

THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY IN ETHICS

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submitted in accordance with the requirements

for the degree of

DOCTOR OF THEOLOGY

in the subject

THEOLOGICAL ETHICS

at the

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA

PROMOTER: PROF. M.B.G. MOTLHABI

NOVEMBER 2005

Title: The Role of Community in Ethics

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Degree: Doctor of Theology

Subject: Theological Ethics

Promoter: Prof. M.B.G. Motlhabi

Thesis Summary

“The Role of Community in Ethics” makes the assertion that in the North American context an over emphasis on the individual in the ethical decision making process has led to some significant consequences that need to be considered. The premise of this thesis is that by incorporating a more communal view, along side individual concerns, the ethical decision-making process is actually more beneficial to humanity.

In developing this premise this thesis explores some of the secular foundations for why and how the individual came to take such a prominent role in ethics. Also explored is the biblical foundation for the ethical decision-making process and how it contributes a communal voice. As illustrations of how a more communal emphasis might affect the ethical decision-making process, two issues are considered in some depth; euthanasia and poverty & welfare. The role of the Church as a moral community in a predominantly secular society is also considered as one means of promoting a more communal ethical voice. And, finally, the issue of the legislation of morality, how moral concerns may be expressed, promoted and promulgated in the larger community, is considered.

Key Terms: Individualism, Community, Postmodernism, Moral Community, Legislation of Morality, Church as Moral Community, Relativism, Ethics, North American Culture, Biblical Foundation of ethics.

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CHAPTER ONE – INTRODUCTION: THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY IN ETHICS

1.1. Statement of Problem

Each year Maclean's magazine, along with the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, publishes a "state of Canada" report where they deal with a variety of issues confronting the nation. The winter of 1998/99 report, the fifteenth of its kind, contained an article by Allan Gregg that focused on the public acceptance of the moral failings of their political leaders. Two incidents were used to illustrate what Gregg was talking about.

In the fall of 1997 and spring of 1998 the issue that was dominating headlines in both the United States and Canada was the scandal that plagued Bill Clinton, then President of the United States. President Clinton had had a sexual relationship with a White House intern and it was discovered. Over the course of a number of months President Clinton went from denying that he had had any kind of relationship with Ms. Lewinsky to admitting that he had inappropriate intimate contact with her. During this time there was a significant amount of political posturing as the accusations flew. President Clinton eventually apologized for his actions and asked for the forgiveness of the American people. Later he became only the second sitting president in U.S. history to be impeached but was later cleared of perjury charges by a special senate committee. The incident raised a number of issues in the area of ethics, the nature of public or private acts, what constitutes "sex", the relationship between leadership and moral character, and the relationship between public office and private morality.

The second incident focused on Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chretien. In the fall of 1998 Vancouver, British Columbia, hosted the annual APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation) Summit that was attended by a number of international leaders including President Suharto from Indonesia. Suharto had

been the focus of a number of demonstrations because of his political policies and tactics, and a demonstration was planned for his visit to Vancouver. Apparently however, the Canadian government was concerned that the Indonesians, and particularly President Suharto, would be embarrassed by such a show of protest and it quietly ordered the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) to control and disband the demonstration. A number of individuals were arrested prior to the summit even taking place and many others were arrested or detained in some way during the summit demonstration. The issue gained particular attention when some of the protesters were sprayed with pepper spray by a member of the RCMP. When the details surrounding the incident began to come out, it became evident that to ensure President Suharto's involvement in the summit, Jean Chretien himself had played a significant role in ordering the RCMP to control any demonstration that happened. This kind of infringement upon free speech is unheard of in Canada and raised quite an alarm in some circles. What Gregg has pointed out in his article however, and something that many others have noted as well, is that by and large the Canadian population seemed unconcerned about the event. A tremendous act of political force had just occurred in Canada; a freedom that Canadians hold to dearly had been significantly infringed upon, and little was said about it by the general populace. In Gregg's words, "...allegations of prime ministerial bullying in the name of protecting the sensibilities of tin-pot dictators hardly raise an eyebrow among the citizenry" (1999:18).

Past political leaders who had participated in such dubious actions would have, and did, face the wrath of the general public. Either through the vote or other methods, leaders who transgressed were chastised for their behaviour. Clinton and Chretien however were not treated this way. There were segments of society that were concerned about their actions but the amazing thing was that the popularity of both leaders either remained the same or even increased after their exploits were made known.

Some have suggested that these two incidents are indicative of a moral apathy that has taken hold of the American and Canadian people. Gregg in his article suggests something different, however, and he remarks on a change that has happened to both American and Canadian moral culture.

While the media and their political peers may be assessing our leaders based on their own frame of reference and standards of morality, the population is unwilling to do the same. Almost seven out of 10 Canadians say they are willing to accept behaviour in others that they may find unacceptable in themselves; and almost six out of 10 agree that “no one has the right to impose their morality and ways of doing things on others.” While those views find favour in virtually all segments of society, they are most pronounced among the young and better educated.

In sum, this suggests a population willing to forgive its political leaders’ human failings or minor errors. Demanding that others adhere to your code of what’s right or wrong or important or unimportant has become less forgivable than actually committing some acts that the public does not condone. The population, it now seems, is prepared to take greater umbrage with the moralizers than the sinners. (1999:18)

Further along in the article Gregg goes on to comment that, “the leaders that North Americans are now most likely to find unacceptable are those who would lay claim to a monopoly on virtue or attempt to impose their sense of morality on others.” (1999:19).¹

While many would focus on the apparent decline of moral values something more foundational is our primary concern. The thread within these two situations is the one that Allan Gregg highlighted, that people are more concerned not with whether something is right or wrong, but with whether one person or group is imposing their moral agenda or will on another. This factor represents a dramatic change in our moral climate. In part, what this thread represents is a loss

¹ In many respects this assertion of Gregg’s in late 1998/early 1999 was played out even further in the Canadian Federal election of November 2000. During that election one candidate’s positions on abortion and the rights of homosexuals, among other moral issues, were consistently ridiculed in the newspapers even though neither of these issues were presented as a major part of that candidate’s platform. What was interesting was that the questions that were asked of this particular candidate were not asked of the other candidates. It seems that “everyone” wanted to know how this particular candidate’s religious

of community awareness in moral discussions. The fundamental issue being addressed here is not the apparent decline in moral standards, but the loss of our sense of community in our moral decision-making.

Before we begin to discuss this concern in more depth, one other situation will help to further clarify the discussion for us. Recently a local radio talk show was dealing with the issue of whether or not a public school had the right to ban peanut butter. A number of people are severely allergic to the oil contained in nuts, particularly peanuts. Their reaction to this oil can be very swift and even fatal. Because of this concern one school considered banning peanut butter from its lunchroom in order to protect its students that had this allergy. This position drew a remarkable amount of negative attention. A number of parents called into the show complaining that the school had no right to tell them what they could or could not feed their children for lunch. While the host of the show agreed that in general this is true, he tried, essentially in vain, to get these parents to understand that for the sake of everyone involved, especially for the sake of the child who could quite literally die if they came into contact with peanut butter, a rule like this might be justified. Many of the parents could simply not follow this line of thinking. All they saw was that someone outside of themselves was putting a restriction on them and they did not like it. It became apparent that many could not see how, at times, it is necessary to consider certain restrictions on individual rights or freedoms for the sake of the larger community.

From the moral actions of our political leaders to the lunch rooms in our elementary schools, there seems to be an attitude of “you can’t tell me, or anyone else, how to live” or, a variation, “I can’t tell you how to live”. This seems to be a significant factor in current ethical decision-making. The emphasis or priority lies with the individual rather than with the community. The general affirmation

conservatism would affect his political policy, but the other two primary candidates’ Catholic beliefs were never brought to attention.

seems to be that no one should impose his or her moral opinion upon anyone else.² Any attempt to take a moral stance is met with the query, “what gives you the right to tell me, or anyone else, what to do?” If this is the prevailing sentiment of the general population then how do we go about setting standards for public behaviour? One could suggest that most of us are very much aware of the fact that community plays a role in our ethical decision-making. On some levels this may be true, but what the above illustrations seem to suggest (and many more could be given³) is that on an ever increasing scale we have lost or are losing our sense of inter-relatedness with other people, our sense of community.

A further question that needs at least some initial attention is how did we get to the place we now find ourselves in? On a primary level we can attribute the change in moral climate to a possible paradigm shift in North American culture.⁴ Many people today have either suggested or accepted that we have entered a new era of time. The modern era has essentially passed and we are now in the midst of a cultural change, the postmodern. This change has affected and continues to affect all areas of life, but in particular the moral culture of society. It has also

² The choice of words here is important. Most people seem to like to use the phrase “force your morals upon me” or something similar, like “impose your morals upon me”. The general impression one is left with is that if in a moral discussion someone asserts that something is true for everyone they are “forcing” their morals upon the other person. This colours the discussion immensely because it brings a significant negative tone to it. The issue we are trying to deal with is not forcing someone’s morality on another person, but the discovery of truth that binds us all. Unfortunately this concept is also a dreaded one in current North American culture. We do not believe that there is a truth that “binds us all” and therefore when an appeal is made to such it is viewed as an act of force or coercion.

³ A more subtle anecdote comes from a personal conversation. I was talking to a public school teacher about retirement. She commented that it was becoming more difficult to have parties for those who were retiring because many of the younger teachers did not want to attend such events. Generally the comment was that they really did not know the person at all so why should they go to a party honouring them. The teacher I was talking to mentioned that in the past everyone would go whether they really knew the person or not because they were all teachers and part of a group, but the younger teachers did not see it this way. While the moral implications of this situation may not be as significant as others, it too illustrates a lack of community focus in many ways. Instead of asking, “what would my presence contribute to the group to which I belong?”, the predominant question is, “what do I get out of it?”

⁴ I use the word “possible” only because there does not seem to be any kind of a consensus on the precise nature or extent of the change we are experiencing. That we have shifted from “modern” to “postmodern” seems to be a given, but the specifics of the change, or what exactly is postmodernism, is still open to debate. We do not know if we are experiencing a fundamental change in predominant worldview or simply a modifying of our modern assumptions.

been suggested that what was experienced with “zipper-gate” (Clinton) and “pepper-gate” (Chretien), along with all of the other situations that we have highlighted, was indicative of the postmodern approach to ethics, a system marked by relativism. The postmodern context has raised some crucial questions for normative ethics. If it has not already done so, relativism is quickly becoming the predominant element in North American culture. Moral relativism is built on the premise that there are no absolute rights or wrongs, but rather a morality dependent upon the culture that it finds itself in. One key component to relativism is an emphasis on the individual and their right to express themselves or choose their own course of action. (We will discuss the finer points of this view more extensively in chapter two.) This is, perhaps, the key factor for our current discussion. Personal rights and the ethical relativism that has accompanied them have taken centre stage in North American culture. The individual’s right to choose their own lifestyle highlights postmodern thought in Canada and the U.S. and any consideration of the overall needs of society seems to be secondary at best. We live in this tension of not wanting to offend anybody by telling them they cannot do something and yet we realize we must have some basic agreements in place in order to function as a society. In Canada we have specifically laid out the desire to be multicultural and pluralistic and this desire is being put to the test. While the postmodern era has, to some extent, glorified the individual and their experience, especially in the area of ethics, it still holds that the community or communities to whom the individual belongs are very important. If we understand that we need some kind of community structure to order our lives and allow us to “live together”, then we must also consider what foundation gives us the necessary support for those communal interests. This is essentially our primary concern.

