comparison to one's own well-being.
- Divergent constative beliefs on the given options for action and the consequences of one's actions.

I went on to demonstrate how divergent religious beliefs on human well-being or salvation, on the consideration of the well-being of others and on the available options for action and the consequences of one's actions do exert influence on the content of the morality of a particular religious community and can even lend a certain distinctiveness to it (De Villiers 1978:92–105).

On the basis of the influence religious beliefs exert on morality, I concluded, in the first part of the dissertation, that the moral values and action guidelines of a particular religious group can be distinctive in two respects. Some of these values and guidelines can be regarded as distinctive of the religious group *in principle* when certain typical *religious* terminology that distinguishes their religious beliefs from those of other religious groups forms part of it. The moral action guideline: 'One should witness to the unsaved that salvation is only found in Jesus Christ', is an example of a moral action guideline that is distinctively Christian in principle. This type of distinctive moral action guideline (and value) usually only makes out a very small part of the morality of religious groups. The greatest part of the morality of religious groups consists of moral values and action guidelines in which no typical religious terminology is used. This does not mean

that such moral values and action guidelines cannot be distinctive of a particular religious group. It may be that, at a particular point in time, these particular moral values and actions guidelines do distinguish such a religious group from other religious groups. There is, however, nothing that prevents other religious groups to take over such moral values and action guidelines and incorporate them into their own moralities if they do not clash with their existing moral beliefs. In fact, in the course of history, religious groups were often exposed to the influence of other religious groups and took over moral values and action guidelines from them on a regular basis. The implication of this is, of course, that the distinctiveness of the morality of a particular religious group, say the Christians, is, for the most part, something that depends on historical coincidence. It also depends on which religious groups are compared with one another (De Villiers 1978:109–115).

All of this is also true when the distinctiveness of specifically Christian morality is under discussion. The morality of different Christian confessions, and even Christian denominations, can, at certain points in time, differ in some respects, given the fact that divergent conceptions of Christian doctrine and other factors can influence the content of their moralities. This, of course, complicates matters if the aim is to establish whether Christian morality is distinctive, as was the case with my dissertation. I realised at the time that it would be a futile exercise to, in the second part of my dissertation, attempt to investigate the moralities of the different Christian confessions, or of a representative number of Christian denominations. Such an investigation would, in any case, have been more sociological than Christian ethical and would have fallen outside my academic competency. I therefore restricted my investigation to the question: 'Are the moral beliefs that Christians *ought to have* distinctive in comparison to those of non-Christians?' As a result, I departed in each of the last three chapters of the dissertation from what I as a Reformed Christian regarded as acceptable Christian moral beliefs (De Villiers 1978:117–119).

In the first of these final three chapters, I defended the undeniable distinctive Christian belief that the will of God (meaning the Triune God) is the final measure for the actions of Christians against the criticism, of mainly analytical philosophers, that such a belief is conceptually invalid and morally objectionable. I concluded that there is no reason for Christians to relinquish their distinctive conviction that the will of God is the final measure of the way they should conduct themselves (De Villiers 1978:121–150).

In the second chapter, I took to task Karl Barth's view on how Christians gain knowledge of the moral will of God. Barth was convinced that the manner in which Christians gain insight into the will of God is clearly distinctive. This distinctiveness does not only lie in the fact that when they seek the morally good they rely on the will of God as their final measure, but also in that God himself reveals to them in his Command, which is always immediate and concrete, what is morally good. Barth denies that any

Christian initiative can, in any way, assist them to gain insight into the will of God. He is especially critical of the role allocated to casuistry in Christian ethics in the past as a means to gain insight into the will of God by applying general moral principles – mostly retrieved from Scripture – to concrete cases and situations. When ethics becomes casuistry, the ethicist, in Barth's opinion, places themselves on the throne of God and acts as judge, deciding on what is right and wrong (De Villiers 1978:153–164). In my criticism of Barth, I did not only point out certain inconsistencies in his argument, but also developed an alternative view of the manner in which Christians gain insight into the moral will of God, based on A.A. van Ruler's view of the work of the Holy Spirit in terms of what he calls 'theonomic reciprocity'. Van Ruler is of the opinion that the New Testament teaches that the Holy Spirit, who 'dwells in us', works in a hidden way not only *in* and *at* us, but also *with* us, so that what he works in us is always executed by us as our own work. I concluded that the implication is that God, in and through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, also provides insight into his moral will by incorporating and activating all our faculties of cognition. Or to put it differently: God reveals his concrete moral will to Christians in and through the process of moral deliberation, in which they come to a personal judgement on the morally right thing to do in a particular situation (De Villiers 1978:165–174). The manner in which Christians gain insight into what is morally right is thus not distinctive in the sense that they – unlike other people – sidestep the process of moral deliberation. When Christians are involved in the process of moral decision-making, distinctive features do, however, come to the fore, amongst others as a result of the central role the biblical message plays in this process as the foundational frame of reference for Christians (De Villiers 1978:177–184).