Another way to understand this discussion is to consider how to balance the needs and rights of the individual with those of the larger community or society. This discussion is a classic one in the area of ethical thought and therefore while it

is not new, in North America, it appears to have renewed importance. We are now confronted with a number of issues and we are struggling with finding a way to address them. Whether the issues are bioethical, political, social, economic, or environmental in nature, we cannot seem to find the common thread, or the foundation, from which we can address the issue of the rights of the individual and the overall needs of society. There seems to be a general agreement that we need some sort of community emphasis, that society as a whole must have rules in place to allow us to live together, but we cannot identify precisely where that emphasis should come from or how it should be defined. The force of these issues is being keenly felt in Canadian culture specifically. We know there needs to be a way to “get along”, but we cannot seem to put our finger on what the basis for that “getting along” will be. We intuitively understand that we are members of a larger group to which we are somehow responsible, but we struggle with the language of describing and articulating exactly what that responsibility is. We do not have the philosophical tools to deal with the issues that lie before us.

In some respects then, the primary focus of this thesis revolves around two very intertwined concerns. The first is the classical ethical concern of the balance between the rights of the individual with the good of the many. The second concern is what role does community play in ethics. In other words, precisely how does the larger community affect the ethical decision-making process?

The purpose of this thesis then is to explore this issue of balance between the individual and community and, more precisely, to explore what role community ought to or should play in our ethical lives. There are a number of facets that must be considered in order to fulfill this purpose. We need to consider the foundational concerns such as how does a society go about building social responsibility and authority in a highly individualistic society and, on what principles or foundation are we to build upon. We also need to consider the question of how society might legislate morality and carry out or enforce those

laws in a just manner. And we will need to raise and discuss the issue of how the Church is to respond to this issue and explore what options it might offer in our current situation.

1.2. Assumptions

There are a number of assumptions that need to be made for this project. The following four are of particular importance. The first assumption made is that the Bible is both authoritative and relevant in the area of determining what is right or wrong for humanity. There has been a great deal of discussion of how exactly the Bible should be used in ethics; it is an important issue with significant consequences. While some attention will be given to this discussion, many of the details lie beyond the scope of this thesis. Authority itself is a thorny issue in our modern/postmodern age. It is not always considered “politically correct” to label something as an authority and in part that is what this thesis is about.

A second assumption has to do with the role and nature of the church. Again, there are a number of issues surrounding the church and some of these will be more formally taken up in a later chapter. But from the outset it is important to acknowledge the belief that the church has a significant role in how the gospel is presented in our world. The church does and should affect the culture in which it finds itself. How this is to happen is the question that will occupy our time later on.

Third, it is assumed that we do in fact legislate morality. This is a core issue for this thesis and, again, a later chapter will be set aside to deal with it directly. The argument has often been made that we need to lessen the amount of legislation on “personal ethical issues”. Once again it should be pointed out that it is precisely this kind of statement that has fueled the desire to write this thesis. It is interesting to note which items are considered “personal” in the ethical realm

and which ones are communal. While we should not deny that there is a distinction that should be made here, there is concern that we have moved far too many issues into the realm of the personal and have not recognized their communal element. Generally these concerns surround laws regarding sexuality and how it ought to be expressed, but there are other areas as well. While we need to appreciate that the level of involvement that the legal system should or can have in these areas is a significant question, there is in fact involvement. Whether we know it or not, whether we like it or not, we do in fact legislate some kind or level of morality. One very practical area where this issue is clearly seen is in the legislating of laws. A common question used to be “can we legislate morality?” The answer was, and is, yes. All laws are essentially a legislation of morality on some level, from the most mundane to the most involved. A more realistic question is “whose morality will we legislate?” How does the group decide (realistically, fairly, or justly) to “impose” its desires on the individual? By what standard or in what manner does the larger group rule or legislate the activities of its individual members?

And finally, the fourth primary assumption is that our dominant philosophy is ultimately self-destructive. We cannot hold on to the tenets of pluralism and relativism as they are popularly expressed and continue to function as a society. The current emphasis and understanding of tolerance and pluralism will only lead to more social upheaval, not less. While tolerance is an admirable quality it is not to be given the unqualified acceptance that it has in our culture. And while pluralism may have some important facets that encourage a richness and diversity in culture, it too must not be given an unqualified acceptance as an absolute good.

1.3. Limitations

As with all projects, there are a number of limitations that we will need to pay attention to as this thesis is written. First of all we cannot deal in depth with all of the varying approaches to ethics and the foundation that they might supply for the role of community. We will need to concentrate more on the “big picture” concern of relativism and pluralism as a whole. The same should be said regarding the biblical material as well. As already noted in our assumptions, there are many issues surrounding biblical authority and the task of hermeneutics that face us in this thesis. We cannot deal with them all, but we will need to establish enough of a foundation to focus our attention.

We must pay particular attention to the philosophical and theological agenda that has been set for this thesis. While it will be necessary to touch on the social, psychological, and biological issues that no doubt play a role in this area, they essentially lie outside the scope of this thesis. In many areas the material that will be presented will only raise issues rather than address them. This will be especially noticeable in the examples that are used to illustrate the various concerns and applications. While material will be drawn from a number of disciplines we must acknowledge that each of them will only be dealt with in an introductory manner. They will serve primarily illustrative purposes and as discussion starters.

Finally, this thesis cannot deal with every culture or country. The issue of community in ethics obviously goes far beyond the North American⁵ context. While we will touch upon many global issues and concerns, we cannot comment on a significant number of specific issues facing a particular country or culture. The issue that is being addressed has a North American “feel” to it. We are very individualistic. However, this trait is not ours alone and is quite readily found in

⁵ We need to acknowledge that in many ways this usage of “North America” is inappropriate in that it apparently ignores the fact that Mexico is a part of the continent. The difficulty is that while Canadian and American cultures share many similarities and may be lumped together; Mexico is quite different from both of them. In fact, Mexico in many ways defies the North American stereotype because of its well-

many other cultures. We do not want to appear myopic in dealing with just our own immediate context, but it is the context with which we are most familiar and the one out of which the concern for this discussion arises. If the foundational issues are dealt with, then much of what is said should be applicable to other cultures facing similar concerns.

1.4. Importance of the Study

If our assumptions are correct, the loss of community awareness in our ethical decision-making process has had, and will continue to have with greater force, significant consequences. As already stated, the tenets of pluralism and relativism, as they have developed over the last number of years, are ultimately self-destructive. They do not provide the necessary foundation from which key ethical issues may be addressed. They provide us with no foundation from which to address the key ethical issues that will shape our future. Personal choices have communal effects and communal choices affect individual persons, therefore it is imperative to discuss the relationship between these two and the foundation from which that discussion is to take place.

Two elements help us to further understand why this study is important. The first has to do with the various forms “community” takes in the life of any person. While we philosophically discuss, and isolate, the individual from the community, the reality is that these two cannot, realistically, be separated. With the exception of the hermit, each individual is a member of many different communities or social arrangements which carry their own understanding of how life is to be lived. Likewise, each community or social arrangement is made up of any number of individuals. While we may discuss ethical issues, or any issue for that matter, from an individualist perspective only, the fact of the matter is that no individual exists outside of a communal context of some kind. For example, there

entrenched understanding of community. For the sake of style and simplicity however, the term North

are biological communities such as a family structure or ethnic groups that function as a community with its own history and expectations. On a social level we all associate with a certain group of friends that act as another community to which we are accountable. Included here could be a larger social circle such as a club or church, which also includes some sort of communal lifestyle. There are also geographic communities to which we belong and which place expectations upon us. These include our neighborhoods as well as larger and more formal communities, such as cities, provinces, and countries. In this vein one could look at the entire world as a community to which we all belong. In fact, many of the issues that we will consider later on have global consequences and therefore are a matter of concern for the global community.

Each of these communities has its unique concerns and each of them overlaps at some level. Also, each of the issues that we raise in this thesis can cross over any number of community boundaries. This makes dealing with many of the specifics of these issues a daunting, if not impossible, task. We cannot deal with all of the concerns expressed in each area, but it is important for us to realize from the start that we are involved in many different communities, whether we are aware of them or not. While the issues that we will be addressing may have their particular focal point or area of application, we cannot simply be assigned to that one area alone. Any particular area will have far reaching consequences to which we must pay attention and address.⁶

America or North American will be used in this thesis to refer to Canada and the United States together.

⁶ We must also recognize that there can be significant tension between these different communities. In North American culture for example there is a growing tension between religious and non-religious communities. "Faith communities" played a significant role in the establishing of North American culture. Both the American Constitution and the Canadian Bill of Rights reflect the role of God and faith in the founding of their respective nations. However, over the last couple of decades we have seen a growing uneasiness with the relationship between the sacred and the secular. One primary area where this uneasiness or tension is particularly seen is the educational system. In May of 2001 a legal case involving Trinity Western University (a Christian institution) and the province of British Columbia, was resolved by the Supreme Court of Canada. As a part of their entrance requirements, TWU asks each student to sign a statement indicating that while a member of the TWU community, the student will abstain from a number of activities that the school believes are not an appropriate part of the Christian life. Amongst these activities is extramarital sex, including homosexual behaviour. The B.C. College of Teachers (the governing body that certifies any teacher education programs in the province) refused to certify TWU's teacher education program because it felt that this requirement promoted intolerance of homosexuals. The position of the

A second element that highlights the importance of this study comes out of the fourth primary assumption that was stated above. What we are asserting is that a sense of community is vital to our ethical well-being and that the growing individualism of North American culture does not foster this sense. All along we have indicated that there is a growing concern that ethical issues are taking on an overly personal bias and that this is inherently destructive to the process of meaningful ethical discussion. The reason this is so destructive is because ethics, by the very nature of them, are communal. When we grossly de-emphasize the communal nature of ethics we are attacking something foundational to ethics itself.

James Gustafson, in *Ethics From a Theocentric Perspective – Volume Two*, expresses this part of our concern very well:

To some extent moral discourse does take place in communities and it ought to do so to a greater extent. From the perspective of the present work the importance of such communities cannot be overstressed. Even significant choices made by individuals in problematic circumstances are more likely to “value right” the good or evil before them if opportunities for reflection and consultation occur in the presence of another person. When more complex matters of public policy such as reduction of poverty, disarmament negotiations, and environmental programs are under consideration a community is indispensable...No single person has the capabilities to be sufficiently informed about factual matters, analyses of processes and patterns of interdependence, and projection of possible consequences of alternative courses of action to be absolutely self-

B.C.C.T. was that any teacher being trained by TWU would not be tolerant of any homosexual students they might have in their classes and therefore decided to reject their request for certification. After six years of legal proceedings, including many lower court decisions and appeals, the Supreme Court of Canada agreed with all of the lower courts that there was no evidence of intolerance among TWU-trained teachers and therefore its program should be certified.

While this case ended with a re-affirmation about the freedom of religion in Canada, many have suggested that the case itself has opened the door to numerous questions about the role of faith communities in larger Canadian society. Many suggest that there is a growing distrust between those who voice a religiously based moral system and those who represent “the greater population” of Canada. It has been suggested that challenges like the one faced by TWU are symptomatic of a growing hostility to religion in Canada, particularly the Christian faith. If this is true, then the contribution that faith communities have made, and currently make, to the ethical life of Canadian culture will be called into question.

reliant...Discernment ought to be a social as well as individual process (1984:316).

The purpose of moral discourse in communities is not in most cases to come to a unanimous conclusion, though there are occasions when this is proper. It is to help form the “consciences” of persons, to educate their rational activity, to enable them to think more clearly and thoroughly about the moral dimensions of aspects of life in the world. It is to hone more sharply their moral thinking from which choices and actions in part flow (1984:317).

The question before us is not whether we need to have a community structure to support our ethical decision making; as Gustafson points out a solid community structure is indispensable to the process. What we are pursuing is the how exactly this community structure functions in the process.

1.5. Method of Research & Presentation

The primary method of presentation for this thesis will be the evaluation, critique and synthesis of previously published information. Most of the needed research material can be obtained through books and articles, with some added material gleaned from newspapers. There will also be some anecdotal material that will come from other forms of media, classroom discussions, and private conversations since these areas provide an excellent resource for illustrating how people currently think and express themselves. Some extra attention to detail will need to be taken in these secondary areas to ensure accuracy in recounting the material.

The method of presentation will include a number of elements. Some descriptive or interpretative work will be necessary throughout the thesis, but the primary form will be analytical and critical. Inherent within this approach will also be the need to compare various positions to see how they approach the same issue and how they interact with each other in the process. The purpose of this thesis is to discuss the dominant method of ethical decision making in North

American culture and to compare that with a biblical worldview. The focal point for this comparison is how communal issues or presence is addressed or expressed.

1.6. Procedure

This thesis will develop along the following lines. After this introduction, chapters two and three will discuss community foundation for ethics. Chapter two will focus on the secular foundation that is gaining prominence in our culture. Specifically, we will consider how the different trends that have happened bring us to the place we are now. Again, special attention will be paid to relativism; its forms, sources, and consequences. Chapter three will deal with the biblical material and will discuss how that material addresses the issue of community in ethics. From both of these chapters we should have a basis established from which we could discuss the particular issues that are raised when we discuss the role of community in ethics. Chapter four will discuss two primary ethical concerns to illustrate how community and personal needs and responsibilities interact with each other. The purpose for this chapter is to see how the foundations dealt with in the second and third chapters actually apply to “real life” situations. On the basis of this material chapter five will discuss the church’s relationship with culture. Exactly how should the church interact with the culture around it and what practical issues does that interaction raise? In short, how is the church to be a moral community in the culture in which it finds itself? In many ways chapter six is a particular application of the material in chapter five. The legislating of morality is a difficult issue and it will be important for this thesis to explore how we might practically combine community and personal needs/responsibilities. There are areas other than the legal where this will occur, but this one is of particular importance. And finally, chapter seven will also briefly show how the postmodern worldview is essentially existentialism lived out

in very practical terms. Understanding this should help us to understand how important community is for our current culture even if it's role is not exactly understood.

CHAPTER TWO - SECULAR FOUNDATIONS

2.1. Historical Sketch

As was mentioned in the introduction to this study, it is generally agreed upon that Western culture, in practically every area, is undergoing a significant philosophical change. What the precise nature of that change is or how it fits into the broad scheme of human history is yet to be known, but never the less the general consensus is that, on many levels, we have moved from the modern to the postmodern age.

A detailed survey of the history of Western philosophy is well beyond the scope of this thesis. What is necessary however is a broad picture of what changes have occurred over the last few centuries that have provided the context of where we find ourselves today. It is important for us to identify and understand the philosophical underpinnings that have shaped our worldviews and have created the issues that lie before us.

The history of Western philosophy can be roughly divided into three broad time periods; premodern, modern, and postmodern. While general, or perhaps even specific, dates can be given for each of these periods, the important element for our discussion is the dominant ideology that each of these periods represent. “To put it simply, in the premodern phase of Western civilization people believed in God (or gods). Life in this world owed its existence and meaning to a spiritual realm beyond the senses” (Veith, 1994: 29). In sharp contrast to the modern mind, the belief in the supernatural was the underpinning for everything that happened in the premodern world. As Veith goes on to point out, it is a time period that needs to be taken seriously. “This phase of Western culture was not characterized by a single monolithic worldview. Rather, this complex, dynamic, and tension-filled era included mythological paganism and classical rationalism, as well as Biblical revelation” (Veith, 1994, 29). Influenced greatly by the early Greek philosophers

(especially Plato and Aristotle) the premodern mind was a remarkable mixture of supernatural belief and developing rationalism and logic. During this time period the Catholic Church dominated the landscape. In every area, including politics, social structures, the arts, economics, education, morality, and of course religious life, the Catholic Church was the primary force. By the Middle Ages (A.D. 1000-1500) life had become essentially saturated with the Christian worldview,¹ a time period often referred to as “Christendom”. God and the spiritual were the foundation for everything and everybody. We existed because of God’s (or possibly, the god’s) good favour.

This arrangement essentially lasted until the 1500s when things began to change. George Hunter III outlines what he calls six watershed events that caused Christendom to collapse and mark the secularization of Western civilization (1992:26-29). The first of these events was the Renaissance. Spanning from the mid-fourteenth century to the early sixteenth century, the Renaissance was an intellectual and cultural re-birth within the Western world. “Essentially, the Renaissance represents the West’s rediscovery of ancient Greek philosophy, science, and literature” (Hunter, 1992:26) and affected people in three primary ways. First, it focused people’s attention on humanity and humanity’s progress rather than on God and theology. Protagoras’ statement, “Man is the measure of all things” became the focal point of the Renaissance. Secondly, the Renaissance provided people with a more comprehensive option to the Christian worldview. As mentioned, there were other views around during the premodern time period, but none that so dominated the landscape like Christianity. The Renaissance began to change that by providing people with another option, Greek philosophy, for understanding the foundations of life. Thirdly, “...the Renaissance created the

¹ It is important to point out that the Christian worldview of the day would have included influences from a number of surrounding philosophies. Greek mythology and the paganism of the day were often intermingled with Christian thought. While, in general, it is accurate to say that at a primary level the Christian worldview dominated the philosophical landscape, it must be noted that there would have been all kinds of things “floating around” that would not be considered a part of the Christian faith.

cultural soil out of which humanism eventually emerged as a major and perennial competitor to christian truth claims and ethics” (Hunter, 1992:26).

Out of the Renaissance came the Protestant Reformation that was primarily led by Martin Luther and John Calvin. Through a series of crucial events, the authority of the Catholic Church was challenged and the Christendom arrangement, as it had existed up until then, was broken. “The Reformation removed Church influence from western life by dividing the Church and by turning the Church’s attention away from the management of society and inward toward renewal, reorganization, and theological matters” (Hunter, 1992:27). As a consequence the process of secularization accelerated as more and more of day-to-day life was removed from the influence of the church.

The third event was the rise of Nationalism. Up until the Reformation Europe had been comparatively united and with the division that arose with the emphasis on independent nations, Christendom as a political entity ended. Along with this, the belief in a common humanity that Christianity had encouraged disintegrated as well. One of the results of this was unprecedented warfare among Europeans including the world wars experienced during the twentieth century. With war came disillusionment, especially with God.

Hunter’s fourth watershed event is the rise of Science and the empirical process. The birth of science began to challenge many deeply held beliefs about the universe and human life. A radically different way of looking at our existence began to emerge as God slowly was removed from the discussion. While many figures have played a crucial role in this development, Hunter points out six that are strong examples; Copernicus, Galileo, Newton, Darwin, Marx, and Freud. Hunter quotes Peter Gay when summarizing the significance that these six individuals had on the history of Western thought.

Copernicus and Galileo, by discovering the structure of the solar system, challenged the Church’s traditional understanding of the cosmos...Newton’s theory of gravity challenged the doctrine of Providence,

as traditionally understood. Prior to Newton, people assumed that God's providential hand kept the moon, planets, and stars in place. Newton's *Principia* demonstrated, mathematically, that the universe's cohesion could be explained by his theory of gravity, and for many people God was edged out of the providence business. The long-term effect of the Newtonian revolution was even greater, as people came to see the universe as a self-enclosed system, or a "machine" that did not require "God" to explain or manage it. Darwin's theory of evolution challenged the doctrine of the creation and the nature of humankind - as traditionally understood. Darwin's *Origin of Species*, with theories of natural selection, survival of the fittest, and progressive evolution, made it possible for people to understand their species in a very different way - as rational animals, without the dignity and purpose assumed in the biblical doctrine of creation.

Marx's writings provided an alternative to the traditional christian understanding of the goal of history. Marx seems to have retained the Judeo-christian structure of history, but he substituted for Christianity's promised Kingdom of God a promised economic utopia.

Freud wrote a question mark over religious belief and religious experience, charging that belief in god and experiences of God could be explained psychologically, and thereby explained away as an "illusion" (Hunter, 1992:27-28).

The final influence of these individuals (spanning some 500 years of history) is that God was removed from the intellectual landscape. While many people held on to their Christian assumptions and beliefs, culture at large was now shaped by assumptions that gave answers to life's most foundational questions without reference to a Divine Creator or Divine revelation.² This development, coupled with Hunter's next watershed event set the stage for a philosophical battle that has raged for some two hundred years.