In the final dissertation chapter, I discussed the issue of the distinctive content of Christian morality. My main interlocutors were Roman Catholic moral theologians, including J. Fuchs and A. Auer, who adhered to the thesis of the autonomy of morality and thus denied that the distinctiveness of Christian morality can be found in its content. In their opinion, it rather lies in the context of the horizon of meaning of the Christian belief in which the morality of Christians is integrated, and which provides to them extra reasons and extra motivation to do what is morally right (De Villiers 1978:186–197). In my criticism of these authors' views, I pointed out that even they could not avoid referring to Christian ethical notions that have a distinctive content. My main criticism was, however, that they simplified the issue of the distinctiveness of Christian morality by restricting it to what is, *in principle*, distinctive to it, whilst Christian morality can also be distinctive in content, in comparison to the moralities of non-Christians and with respect to values and action guidelines that can, in principle, be taken over by other groups. One of their main arguments was that the adoption on a large scale by biblical authors of moral notions from non-Israelite and non-Christian sources provide ample proof that, even in the Bible, morality was formulated in complete independence of religious beliefs.

In countering their argument, I tried to demonstrate that not only resemblances but also differences with regard to content can be pointed out between biblical morality and the morality of other groups in the ancient Near East and that these differences, at least in part, had to do with the divergent religious beliefs of Israel and the early church. In the New Testament, for example, the prioritisation, radicalisation and universalisation of the command of neighbourly love did not only distinguish Christian morality from the moralities of contemporary groups in the Roman Empire, but also correlated with the belief in, and experience of, the unconditional and inclusive mercy of God manifested in Christ's incarnation and death on the cross (De Villiers 1978:197–212).

The general conclusion of the dissertation was that one could rightly assert that Christian morality is distinctive in more than one respect. On account of the considerable resemblance between the moralities of Christians and non-Christians, a second general conclusion was that communication and cooperation between them was not only a real but also a legitimate possibility.

Hauerwas's alternative view

Although, today, I stand by most of what I wrote in my dissertation, I must admit that my approach to the discussion of the distinctiveness of Christian morality was deficient in two respects:

- It departed from a too narrow definition of morality and, as a result, also of Christian ethics.
- It endeavoured to demonstrate the distinctiveness of the content of Christian morality too one-sidedly in terms of moral action guidelines.

In my definition of morality, I relied strongly on the extensive meta-ethical discussion on the nature and the definition of moral language in English analytical philosophy after the Second World War. I was convinced by the criticism of the purely formal definitions of morality of C.L. Stevenson and R.M. Hare, as expressed by G.J. Warnock (1967:49–50). Like Warnock, I was of the opinion that moral language is recognised by its reference to a particular *content*, namely the well-being of people, by providing guidance on how acting to the disadvantage of people could be prevented or how acting to the advantage of people could be enhanced. The result was that my discussion of the distinctiveness of Christian morality was also restricted to inter-relational human behaviour and to action guidelines regulating such behaviour. This did not allow me to produce a very strong statement of the distinctiveness of the content of Christian morality. I could only demonstrate that certain action guidelines that form part of Christian morality are distinctive *in principle* and that some action guidelines containing no typical religious terminology could on occasion be distinctive of Christian morality, depending on the point in time and the sample of moralities involved in the comparison.

After reading Kurt Bayertz's (2004) book, *Warum überhaupt moralisch sein?*, I realised that my definition of morality is

an example of a modern trend to provide a rather narrow definition of this concept. In this work, Bayertz namely identifies two important uses of the concept of morality. In the first, a wider use of the concept 'morality' refers to a complex of norms, values or ideals that provides every individual with general guidelines to give shape to his or her life. A morality in this broad sense shows an individual their place in life and tells them what life is about. Such systems of orientation are found in all human societies, so that their existence can be regarded as an anthropological constant. The further one goes back in history, the more homogeneously they are blended with dominant mythical and religious beliefs. For the most part, such systems of orientation find their legitimization in tradition. It is only later in history that such systems are also intently designed by certain individuals and contrasted with tradition.

Bayertz (2004) mentions the ethical theories of the philosophers of ancient Greece as early and influential examples of the attempt to provide philosophically reflected life orientation. The question of Socrates, 'How ought a man to live?', can be regarded as the key question of the whole of ancient Greek ethics (Plato, *Gorg.* 550c; *Resp.* 344e, 352, 618). What is typical of ancient Greek ethics is that the emphasis is not so much on the formulation of guidelines for action in concrete situations, but on the identification of the highest goals individuals should strive to achieve and the ideal type of person they should strive to be in order to live a happy life. As a result of the fact that the Christian religion provides a comprehensive framework of orientation for the whole of human life and conduct, Bayertz (2004:35) is of the opinion that it also provides a prominent example of morality in the wider sense.

Morality in a more narrow sense is, in Bayertz's opinion, already present in the Old Testament, although there it still forms an integral part of a comprehensive morality in the wider sense. If one looks more closely at the commands in the second tablet of the Ten Commandments, it becomes clear that they have certain features that distinguish them from other more purely religious commandments, for example the commands in the first tablet that relates more to the relationship with God. Firstly, they express *minimal demands* to which everyone can and should comply. Secondly, they do not provide positive guidelines for action, but rather *negative prohibitions* that lay down certain limits to our actions. Thirdly, their subject matter is the *protection* of the interests of those human beings on whom the actions of an individual can have an impact. They forbid us to inflict particular forms of harm on other persons. When we take these three features together, it is clear that we are working with a different conception of morality than in the case of the morality in a wider sense we have already discussed. Morality in the wider sense indicates the goals for which we ought to strive to lead a good life. It is, in other words, concerned with the well-being of the acting subject themselves. Morality in the narrower sense is concerned rather with the well-being of *other* persons that may be negatively impacted by the acting subject (Bayertz 2004:37–39).

It is now precisely against the uncritical adoption of the narrow conception of morality also in Christian ethics that the American Christian ethicist Stanley Hauerwas has – in my opinion rightly – expressed strong criticism. Already in a collection of some of his articles, entitled *Vision and virtue*, Hauerwas (1974) voices his criticism and provides an outline of his view on Christian morality:

Methodologically it is my contention that the current difficulty of Christian ethics stems from the far too narrow conception of moral experience accepted by many philosophical and religious ethicists. When ethics is limited to an analysis of the justification for particular actions, then it is indeed difficult to make sense of Christian ethics. The language of the Gospel includes, but points beyond, judgments about particular actions and practices to the nature of the self and how it is formed for our life project. Once ethics is focused on the nature and moral determination of the self, vision and virtue again become morally significant categories. We are as we come to see and as that seeing becomes enduring in our intentionality. We do not come to see, however, just by looking but by training our vision through the metaphors and symbols that constitute our central convictions. How we come to see therefore is function of how we come to be since our seeing necessarily is determined by how our basic images are embodied by the self – i.e., in our character. Christian ethics is the conceptual discipline that analyzes and imaginatively tests the images most appropriate to score the Christian life in accordance with the central conviction that the world has been redeemed by the work and person of Christ. (pp. 1–2)

In his later works, Hauerwas lays special emphasis on the indispensable role that the church and its practices of worship and service play as a school for the shaping and developing of Christian character. The church, in turn, is described by him as nothing but a 'story-formed community', a socially identifiable community of people with a collective memory of a particular history told in the Bible, culminating in the story of the life of Jesus (Hauerwas 1981:9).

Criticism of the inadequacy of basing Christian ethics on the narrow conception of morality, in which all attention is directed to actions and action guidelines, has remained an ongoing feature of Hauerwas's Christian ethical reflection. In an article entitled 'On keeping theological ethics theological', for example, Hauerwas ([1983]2001) provides incisive criticism of developments in American Christian ethics since Walter Rauschenbusch. In his opinion, American Christian ethics, up until the end of the 1970s, could not succeed in breaking free from the grip of liberal theology. Not only was it dominated by the typical themes of the liberal tradition, but was it also characterised by the liberal tendency to demonstrate the universal relevancy of Christian moral principles. Hauerwas finds this an unfortunate development. His reproach is that:

... Christian thinkers, above all, should have been among the first to criticise the attempt to model the moral life primarily on the analogy of the law. Instead, fearing moral anarchy, like our philosophical colleagues, Christian ethicists assumed that questions of the 'right' were prior to questions of the 'good', that moral principles were more fundamental than virtues, that a coherent morality required a single primary principle from which all others could be derived or tested, and that the

central task of morality was to help us resolve difficult moral quandaries. (Hauerwas [1983]2001:71)