The Enlightenment is Hunter's fifth event. He points out that the Enlightenment played such a key role in the secularization of Western civilization that a number of authors treat it as the only event (Hunter, 1992:28). Three key

² In fairness it should be pointed out that this was not the intention of at least three of the people mentioned here. Copernicus, Galileo and Newton held Christian beliefs about their world and seemingly were not looking to explain it without God. For a fuller treatment of Copernicus and Galileo see Philip Sampson, 6 Modern Myths About Christianity & Western Civilization (Downers Grove: IVP, 2000).

thoughts emerged out of the Enlightenment that have become the bedrock of the modern mind. The first key thought is the inherent goodness of humanity. Enlightenment philosophy taught that humanity is intrinsically good and that goodness will show itself in the right environment. The second key thought is the inherent rationality of humanity. The Enlightenment carried with it a remarkable confidence in human rationality and our ability to define our own world and existence. Again, the right environment would bring this rationality out. And the third key thought was the goodness and inevitability of progress. Through science, education and technological developments humanity would only progress to higher and higher standards of living. All of this, of course, being a good thing, as we take further command of our world and define ourselves in the process.³

Some finer points developed based on these three key thoughts. The Enlightenment and the modern mind that it forged praised the value of human rights and dignity and did so without reference to God or a Creator. In the area of ethics and religion this was key. Because of our inherent goodness and rationality, humanity would be able to develop or discover its own morality or basis for ethics. We did not need a God or Divine revelation to tell us how to live; we could determine that for ourselves. At its core, ethics became anthropocentric rather than theocentric; a development that set the stage for the modern and postmodern world.

The sixth and final event was Urbanization. The 18th century Industrial Revolution in Great Britain started what was to become a global phenomenon where large numbers of people moved from rural to urban life. During the last century especially, we have seen the astronomical growth of cities in most of the world's countries. The result, according to Hunter, is the amplification of the effects of secularization and the subtle, but profound, loss of "God consciousness" associated with urban secular populations (Hunter, 1992:29). Through the 500

³ An excellent critique of our modern (and even postmodern) belief in the inherent goodness of technology

years of history that Hunter highlights, God was, by and large, left behind not only in the area of philosophy, but in the country as people moved to the cities. The church's influence did not follow the people and as a result was greatly diminished.

The events that Hunter highlights show the larger historical moves that occurred that brought us to the place where we are today. They indicate to us how the modern foundation for ethics was built and represent a mix of sociological and philosophical factors. While these events show the broad current of Western history, there are some other elements, primarily philosophical or religious, that need to be considered to give us a clearer picture of our roots. Two of these elements that are of particular note are Romanticism and Existentialism; both of which essentially come as a response or corollary of the Enlightenment and both of which are intertwined with the other.⁴

The term "Romanticism" historically applies to many areas including art, music and literature, but also to philosophy and religion.

Romanticism is more than a fashion in arts and letters, more than an approach to political problems: it is a philosophy, or better, a set of philosophies loosely tied together if only by their common rejection of eighteenth-century rationalism, of refusal to line, shall we say, on the Locke-Hume axis (Brinton, 1967:209).

Veith suggests that "early nineteenth-century romanticism turned the rationalism of the Enlightenment upside down. Rather than seeing nature as a vast machine, the romantics saw nature as a living organism" (Veith, 1994:35). The romantics emphasized human creativity and individuality rather than the cold rationalism of the Enlightenment. It was not that Romanticism abandoned the entire Enlightenment project, because in fact both streams of thought held much in

and progress is found in Neil Postman's Technology, New York: Vintage Books, 1992.

⁴ Many point out and treat Immanuel Kant as the focal point for this discussion (see Wilkens & Padgett in Christianity and Western Thought - Volume 2) and Frederick Copelston, A History of Philosophy - Book

common (a belief in the progress of humanity, humanity's ability to manipulate its environment, an almost overwhelming optimism about humanity's condition and possibilities), but it rejected the manner in which these commonalities would come about.

For our purpose the primary force of Romanticism is the individual emphasis that it laid for ethics. While the Enlightenment (and subsequent modern mind) built its ethical agenda on the inherent rationality and goodness of humanity as a whole, the romantics essentially built their ethics on the individual. "The romantics exalted the individual over impersonal, abstract systems. Self-fulfillment, not practicality, was the basis for morality" (Veith, 1994:36). And further:

Romanticism cultivated subjectivity, personal experience, irrationalism, and intense emotion. It encouraged introspection and attention to the inner life...Instead of following external rules or even practical considerations, romanticism interiorized the moral life. The romantics did agonize over their honor and their personal failures. But they ultimately understood morality in terms of the fulfillment of the self. Since the purpose of life is to "grow", like flowers and embryos, whatever enriches the self must be good, and whatever diminishes the self must be bad (Veith, 1994:36).

This kind of emphasis led to a much more relativistic or subjective view of ethics.

...as against the Enlightenment's concentration on the critical, analytic and scientific understanding the romantics exalted the power of the creative imagination and the role of feeling and intuition. The artistic genius took the place of *le philosophe*. But the emphasis which was laid on the creative imagination and on artistic genius formed part of a general emphasis on the free and full development of the human personality, on man's creative powers and on enjoyment of the wealth of possible human experience. In other words, stress was laid on the originality of each human person rather than on what is common to all men. And this insistence on the creative personality was sometimes associated with a tendency to ethical subjectivism. That is to say, there was a tendency to depreciate fixed universal moral laws or rules in favour of the free development of the self

3, Vol. 7. The themes Kant deals with and the challenges he meets (especially of Hume) set the agenda for much of what has happened in Western philosophy.

in accordance with values rooted in and corresponding to the individual personality (Copleston, 1963/1985:14).

Copleston goes on to point out that we must be careful not to suggest that all romantics followed this line of thinking, but that it is representative of the movement as a whole.

Existentialism was also a response to the Enlightenment agenda, although in a much different fashion than Romanticism. The core of existentialist philosophy is that life, inherently, is meaningless. In the face of the crass rationalism and the machine like universe of modernism, existentialism seeks to find meaning in a meaningless world.

According to existentialism, there is no inherent meaning or purpose in life. The blind automatic order of nature and the logical conclusions of rationalism may be orderly, but they are inhuman. As far as a human being is concerned, the mindless repetitions of natural laws are meaningless. The objective realm is absurd, void of any human significance (Veith, 1994: 37).

The modern world built by the Enlightenment was pictured as a tidy package where all of the pieces fit perfectly together and where humanity's primary problems were sociological or educational in nature. Experience however taught us that this picture was not big enough, that the problems we face are not so easily defined and dealt with. Words like "despair" and "absurd" are common in existentialist literature because they capture the feeling of hopelessness that pervades the view. If we, as humans, are simply part of a machine like universe that was born of an accident and is proceeding to no place in particular, then where does meaning come from? For the existentialist, meaning comes from the self, the individual; the person who creates meaning for themselves out of whatever circumstances they find themselves in. Personal choice is paramount for creating meaning.

Existentialism provides the rationale for contemporary relativism. Since everyone creates his or her own meaning, every meaning is equally valid.

Religion becomes a purely private affair, which cannot be “imposed” on anyone else. The content of one’s meaning makes no difference, only the personal commitment - to give life meaning Sartre chose communism; Heidegger chose Nazism; Bultmann chose Christianity. Everyone inhabits his or her own private reality. “What’s true for you may not be true for me” (Veith, 1994:38).

For the romantic and the existentialist the primary purpose was the same, to escape the crass rationalism of Enlightenment philosophy. In that escape, each rejected a primarily objectivist morality for a subjectivist one. In doing so, they paved the way for our contemporary world and postmodernism.

The difficulty in summarizing where we might be today philosophically is that each of these streams (along with others and countless variations of all of them) intermingles and has created a very eclectic approach to life in the West. There is an ebb and flow to philosophy that makes it difficult to define, especially when you are in the midst of it. In some areas of contemporary Western life the modern worldview still dominates. For example, atheistic empiricism still dominates the basic epistemology of our culture, especially when it comes to explaining the origins of humanity.⁵ Technological progress is still almost always viewed as the key to dealing with any problems that might face us, including ethical ones. And for many, it still seems to be the assumption that we are inherently rational and good enough to save and advance the human species. Postmodernism however represents a significant departure from this worldview. The nature of science and the scientific process are being questioned. There is an

⁵ There are a number of good resources that highlight this issue. Phillip Johnson in [Reason in The Balance](#) deals specifically with the naturalistic assumptions of American culture. Lesslie Newbigin’s third chapter in [The Gospel In A Pluralist Society](#) entitled “Knowing And Believing” offers an excellent critique of how epistemologically biased Western culture has become. If a statement is based on “science” then it is “fact” and can be known. However, if a statement is faith based or is a value judgment, then it is something to be believed, but not on the level of a fact. Newbigin points out how impossible it is to hold to such a dichotomy and how within the scientific community value judgments are continuously made to interpret the “facts” they discover.

increasing number of serious critics of our growing dependency on technology.⁶ Added to this is a general wariness about anyone or anything that offers “sure” answers to life’s concerns. It is in the area of ethics and the nature of truth however where we see the most significant movement from the modern to the postmodern, and it is in these areas where the most significant challenges lie.

2.2. The Challenge of Postmodernism

Depending on who one listens to, postmodernism is either the worst obstacle or the greatest opportunity Christianity has ever faced. While the secular modern mind presented, and still presents in many areas,⁷ a daunting challenge to the Christian worldview, it was at least a stationary target. Both the Christian worldview and the secular worldview accepted the existence of objective truth and reality; the debate was over the nature of that reality. A quick survey of Christian apologetics books illustrates this very thing. The issues dealt with had to do with the existence of a creator, the possibility of miracles, etc. The foundational question was the nature of the focal point of the universe; was it divine or human. For the postmodern mind, the fundamental question is quite different. For the postmodern mind the question is not about the nature of the focal point because the focal point does not exist. There is “...no transcendent center to reality as a whole” (Grenz, 1996:6). The postmodern mind critiques the Christian worldview

⁶ Again, Neil Postman in *Technopoly* (Vintage Books: New York, 1992) offers an excellent critique of dependency on technology. He calls into question our assumptions about the inherent goodness of technology progress as well as those who see technology as “neutral”. One area in the West where we are really starting to see a critique of the technological approach to life is in the area of medicine. There is a growing interest in “alternative” medicine in the Western world. Naturopaths, herbalists, and the like are gaining more of a foothold in Western culture as legitimate choices. Never-the-less, I believe Postman is essentially correct when he remarks that “there are no longer methods of treating illness; there is only one method - the technological one. Medical competence is now defined by the quantity and variety of machinery brought to bear on disease” (pg. 102).