The result of this accommodation of the approach of secular ethics and its emphasis on actions and action guidelines was that the distinctive character of Christian morality and the distinctively theological nature of Christian ethics were underplayed:

Hauerwas's fear of compromising the distinctiveness of Christian morality by adopting an approach in Christian ethics concentrating on Christian moral principles goes so far that he even denies the Christian ethical responsibility to promote the cause of social justice in the American society. The reason is that he is convinced that it is virtually impossible for the church in liberal societies, such as the USA, to promote social justice without taking the liberal conception of justice as point of departure. As a result of the strong separation of state and religion, conceptions of justice peculiar to particular religions are not allowed to have an influence on public life. Only the liberal conception of justice, which is regarded as universally valid, is accepted in the public sphere. When the church, however, promotes social justice in the liberal sense of the word, it does not serve the cause of Christ, but the cause of political liberalism. (Hauerwas 1991:45–68)

As a result of this situation in which the church in liberal societies finds itself, Hauerwas is of the opinion that it should not strive to change society by undertaking all sorts of social ethical initiatives in public life. The church should instead serve as a model of how a true community should look like.

The task of the church [is] to pioneer those institutions and practices that the wider society has not learned as forms of justice ... The church, therefore, must act as a paradigmatic community in the hope of providing some indication of what the world can be, but is not ... The church does not have, but rather is a social ethic. That is, she is social ethic inasmuch as she functions as a criteriological institution – that is, an institution that has learned to embody the form of truth that is charity as revealed in the person and work of Christ. (Hauerwas 1977:142–143)

We can conclude that, for Hauerwas, the distinctiveness of Christian morality does not so much lie in particular moral principles Christians subscribe to, but in the distinctive formative influence the church, as a community based on a distinctive Christian vision and story, has on the moral character of its members through their participation in its practices.

Going beyond Hauerwas's view

In this final part of my article, I first want to express my appreciation for Hauerwas's contribution to the discussion of the distinctiveness of Christian morality, before criticising the one-sidedness of his view and endeavouring to indicate the way beyond Hauerwas's view for Christian ethics when it deals with the topic of the distinctiveness of Christian morality.

Hauerwas has no doubt succeeded in adding to the discussion of Christian morality and its distinctiveness a new and much neglected dimension. In hindsight, it seems almost

unbelievable that, especially in Protestant Christian ethics, the important role of Christian virtues and the formation of such virtues through participation in the practices of the church could have been neglected for so long. In the New Testament, for one, there is unmistakably a strong emphasis on the display of Christian virtues in the lives of believers and the obligation to deliberately promote the cultivation of such virtues in the church. That virtue formation plays such a central role in Christian morality has to do with the central role that the narrative – recorded in written format in the Bible – of God's redemptive involvement with the world, initiated in Israel and culminating in the incarnation, death and resurrection of Christ has always played in the life of the church. The moral role that biblical narratives play has less to do with the introduction of new moral principles and norms, than with the instilling of moral attitudes and virtues, which lend to the believer a new and distinctive identity.

As a result of the close correlation of the formation of Christian virtues with the communication and embodiment of biblical narratives in the practices of the church, it is not difficult to acknowledge the distinctively Christian nature of such virtues. The repetitive exposure of the believer to the biblical stories about God's actions as creator, forgiver and ultimately redeemer and the actions of sinful human creatures, who are in need of God's forgiveness and redemption, creates a very definite self-understanding in believers:

This self-understanding generates dispositions toward God of humility (born both of creaturely dependence and of sinfulness), gratitude (both for creaturely being and for forgiveness), and hope. These theological or spiritual or vertical dispositions then generate horizontal ones toward fellow human beings, such as a lack of self-righteousness, docility (that is, a readiness to learn from others), compassion for those who do one wrong, and patience in the face of persistent prejudice. (Biggar 2011:80–81)

As Nigel Biggar rightly claims, these dispositions – especially if they are taken as a set – are not universally regarded as virtues. They are distinctively Christian virtues.