⁷ It is important to recognize the fact that while we talk about having moved into the postmodern era, many still operate with modern assumptions (and premodern for that matter). As a matter of fact, one could argue that in many areas of life the modern mind is still the dominant one and that we cannot simply make blanket statements about how North Americans think. Never the less, stylistically it’s difficult and

and the modern secular worldview for essentially the same reason, a belief in objective truth. The postmodern mind is largely unconcerned as to whether or not one believes in God, it's only concerned if you believe that "truth" applies to everyone. To the postmodern mind it is bold arrogance to speak about absolute Truth, whether the speaker be Christian or atheist. Truth is found on the inside, through the eyes of the viewer. Each individual interprets their reality and world solely through their own experience.

For ethics, the postmodern challenge lies in its emphasis on the subjective nature of truth and knowledge. The postmodern mind echoes very clearly the themes we considered under both Romanticism and Existentialism. Philosophers like Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and Richard Rorty and the many who have followed them have directly challenged the notion of objective truth and the ability to know it. For them, the nature of truth is found in the knower not in the thing being known. In other words, there is no such thing as a universe "out there" that individuals come to know, but rather everything we know is fully conditioned by us, the "knowers". In Grenz's words:

...the postmodern mind no longer accepts the Enlightenment belief that knowledge is objective. Knowledge cannot be merely objective, say the postmoderns, because the universe is not mechanistic and dualistic but rather historical, relational, and personal. The world is not simply an objective given that is "out there," waiting to be discovered and known; reality is relative, indeterminate, and participatory (Grenz, 1996:7).

David Hoekema contends that a culture war is being waged over this issue and summarizes the current postmodern condition in this way:

The partisans on one side [of the culture war] are the heirs of those great iconoclasts of the previous century – Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche – whose broadly parallel critiques of conventional economics, psychology, and moral philosophy unmasked the smug self-deception with which Western thinkers had long reassured themselves that their parochial viewpoint was

cumbersome to write that way. So, for ease and clarity I will talk about the modern worldview in the past tense, even though it still lingers.

that of a pure rationality transcending history and community. In distinct but related ways, the advocates of feminism, postmodernism, and multiculturalism have argued that such transcendental rationality is an illusion, a goal that cannot even be coherently described, let alone achieved. Knowledge, they urge, is always situated in a person, in a time, in a community. We are not rational, fact-verifying devices: we are human persons, male and female persons, African American and Asian American and European American persons. Our questions no less than our answers are situated in our concreteness. Both are products of a dynamic process in which our minds do not snap photographs of the world but rather converse with it. As our search for answers leads us on, both the knower and the known, both we and our world, experience profound changes (Hoekema & Fong, 1997:2).

The consequence of this view is far reaching. In the area of ethics the result is that morality must also be located within the knower rather than in some external reality. Ethics would also be described as relative, indeterminate, and participatory, which makes it a very fluid discipline. If knowledge and truth are subjective in nature, then so too must ethics and morality. Whether something is right or wrong, good or bad, is determined by the subjective self and the context (or contexts) they find themselves in. For the objectivist (including the traditional Christian theist) this shift in thinking is a significant one. Traditional moral discussions have generally revolved around trying to solve a moral problem by discovering or determining “the right thing to do”. In the postmodern context this is no longer the issue. For postmodern ethics the issue is determining what is “the right thing to do *for you*”.

To some extent this element of postmodernism appears to be more a reaction against the modern/Enlightenment mind. In many ways this is fundamentally true, but we need to probe deeper to show the philosophical roots and structure of relativism.

2.3. The Nature of Ethical Relativism

We have already laid out a general definition of relativism as found in the postmodern context. A more specific one is helpful for this part of our project. Relativism is based on the assumption or assertion "...that genuine knowledge is impossible, that no one can judge which ideas are actually true any more than we can know which actions are really right or which values are genuinely worth holding" (Porter, 1988:3). Inherent within this assumption is the claim that there is no external, objective standard by which to measure any statement or value judgment. The standards for truth or morality come from within the society or individual. This philosophical position can be applied to any discipline including science and art, but our primary concern is how it relates to the field of ethics. In its most serious ethical form, relativism tries to take into account the differences between cultures and the ethical pronouncements that those individual cultures make. The relativist points out that each culture has a different way of processing and dealing with it's own ethical issues and those differing methods should be respected. The assertion is that to judge one culture's ethical position as wrong and another's as right is at best naive and at worst arrogant or even oppressive. For example, in Finland it is socially acceptable for men and women, of any age, to sauna together in the nude. In many other countries this would be deemed inappropriate or immoral. Ethical relativism suggests that neither position is right or wrong, but merely different. Each culture has made an ethical evaluation about modesty and should be allowed to judge for itself what is proper.

2.3.1 History of Relativism

We should note that even though we have the impression that postmodernism is "new", there have been many notable philosophers throughout history who have been proponents of the relativism that marks it. Ethical relativism can be traced back to the Sophists of ancient Greece (fourth and fifth

century BC). More recent examples are Thomas Hobbes, Benedict Spinoza, David Hume, William James, John Dewey, A.J. Ayer and Jean-Paul Sartre. Historically, David Hume has been a major pillar of ethical relativism. For Hume, genuine knowledge falls into two basic categories, relations of ideas and matters of fact. Relations of ideas are concepts that are true by definition. A given statement is true because of the meaning of the words that are used; logic dictates that this is so. For example, the statement "a circle is a round figure" is true because "circle" means "round figure" (Porter, 1988:9). This may seem to be a minor point, but nevertheless it is self-evidently true. Matters of fact do not rely on logic per se; they rely on whether or not they accurately reflect the external world. For example, defining "fish" or "dorsal fin" cannot evaluate the statement "all fish have dorsal fins"; it can only be evaluated by considering the external facts to see if all fish do indeed have dorsal fins. When applied to ethical judgments, Hume's thought has serious consequences. Hume states that moral judgments are neither relations of ideas or matters of fact (see Porter, 1988:10). The truth of a principle such as 'Love thine enemy' cannot be proven either by the meaning of the terms involved or by reference to external facts. Moral judgments therefore occupy a state of limbo; their truth lies beyond all verification (Porter, 1988:10). If Hume is correct, then all ethical judgments are relative to those who have made them and those judgments are non-verifiable to anyone outside of those who have made them. Hume's position is the pre-cursor to the strict empiricism of A.J. Ayer and Logical Positivism (Porter, 1988:10). Logical Positivism adheres to the Verification Principle that states that there are only two possible ways for any statement to have meaning. A statement is initially judged to be meaningful if it is a tautology. A tautology is a proposition that is true within itself; for example, 'a rainy day is a wet day'. This is Hume's relations of ideas. The second way that a statement can be judged as meaningful is if it is empirically verifiable. If some sort of empirical test can be performed in order to judge the truth or falsehood of a

statement then that statement is meaningful. If a statement or proposition does not fulfill either of these two criteria then that statement is deemed "meaningless" or "nonsense". This is not to say that such propositions are not true or false, they are just simply meaningless or nonsense because they do not fulfill the verification principle. Essentially, all value judgments fall into this "meaningless" category because they are not true within themselves, nor can they be proven empirically (Porter, 1988:10-11). This, of course, leaves us with ethical relativism, or at least in the position that ethical statements are meaningless. They may have value or meaning to the person making them, but they cannot to anyone else.

2.3.2 Sources of Relativism

There are a number of sources or warrants that seem to support the belief in ethical relativism. B.F. Porter (1988:4-5) gives four sources for our contemporary pluralistic societies. First, relativism comes from "...our desire to practice tolerance, to take a liberal, open-minded approach toward other people's ideas - including those that are different" Each person has a right to hold and express his or her own opinions. Secondly, relativism comes from "...the desire to maximize our freedom of choice." As autonomous individuals we should be able to make as many choices for ourselves as possible without an external authority dictating to us what those choices should be. Third, relativism comes from the intellectual uncertainty that is prevalent in today's world. Contemporary science repeatedly undergoes significant changes in the theories it puts forth; therefore caution is the best approach concerning something that might change in the future. This view is applied to ethics as well. Something deemed immoral today might be accepted as moral tomorrow; therefore we should be less dogmatic about making moral pronouncements. And fourth, relativism comes from our awareness of diversity. The differences in cultures are very obvious and these differences have led to a

less than confident belief that our way of doing things is the correct way or the only correct way (Porter, 1988:4-5).

Sociology and anthropology have offered significant support to this fourth source. Many sociologists and anthropologists point out the cultural differences that exist and argue that each culture functions, both pragmatically and ethically, according to its own standards. Many examples could be given; one is polygamy. Porter quotes a large section from Melville Herskovits' *Cultural Relativism* in which Herskovits explains how polygamy is both a pragmatic and ethical option for certain cultures even if it is not for others. Herskovits' point is that "Evaluations are relative to the cultural background out of which they arise" or, stated more broadly, "The principle of Cultural relativism, briefly stated, is as follows: Judgments are based on experience, and experience is interpreted by each individual in terms of his own enculturation" (Porter, 1988:14). The net effect of these statements in the field of ethics is obvious, ethical judgments are relative to the culture or society that make them.

When we combine these factors with the historical and philosophical roots that we have already considered, it is understandable why ethical relativism would hold such power in our contemporary society.

We should also note that each of these sources or reasons that Porter lists are the primary tenets of cultural pluralism. Pluralism is the context that relativism thrives in. In general, it is the philosophy that larger culture is made up of many different sub-cultures and that each of those sub-cultures should be respected and allowed to live their lives according to their own preferences. The ideas that we are to be tolerant of these differences and to allow each autonomous individual to express their freedom as they wish are primary pillars of pluralism. This is at the heart of Canadian thought. We pride ourselves in being a mosaic of many different cultures and that we allow each group to live their own lives and practices. This is the underlying premise of American culture as well, with some

notable differences.⁸ As a general tenet, pluralism affirms the best in each sub-culture. It encourages an acceptance of cultural differences and the richness of life that experiencing differing cultures can bring. It has much strength in this area. The difficulty however is that the current form of pluralism that now pervades North American culture, and many other parts of the world, has changed from its original ideals. Not only does pluralism affirm cultural differences, but it now states that each of these differences, no matter what they are, are right or true in themselves because they are sincerely held by the members of that culture.

Newbigin describes this form of pluralism this way:

Cultural pluralism I take to be the attitude which welcomes the variety of different cultures and life-styles within one society and believes that this is an enrichment of human life. I accept the truth of this, but qualify that acceptance with the obvious point that cultures are not morally neutral. There are good and bad elements in culture. I would not wish to see cannibalism or infanticide introduced into Birmingham, and I would not want to see sexual promiscuity and abortion on demand introduced into Madras (1989:14).

Newbigin goes on to illustrate how this ideology applies to the area of religion.

Religious pluralism,..., is the belief that the differences between the religions are not a matter of truth and falsehood, but of different perceptions of the one truth; that to speak of religious beliefs as true or false is inadmissible. Religious belief is a private matter (1989:14).

We do not ask whether the belief is true, but whether the believer is sincere in holding the belief (1989:15).

It should be pointed out that what Newbigin suggests is obvious, that cultures are not morally neutral, is no longer all that “obvious”. Many in the postmodern world would suggest that the question of moral neutrality is really a non-issue

⁸ While Canada sees itself as a mosaic, a patchwork of various sub-cultures, Americans generally see themselves as a melting pot, a mixing of various sub-cultures. The difference may be illustrated this way: a Canadian will generally talk about how they are of French, German, Chinese decent first and then a Canadian. Americans tend to be American first and then of some other nationality. There are exceptions of course and it could be suggested that for Americans, this is changing in some areas. Certain groups are not saying they are American first, but are emphasizing their “other” nationality.

since each culture sets its own moral standard. To suggest that neutrality is even a consideration is to suggest that there is a standard outside of any given culture that it is measured against. This basic premise is anathema to postmodern relativism. The same could be said for his comment that different religions are seen as "...different perceptions of the one truth" since most postmoderns would reject the idea of there being one truth.

Even with these two qualifications, Newbigin's point is well taken. We live in a world that no longer sees right or wrong, true or false, but merely perceptions that are based in a person's cultural surroundings.

2.3.3 Various Forms of Relativism

Ethical relativism can be expressed in a number of other more precise forms. With cultural diversity in mind, descriptive relativism focuses on the deeper issue of "differing basic ethical beliefs and values." (Hulley & Villavicencio, 1984:12) To help clarify, a further distinction is necessary. As already seen, relativism is often illustrated by the variety of practices found within different cultures. This can be called relativism of practice. It has been suggested that these various practices could express the same underlying belief or value. For instance, some offer that while the practice of polygamy is quite different from the practice of monogamy, both can be expressions of the basic belief in the importance of the family. In this case the underlying value is the same and would be "cross-cultural", while the practices are relative to culture. In a different situation however both the practices and the values could be different. For example, one culture could believe that it is morally acceptable to kill those who disagree with the status quo while another culture views all killing as immoral because life is sacred. The difference here is not just in practice, but also in the underlying value of the culture. This is called relativism of values. Both relativism of practice and relativism of values are contained under the general

heading of descriptive relativism although the distinction between the two is an important one to maintain.

A second form of relativism is normative relativism.

This form of relativism is stated in the form of a normative principle: what is right or good for one individual or society is not right or good for another, even if the situations involved are similar, which does not merely mean that what is thought right or good by one is not thought right or good by another ... but that what is really right or good in one case is not so in another. That is, this form of relativism rejects any need for consistency or universalisation of ethical principles (Hulley & Villa-Vicencio, 1984:26-27).

In this form of relativism one does not need to look for any underlying value since such values are unimportant. Each individual or society has his or her own values and one value deemed right by one society is not right for another. Each person or society's code of conduct is right and that is all that needs to be said. The result is that you can have, even within the same society, two conflicting values existing side by side and both being viewed as "right". A suggested example concerns the area of business ethics. Normative relativism would accept the existence of two codes of doing business, one code is for the normal business man who treats people "fairly", and the other code is for the young, aggressive business man who operates on a "cut-throat - do whatever it takes to get ahead" policy. According to normative relativism, each code is right for the individual who chooses to live by it. Meta-ethical relativism is a continuation of normative relativism. It concerns itself with the question, if ever raised, of how to justify one normative principle against another. The meta-ethical relativist position is that you do not; there simply is no rational way to justify one position over another. Everything depends on the values that the individual holds and ethics is essentially the "process of deciding which system of values you wish to adopt as a basis for your moral decision-making" (Hulley & Villa-Vicencio, 1984:27). Descriptive relativism is easy enough to comprehend and although it contains some difficult questions, one

can accept that it aids in ethical decision-making. However, normative relativism and meta-ethical relativism are much harder to accept. If any stated value is right just because it is believed to be so, and if there is no rational way to discuss normative ethical principles, then it is ultimately impossible to discuss anything related to the field of ethics.

2.3.4 Evaluation

We finally need to evaluate ethical relativism and consider why it does not offer a foundation for any kind of community ethic. There are a number of remarks that can be made about the validity of ethical relativism. Positively, ethical relativism recognizes the differences in cultures and individuals and attempts to seriously deal with these differences. Instead of accepting simplistic answers to difficult ethical situations, certain forms of relativism search for a common principle underlying the entire endeavour. There is value in this. Instead of emphasizing the differences, relativism can help us to accentuate the similarities that different cultures share and consequently bring down some of the barriers that are often put in place. This should ultimately lead to greater understanding and harmony between different cultures.⁹

There are however a number of criticisms that can be made about ethical relativism, six of which are mentioned by Porter (1988:21-26). First, many question the validity of both Hume's and Ayer's philosophical assumptions regarding what constitutes a meaningful statement. Two points can be made. One, the two criteria stated by both are rather arbitrarily chosen. Most would accept that truth or meaning can be achieved by either definition or by empirical verification, but offer that there are many meaningful statements that can be made that fall

⁹ An aside to this discussion has to do with the nature of the Christian mission. In the past much time and effort has been spent dealing with what would now be considered non-essential issues. Western missionaries have often been accused of trying to "westernize" converts instead of "christianizing" them. For some reason we in the west have equated the two instead of recognizing the cultural differences that

outside of these two areas. For example, the statement "that sunset is beautiful" or "this meal is delicious" would be considered meaningless by Hume or Ayer since neither fit the above criteria. Yet we do not function this way since we place great meaning on either of those statements. Likewise, what both Hume and Ayer seem to ignore is that even empirically verifiable statements often need a "metaphysical" context in order to have any ultimate meaning. For instance, empirically we can determine or describe how to split an atom and release its power. The determination of what to do with that power however is a metaphysical or value oriented question that according to Hume and Ayer would be meaningless. Many would offer though that the use of nuclear energy is anything but meaningless! The arbitrary nature of both Hume's and Ayer's criteria is highly questionable since they rule out many areas of knowledge that appear necessary.

Second, it has been shown that neither Hume's nor Ayer's criteria for meaningful knowledge meet their own criteria. Hume's classifications and Ayer's verification principle are not verifiable by definition or by empiricism; therefore if judged by their own standards their criteria for genuine knowledge would be deemed "meaningless". The stated position refutes itself.

Third, relativism is self-contradictory on other grounds besides its philosophical roots. When the relativist claims that everything is relative, he or she is making an absolute statement which, of course, is impossible if everything is relative. In other words, if everything is relative so too is the statement "everything is relative" which is self-contradicting.

Fourth, if taken in its subjectivist sense, relativism leads to the illogical result of two contradictory statements being "true". Subjectivism is generally applied to the individual rather than society as a whole and states that if an individual believes something to be true, then it is true for them. This position

are acceptable before God. An appropriate understanding of relativism should allow the church to better

however becomes patently absurd when it is carried further. For example, one individual can claim that the world is round and another could honestly claim that the world is flat. If subjectivism is accepted as true then both these statements must be accepted as true since they are both honestly held by two individuals. Obviously this is both logically impossible and absurd.

Fifth, ethical relativism assumes that since different cultures express different moral values there is therefore no objective standard for morality. We must question the validity of this assumption. Descriptive relativism would assert that the differing moral values alluded to are really only expressions of practice relativism and not truly value relativism. Even if practices are different, those practices still reflect the same underlying value which can then be objectively seen across cultural barriers. "In other words the underlying values may be the same and the disagreement may not stem from moral differences at all" (Porter, 1988:24). Further to this is that even if there is genuine disagreement on fundamental values and not just on the expression of those values, that does not mean that values are relative. "For the fact that societies disagree about values does not prove that each is right; it only shows that each society believes itself to be right. It still makes good sense to ask which has come closest to the truth and which is farthest away from the mark" (Porter, 1988:25). Porter gives the example of science and medical research. Centuries ago people held certain beliefs about diseases and considered exorcism or bloodletting to be appropriate medical treatments. Today however, medical researches know more about the causes of diseases and have cures based on the actual causes. This historical fact does not confirm relativism; it confirms ignorance and subsequent knowledge. The early medical practitioners were not right; they were ignorant of the truth. The scientist assumes that there is such a thing as truth and that we must work towards better understanding of that truth. Although Porter does not carry the argument this far,

evaluate what is truly the Gospel and what is only a cultural expression of that Gospel.

the Christian theist fundamentally agrees with Porter's assertion. The Christian belief is that there is an objective standard for morality. When common moral values are held in many different cultures, even if specific practices are different, the Christian can attribute this to general revelation or the fact that humanity was created an innately moral creature. When there is an actual disagreement on moral values, Christianity points to the freedom of choice afforded to humanity and the subsequent possibility of going against, or not fully understanding, the truth that is there.

A sixth criticism has to do with the burden of proof. Point number five above illustrated how the objectivist assumes that there is truth out there and that the moral diversity we see is really a variety of expressions of that truth. The relativist argues that the opposite is true, that moral diversity indicates moral relativity. The relativist could ask why one should automatically assume the objectivists position? Porter's answer is that the belief in some objective moral standard is the customary or commonly held belief and the relativist position is the unique one, and the burden of proof always falls to that position that questions the customarily held one.

In other words, the person who adopts a theory that is out of the ordinary must prove his case, while the person who maintains a customary or commonsensical view is justified in holding that view until it is disproven... For people ordinarily believe that certain values are truly important, that indiscriminate killing, for example, is terribly wrong and the preservation of life is a moral obligation. If assumptions of this kind are mistaken then that has to be proven, and it does not seem that the relativist has succeeded in demonstrating it" (Porter, 1988:25-26).

Philosophically, what our evaluation leaves us with is a system of thought, ethical relativism as expressed in the larger context of postmodernism, that offers a description of "how things really are" while denying that there is any objective position from which to determine "how things really are".

Descriptions of the postmodern condition are subject to a paradox of self-legitimation: we are told that we live amid an irreducible plurality of

meanings and values, but we are not told how we can be certain of this. If there are no more 'meta-narratives' to legitimate the 'grand narratives' describing our world and present age, then what are we to make of the narrative of the postmodern condition? (Goodchild, 1995:21).

Other criticisms could be leveled against ethical relativism. For instance, there are social consequences of the view. At the beginning of this evaluation it was stated that ethical relativism sought to take cultural differences seriously and suggested that when we do so the chance for harmony among different groups increases. Porter mentions that one of the key elements of relativism is the plea for tolerance, which again seeks to bring about this harmony or peace. The difficulty however is that even this possible positive benefit of ethical relativism can be questioned. Porter points out that by extolling tolerance the relativist is again giving an objective value that transcends the relativism that he or she is seeking to prove.