Whilst I have appreciation for Hauerwas's contribution to the discussion on the distinctiveness of Christian morality, I am also of the opinion that there is a certain unacceptable one-sidedness to his view. First of all, he unnecessarily underplays the role of moral principles and action guidelines in the life of Christians. He succeeded to convey the same distrust of moral principles and action guidelines to a number of other influential theologians. The New Testament scholar, Richard Hays (1996), in his well-known book *The moral vision of the New Testament*, shares the view of the Hauerwasian school that moral theology must stick close to the biblical narrative if it is to remain genuinely Christian. In Biggar's opinion, Hays correctly observes that when ethical concepts are abstracted from that narrative, they are vulnerable to being understood in ways that are alien to fundamental Christian presuppositions. The concept of love, for example, means one thing in the light of the Gospel stories of the Jesus' crucifixion, but something rather different in the light of soap-opera romances. Biggar is, however, of the opinion that Hays wrongly concludes that Christian ethics should

think its way to moral judgements by drawing 'imaginative analogies' directly between the biblical stories and our own situations, rather than by abstracting general principles and then applying them methodologically to cases (Biggar 2011:13; Hays 1996:298–304). Hays denies that the abstraction of general moral principles and their application to concrete cases can be a legitimate method used in Christian ethics, despite his acknowledgement that abstract principles are one of the New Testament modes of ethical discourse and that all of the New Testament's modes of ethical discourse should be incorporated into the church's ethical teaching (Hays 1996:294).

In my opinion, there is no reason to deny that moral principles and action guidelines form an essential part of Christian morality and also play an important role in Christian ethical deliberation. Apart from the fact that they form a substantial part of the moral tradition of the Old and New Testament and of the church up until now, they play an indispensable role in the moral life of contemporary Christians. As soon as Christians are faced with moral problems, whether those problems are of a personal ethical nature, for example when they have to decide on the use of abortion or on giving money to beggars, or of a more social ethical nature, for example on what they should think of affirmative action or what ought to be done to combat global warming, moral virtues do not suffice. In such situations, they need moral principles or action guidelines that can be applied on the basis of a thorough analysis of the concrete situation.

Neither am I of the opinion that it is justified to acknowledge only virtues on account of the fact that they clearly correlate with biblical narratives on God's interaction with human beings and have a distinctively Christian flavour. The biblical moral principle of justice and the command to neighbourly love also clearly correlate with God's special care for the poor and downtrodden and his indiscriminate love for all human beings. Such moral principles also distinguish Christian morality from the morality of many existing religious groups. The fact that they, like other moral principles and action guidelines that form part of Christian morality, can be taken over by other religious and cultural groups should not count against them. If one looks at the list of typical Christian virtues Hauerwas (1983:76–88) draws up in his book *The peaceable kingdom: A primer in Christian ethics*, namely service, peacemaking, humility, vulnerability, renunciation, dispossession, forgiving enemies and nonviolence, it would be difficult to deny that even most of these virtues, taken one by one, could be taken over by some non-Christian groups.

Vincent Brümmer (2008), in his book on prayer, makes a distinction between 'behaviour' and 'action' that is relevant for our present discussion. Two people may be involved in behaviour that is identical, when perceived from the outside by onlookers. They may both be distributing food in a refugee camp. When asked what they are doing, they may give two completely different answers. The one may answer: 'I am supporting the revolutionary struggle of the refugees'. The other one may answer: 'I am serving the Kingdom of

God in obedience to God'. According to Brümmer, their perceivable behaviour is identical, but what they are doing – their actions – are not the same, as a result of the fact that they have different intentions and confer different meanings on their distribution of food (Brümmer 2008:133–134). I believe that one can, by extension, make the same type of distinction with regard to moral action guidelines that are shared by Christians and non-Christians. Seen from the outside, the guidelines and the behaviour they prescribe are identical for Christians and non-Christians. Seen, however, from the inside perspective, the guidelines and the actions prescribed are not identical, but different, because of the different intentions they have with and the different meanings they confer on the subscription and execution of the guidelines.

There is, in other words, no reason to problematise moral principles and action guidelines as a result of the fact that they can form part of the morality of non-Christians. In my opinion, the main reason why Hauerwas problematises the role of moral principles and action guidelines and does not recognise their rightful place in Christian morality, is that he overemphasises the need for the distinctiveness of Christian morality. As he is of the opinion that only Christian virtues have a distinctive Christian character, he tends to regard Christian virtues as the whole of Christian morality and to ignore the role of moral principles, as they do not pass the test of Christian distinctiveness. If, however, the emphasis in Christian ethics is on the formation of the Christian identity of the believer's self, as Hauerwas (1974) claims in *Vision and virtue*, there is, in my opinion, no reason to demand that every single moral principle or virtue to which a person with a strong Christian identity adheres, should be distinctly Christian and should not be shared by non-Christians. As Ann Marie Mealey (2009) puts it in her recent book on *The identity of Christian morality*:

Even if the demands of Christian morality are the same as those of human morality, one can still claim that Christian morality has a specific and unique aspect. The mere fact that the Christian interprets his/her life in part through the story of Jesus as revealed in the Scriptures gives the Christian search for truth a different spin. (Mealey 2009:35)

One cannot overcome the sneaky suspicion, when one reads what Hauerwas has to say about the distinctiveness of Christian morality and the restriction of the scope of Christian ethics to the church, that he verges on the brink of an almost sectarian and dualistic view of the church and the world. The world, and especially the world of the liberal West, is regarded as invested by evil ideologies that are anti-church and anti-Christ. The task of Christian ethics is to prophetically criticise these ideologies and to help the church to be an alternative society based on Christian virtues. The promotion of Christian involvement in and cooperation with non-Christians in transforming society is, in Hauerwas's opinion, clearly not part of the task of Christian ethics.

In my opinion we should, today, go beyond the view of Stanley Hauerwas on the distinctiveness of Christian

morality and I would like to indicate some respects in which we could proceed to a more satisfactory and also more inclusive approach.

Firstly, we should recognise that both moral principles and virtues form an intrinsic part of Christian morality and that not only virtues, but also moral principles, can be distinctly Christian. We have to recognise that, for the most part, this distinctiveness would be both time-bound and context-bound. It would also be preferable to not primarily seek the distinctiveness in single moral principles or virtues, but rather in the combination or pattern they form as a set. And one should take into account that this set of moral principles and virtues has for Christians a distinctive meaning as they are interpreted within the framework of distinctive Christian narratives.

Secondly, in contrast to Hauerwas, I am not of the opinion that it is so crucial to demonstrate the distinctiveness of Christian morality. I rather agree with Biggar (2011:9): 'Integrity, not distinctiveness is the point'. The reason why one should not overstress distinctiveness is that it is, for the most part, an accident of history. To quote Biggar (2011:8): 'Whether or not what the Christian ethicist has to say is distinctive is dependent on the happenstance of whom he is talking with and what he is talking about'. Theological integrity is, however, another matter. It is important:

... that ethics be integrated with theology, that this theology maintains its biblical and orthodox integrity ... that the definitive story be allowed a direct bearing on appropriate conduct, that this story should be read so as to do justice to its historical particularity, and that ethical reflection be ordered toward shaping the life of the church ... (Biggar 2011:6)

Finally, I am, unlike Hauerwas, not disturbed by the fact that moral principles and action guidelines can be shared by Christians and non-Christians and can be used to find common ground and enable cooperation between them. I do not deny that the church should endeavour to be a community that embodies Christian virtues and, as alternative society, set an example to wider society. Its message of salvation in Christ only has legitimacy insofar as it succeeds in doing so. I also do not deny that it is often necessary for the church – with the help of moral principles and action guidelines derived from the Christian tradition – to provide guidance to church members on difficult moral issues of a personal and social nature. Christian ethics should assist the church in identifying the conduct most befitting the Christian gospel in such cases. What I, however, do feel strongly about, is that the contemporary task of the church and of Christian ethics does not stop there. They also have a responsibility to contribute to the solution of the extremely difficult moral problems we are faced with in wider society, to the moral issues of poverty, inequality, land reform, affirmative action, racial conflict, xenophobia, violence and corruption in the South African society, as well as the moral issues of climate change, ecological degradation, economic globalisation, religious

extremism, regional conflicts and overpopulation in the global society, to mention but a few. Added to these specific moral problems, there is also the more fundamental issue that the moral dimension of especially societal life is also under threat, amongst others, as a result of the widespread and growing plurality of divergent moral beliefs that has infiltrated even smaller communities, such as the church, and as a result of the differentiation of society in independent social systems, each with its own set of values. These moral issues can only be solved if a strong enough overlapping moral consensus could be found amongst those individuals and groups that are in a position to make a significant contribution to their solution and if they are strongly enough committed to act in accordance with the formulated moral consensus. Instead of opposing or shunning efforts to formulate such an overlapping moral consensus and to conclude moral covenants in South Africa and the global society, churches and Christian ethics should in my opinion be on the forefront of such efforts. And the reason for this is not that this could be a way for churches to regain lost influence in society, but because this world we are living in is God's world. We, as Christians, have a responsibility that this world of God does not fall apart in conflict and ecological degradation. Or, to put it more positively: we have the responsibility to work together with other people with the same intent to promote the protection and flourishing of all life in God's creation.

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Competing interests

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