For by advocating the value of tolerance the relativist is presupposing that this value has objective worth and denying his own position. He is extolling tolerance from the standpoint of a moral system that he believes everyone should accept. In other words, by claiming the virtue of tolerance for his position the relativist gives the game away, for tolerance at least is assumed to be objectively valuable (Porter, 1988:26).

Further to this is the suggestion that tolerance in the context of ethical relativism could even be dangerous. For example, in medicine the doctor is not tolerant of disease because if left untreated it will lead to the demise of the patient. Likewise, one could argue that to be tolerant of an ethical position that is wrong leads to the demise of society. Consider the business example given above. Relativism suggests that we should accept the fact that some businessmen operate on the "older" system of fairness while others operate on the "cut-throat" style. But would not this kind of tolerance undermine confidence and respect for the entire business community? Since it would obviously not be in the best interests of the cut-throat to announce their method of operation, how would the consumer know

who to trust? Other examples could be given, but at the very least one must consider whether or not ethical relativism ultimately has the social benefits that its supporters say it does.

Another smaller, but important, criticism has to do with the “proofs” that are often given in support of relativism. Although many authors make a distinction between serious relativism and individual subjectivism, the average person (in North America anyway) does not generally make this distinction. For example, many times the comment is made, either in casual conversation or in more formal presentations, that relativism must be accepted as true because of the wealth of examples around us. The examples that are stated often concern what could be called the more mundane things in life like your choice of car or flavour of ice cream. Non-moral or amoral statements like, "You like Fords, I like Toyotas. You like chocolate ice-cream, I like vanilla" are somehow equated with fundamental moral pronouncements. Therefore, expressly non-moral statements are used, on a popular level, to support larger ethical relativism. Some will argue of course that those doing the important research in ethics do not take these proofs seriously. This may be true, but if the individual in everyday life accepts these statements as proof for ethical relativism then they must be dealt with. People, on the popular level, must understand that personal preferences about the details of life are not the same as the moral issues that govern who we are as humans and how we are to live.

One final comment that is closely related to the previous material can be made about the validity of ethical relativism. Throughout this evaluation it has been noted that many individuals make the distinction between serious ethical relativism and individual subjectivism. But one could question how long this distinction can be maintained. It is true that on a broader level cultural relativism deals with the differences in a given culture and offers a way of structuring society within that culture. The goal is that the members of a certain society may have

some standards by which to live even if other groups do not accept those standards. Could not one argue however that this is really just subjectivism on a larger scale? Granted that relativism on a cultural level is not as whimsical or as apparently shallow as the individual subjectivism that is often criticized, but is it not still subjectivism? Cultural relativism, apart from perhaps descriptive relativism, recognizes no objective standard of conduct; no principle by which its actions can be measured. This is, essentially, the definition of subjectivism whether on an individual or social basis.

2.4. Consequences of Ethical Relativism

There is a need to step back a little to remind ourselves of the larger view of the issue we face. The above evaluation focused primarily on the philosophical shortcomings of ethical relativism along with a brief comment about some social issues it presents. Each of these could be developed further and dealt with in more detail, but we must also keep an overarching perspective.

The main consequence of ethical relativism is the lack of a moral voice that it leaves us with, especially a communal moral voice. Once one is committed to the idea that there is only “truth for me” and “truth for you”, then there is no foundation from which to argue that there is something to which both of us must adhere. Many from very diverse backgrounds lament this development. For example, in the book Search for Community in a Withering Tradition, Hendrik Hart and Kai Nielsen dialogue about the nature of reason in our current philosophical culture. While the material they cover is not primarily concerned with ethics, their discussion is very much related to the concern of this thesis. The context for their discussion is the questioning that has occurred “after the collapse of foundationalism and the rise of postmodernism...” which has led to “...an intensive and widespread inquiry centered on Western philosophy’s preoccupation with reason” (Hart & Nielsen, 1990:VIII). One of the primary issues is whether or

not reason and rationality were treated, and perhaps still are, as absolutes of sorts that were appealed to in any debate or discussion. The implication is that whether overtly religious or not, there was a foundation from which to base any discussion. Essentially, there was a “Truth out there” to be appealed to. What is important to note about the discussion between Hart and Neilsen is that they come from radically different perspectives and seldom agree except on an underlying concern. Hart is a Calvinist Christian, Neilsen a Marxist Atheist. Both agree that “the tradition of reason is withering” (1990:XI) and that there is a need to somehow address that issue in order to avoid the paralysis of relativism. In the modern worldview reason and rationality were accepted as the means to decide or facilitate a debate. Because of the shift to the postmodern (and again the names of Derrida, Foucault and Rorty arise) this emphasis is no longer accepted. But if reason and rationality are no longer accepted, to what do we appeal? In other words, what provides any kind of shared belief system from which we can dialogue? As Hart states in the introduction to, and justification of, the book,

If it is true that in today’s global culture deeply alienated communities do not sufficiently share significant beliefs, while at the same time the tradition of reason as a tradition widely trusted for providing shared beliefs is withering, we are in serious trouble. For shared beliefs are crucial if divided communities are to live together. Our attempt to continue to talk together is, therefore, of great importance in a culture deeply attached to conversation as a vehicle of human flourishing (Hart & Nielsen, 1990:X).

While Hart and Nielsen do not move into this area, their discussion has implications for ethics because the nature of the debate is the same. Individuals, societies, or cultures may all disagree on the substance of an ethical choice, but to have any sense of community or mutual direction there must be some standard or foundation to appeal to in our ethical decision-making.

In the area of ethics, Margaret Somerville in her book The Ethical Canary raises some similar concerns. Working in the area of bioethics, Somerville argues

that we have lost our “shared story” and, as a result, have lost our ability to address the significant ethical issues that face us. In her own words,

Our postmodern, industrialized Western democracies are characterized by being pluralistic, secular and multicultural. These same features also mean that these societies lack a “shared story” – the collection of fundamental values, principles, attitudes, beliefs, myths and commitments that we need to buy into in order to function as a society, and that we use to give meaning to our communal and individual lives. This story, or societal-cultural paradigm, is the glue that holds us together (Somerville, 2000:2).

...extraordinary new advances in medical science have shocked us into recognizing that we do not have consensus about the values we need in order to address the immense ethical issues these new technologies raise. We have also recognized that these issues must be accommodated within our general societal paradigm; we would deal with them in isolation at our peril. The search for ethics is part of this accommodation process (Somerville, 2000:4).

Somerville goes on to argue that, amongst other factors, intense individualism in the Western world has contributed greatly to this loss of shared story and sets out to suggest how we might regain it.¹⁰

A concern raised by the predominance of intense individualism is that it has caused us to lose a sense of the common good and of what is required of us if we are to protect and promote the common good. The current search for ethics could indicate the emergence of a focus on individual responsibilities as well as rights and a renewed willingness to act in the interests of furthering the common good.

In contrast, if we apply intense individualism to our search for values, they can be reduced to simply what I as an individual prefer, which means that it is very difficult to find consensus and, as a result, to form community and protect the common good. The political scientist Francis Fukuyama, in his controversial book *The Great Disruption: Human Nature and the Reconstitution of Social Order*...sums up this phenomenon as

¹⁰ It should be noted that Somerville asserts that religion, at least institutionalized religion, can no longer provide this shared story as it once did. While she accepts that religion will be part of the story, since it plays such a significant role in the lives of so many Canadians and people in general, it cannot be the whole story since it is no longer accepted by all members of Canadian society. What Somerville is looking for is a story that all members of society can adhere to, one that would not be limited to any single religious tradition but would leave room for religion in general.

“moral individualism” resulting in “miniaturization of the community.” But for the purposes of the line of argument I want to develop in this book, the most important effect of the loss of consensus on values is the adoption of a situational ethics approach. In taking a situational ethics approach to the formation of values – adopting moral relativism – so that we can keep all our values’ options open, we seem to have lost the ability to agree that anything is *inherently wrong* – that is, wrong no matter how much good could come from doing it (Somerville, 2000:8).

Somerville’s last statement is particularly significant to our agenda. Moral relativism has essentially removed our moral voice. If morality (or values) is just a matter of personal opinion, then there is no basis from which to say something is wrong, a desperate state to be in.

The concern suggested by the above authors is made more pointed by some others. In his book, The Gospel in a Pluralist Society, Lesslie Newbigin explores the roots of pluralism in Western culture. As a part of that exploration Newbigin distinguishes between beneficial and non-beneficial forms of pluralism and relativism. In some concluding remarks he makes this comment: “The relativism which is not willing to speak about truth but only about ‘what is true for me’ is an evasion of the serious business of living. It is the mark of a tragic loss of nerve in our contemporary culture. It is a preliminary symptom of death” (Newbigin, 1989:22). Stanley Hauerwas, in A Community of Character, uses Richard Adams’ book, Watership Down, to emphasize this same point. Watership Down is a story about a group of rabbits that fear the destruction of their current warren and so leave to look for a new place to live. As they look for a new home they continue to tell the stories of El-ahrairah, their “god”, that emphasize who they are and their reason for existing. In their journey they come across a number of other rabbit warrens, each with their own characteristics. One particular warren is marked by an emphasis on individual freedom, the lack of any identifiable leadership and, most importantly, the lack of a shared story. These rabbits do not tell the stories of El-ahrairah, they see no need for them. What the wandering rabbits discover is

that this warren has been somewhat domesticated by a farmer who, from time to time, snares one of them. The others have just simply accepted this as the way of things because they, individually, are content, well fed, and may live as they please. The point that Hauerwas emphasizes is that the loss of a shared story has made it impossible for these rabbits to maintain the skills necessary for survival and for any kind of communal foundation. They lack the resources to deal with their situation because they have lost a sense of who they are and why they exist. Hauerwas goes on to suggest that, in some fashion, this story tells us something of our own in the area of social ethics. If we lose our shared story, we will lose our identity and sense of purpose, and ultimately we will die. Hauerwas offers this quote from Alasdair MacIntyre to solidify his point:

Alasdair MacIntyre has argued that our culture lacks a moral scheme which might provide “a vision” of man’s true end, of the relation of his empirical nature to his essential nature. “It is a tacit assumption of secular, liberal, pluralist culture, of the culture of modernity, that to a rational man no such vision is now available, because we can have no rationally defensible concept of man’s true end or of an essential human nature. Consequently, what we inherit from the varied and different strands of our past is a collection of fragments, of moral premises detached from the contexts in which they were once at home, survivals now available for independent moral assertion from a variety of moral points of view. It is this that makes moral argument appear to consist merely of the clash of bare assertion and counterassertion, marked by what is only the appearance of argument, so that nonrational persuasion seems to be the only way for an agent to resolve the issues in his own mind” (Hauerwas, 1981:231).

The summation of what Somerville, Newbigin and Hauerwas have said is this: moral relativism has moved ethical decision-making away from any absolute foundation and placed it upon the individual. In doing so, it has removed the binding story that holds society together morally and subsequently has removed our moral voice. Instinctively we know some things are right and some things are wrong, at least we express such conviction when we are on the receiving end of

the wrong things. But moral relativism has taken away our ability to adequately address these wrongs. We have no ground to stand on. The only possible result of this kind of situation, if it remains unchanged, is the death of a society.

A concrete example of what all of these authors are talking about will help us understand the core issue that we are trying to deal with. On April 20th, 1999 in Littleton, Colorado, two male students went into their high school with a variety of guns and bombs and began shooting their classmates. After killing twelve other students and one teacher they turned the guns on themselves. The two young men involved were members of a gang called “The Trenchcoat Mafia”, a neo-nazi influenced group. This was obviously a premeditated attack that targeted specific groups of individuals (believers in God and “jocks”, the athletically gifted). The shock that was felt after the incident was, and is, quite profound. It has sparked all kinds of discussion about the availability of guns in America and the violence of television and video games.

There are some significant issues to be dealt with in this situation. A frequent comment in this entire event was that if we had taught these young men to be tolerant of others who were different than them, then this situation could have been avoided. As one commentator pointed out however, perhaps the opposite is true. Perhaps what we have done by preaching tolerance is to allow groups like the ones to which these two boys belong to express their views with impunity. Instead of coming out and denouncing the hatred and violence that neo-nazi and similar groups promote, we have created a society that feels it cannot say anything, that it must be tolerant. More accurately, what we have created is a society that does not have the resources to determine how to in fact do this. We have emphasized tolerance and pluralism for so long we now have no basis from which to condemn actions that we find abhorrent. We have no communal moral voice. The situation of Littleton and the issues that surround it are of course extreme and most would point out that we instinctually know that what happened

there was wrong and should be condemned. That is no doubt true, but if we believe that the solution to these kinds of acts is simply to encourage everyone to be more tolerant we are sadly mistaken. The key issue here and the one that is at the heart of this thesis is that to be truly tolerant and affirm the basic rights of all people we must be intolerant of those ideas and actions that are wrong and destructive. The problem that current American and Canadian culture has is that it no longer has a basis from which to say certain things are right or wrong. We have been left without a moral voice and without a basis for communal reflection in the process of doing ethics.

2.5. Conclusion

The primary emphasis of this chapter was to show how the foundation of ethical thought in the West has shifted during the past number of centuries as well as to show some of the consequences of that shift. The removal of God from the intellectual landscape has had a significant impact on Western culture. It was illustrated that a particularly important consequence of this development was the adoption of a more subjective or relativistic view of ethics rather than an objective view. This, in turn, led to a more prominent emphasis on the individual in the ethical decision-making process rather than on the larger community. This over-emphasis on the individual has led to a diminished communal moral voice; a development that raises significant concerns as larger ethical issues are dealt with. In light of these significant concerns, a foundation of ethics that enhances a more communal voice needs to be pursued.

CHAPTER THREE - THE BIBLICAL FOUNDATION FOR ETHICS

3.1 Introduction

Friedrich Nietzsche, in Beyond Good and Evil (1885), became famous in the religious and philosophical communities for asserting that God was dead, that is that humanity had out-grown it's need for a deity to order life. Yet even he recognized that if you removed God from the system, moral chaos would reign if you did not replace God with something in order to provide a basis for ethics. For Nietzsche the replacement was the *Urbmensch* or "superman", an individual who took charge of people's life, gave order to it's apparent chaos, and led others in doing the same.¹ As shown in chapter one, in some measure, North American society is trying to live out Nietzsche's words. We have largely abandoned the Judeo-Christian ethic as our moral foundation and have instead built our foundation on the human. In broader terms, we have largely abandoned the idea of an external moral foundation and replaced it with an internal one. Sometimes segments of society may follow a particularly influential individual (an example of Nietzsche's *Urbmensch*?), but more often than not the trend seems to be to locate the foundation for morality within the person themselves.

George Cornell of the Associated Press ("*Noble Lie' needed to link morality, facts*", July 19, 1991) reported a more current example of the same sentiment. Loyal Rue, a professor at Luther College in Iowa, was quoted by Cornell as saying that modern culture needs a "noble lie" in order to connect morality with the current scientific mindset. According to Rue modern science has made it impossible to believe the myths of the Bible, such as Jesus rising from the dead or Moses delivering the Ten Commandments for God, any longer. However,

since these myths have provided the framework that brought about the betterment of humanity, dispelling them leaves one with Nihilism, the idea that there is nothing meaningful in life or the universe. Since Nihilism is ultimately destructive, a "noble lie" is needed to hold society together. "Without some 'integration of cosmology and morality' people will deny fixed standards and do whatever they choose, splintering society." Rue did not specify what the noble lie would be although he did suggest that it needed to be something "...that squares with what is known scientifically - something convincing though it may not be factual."

Much could be said about Rue's comments. A rather lengthy discussion could take place over Rue's assumption that science has made it impossible to believe the "myths" of the Bible any longer.² If nothing else, Rue's primary point is well taken, there must be a foundation for ethics that goes beyond the individual or else society crumbles. In the previous chapter we referred to comments made along similar lines by Margaret Sommerville. Some basis for ethics needs to be established in order to address the issues we face, but the general consensus seems to be that that basis cannot come from religion.³

Philip Yancey, in an article entitled "Nietzsche Was Right", deals with this particular issue. Following in the footsteps of Nietzsche, among others, Yancey contends that serious thinkers have recently begun to consider the idea of un-morality, the idea that there is no such thing as morality (1998:14). The basic

¹ On the surface current thinking in North America has gone even farther than Nietzsche, not only is God dead, but at least verbally many are saying that we can somehow remain morally grounded without replacing Him.

² Rue's comments are not new; many have suggested that the advent of the scientific method over the last two or three centuries have rendered it impossible to believe the biblical story. (It is remarkable however to hear someone suggest that we actually need to lie to ourselves in order to keep from self-destructing!) We should also note however that in recent years there has been a movement among both scientists and theologians to come together and dialogue about how their respective disciplines may interact with each other. Science and Theology may not be the mutually exclusive disciplines that many today contend they are.

³ A recent attempt at providing a purely secular foundation for ethics can be found in Jurgen Habermas' The Future of Human Nature. Habermas' work is detailed and provides some new insight into some key

premise of un-morality is essentially what we have described in chapter one; the idea that there is no binding foundation from which to judge anything right or wrong, that morality is based on the individual and individual preference. Yancey echoes much of what we have already covered and suggests that,

From Aristotle onward, the West had always perceived “the good” as an external code, neither mine nor yours. Though one could choose to break the code, it remained an external code above and beyond the reach of any individual (1998:15).

He also notes that the consequence of making this shift in thought is not all that difficult to predict. Yancey offers the following quote from Charles Darwin to suggest what we are left with:

A man who has no assured and ever-present belief in the existence of a personal God or of a future existence with retribution or reward, can have for his rule of life, as far as I can see, only to follow those impulses and instincts which are the strongest or which seem to him the best ones (as in Yancey, 1998:15).

Throughout the article Yancey illustrates what some of those “impulses and instincts” (mentioned Darwin’s quote above) have been in our culture.

What is particularly helpful is that in his article Yancey not only explores the consequences of secularism’s rejection of a traditional Judeo-Christian moral foundation, but also suggests that “the question is not why modern secularists reject traditional morality, but on what ground they defend any morality” (1998:16). The agenda that faces us is not just a discussion about differing moral positions, but on what basis a secularist/relativist discusses morality at all. Yancey summarizes the issue rather pointedly.

‘Can anyone be a saint if God does not exist? That is the only concrete problem I know of today,’ wrote Albert Camus in *The Fall*. Civilization holds together when a society learns to place moral values above the human appetites for power, wealth, violence, and pleasure. Historically, it has always relied on religion to provide a source for that

issues. However, one key assertion still seems to remain; that while religion may play a role in our ethical discussion, society needs to adopt a thoroughly secular foundation for ethics.

moral authority. In fact, according to Will and Ariel Durant, ‘There is no significant example in history, before our time, of a society successfully maintaining moral life without the aid of religion.’ They added the foreboding remark, ‘The greatest question of our time is not communism versus individualism, not Europe versus America, not even the East versus the West; it is whether men can live without God’ (Yancey, 1998:16).

A fundamental contention of this thesis is that the answer to Yancey, Camus, and the Durant’s question is no; we cannot live without a divine anchor for our moral lives.⁴ The shift from an external moral foundation to an internal one is ultimately self-destructive. “By destroying the link between the social and cosmic orders, we have effectively destroyed the validity of the social order” (Yancey, 1998:17). We need a foundation from which to build our communal ethic and the prevailing North American philosophy does not provide it.

The purpose of this chapter then, is to establish a Biblical foundation or context for ethics and then to consider what the Biblical text has to say about the role of community in the ethical decision making process. The context in which the Bible discusses ethics is important for understanding what it says specifically about a communal moral voice. One without the other would leave us with an incomplete picture.

Two primary components will be used to build this foundation. Component one, God’s Redemptive Story, will give an overview of the context in which the Bible states that ethics takes place. The assumption here is that the Bible not only gives us an accurate account of humanity's situation, but also that it is authoritative in addressing that situation. The second component, God’s Redemptive Work, will provide a significant core to the discussion. In this

⁴ Another way of framing the question is to ask whether or not Western culture will be the first to have some kind of external, non-divine, foundation of ethics. Further inquiry might be made to see if this is even possible. In other words, is an external foundation for ethics always divine or can it be something else? Some might argue that placing the foundation for ethics on the state or larger culture is a way of having an external, non-divine, foundation. What we have argued to this point however is that even in these corporate forms; the foundation is still an internal one. That is, still founded upon human opinion or choice rather than something outside of the human experience.

component we will consider three fundamental elements, grace, salvation, and Christian identity and character, which provide the outline of God's dealings with humanity. These three elements establish the theological grounding necessary for the Christian ethic. On the basis of these two components we can then discuss what is essentially a third component to the overall picture, the biblical teaching on community in ethics or, God's Community of Faith. More precisely then, we will be discussing three primary components of the biblical foundation for ethics, one of which is the role of the community in the ethical process.⁵

3.2 God's Redemptive Story - Life Between The Bookends

The Bible begins with a clear statement about the origin and nature of the world in which we now live. It simply states, "In the beginning God created..." (Genesis 1:1). The rest of chapter 1 and 2, in the form we now have them, detail just what God created and in doing so leave us a picture of not only an absolutely sovereign God, but also one that is intimately involved with God's creation (Birch 1991:72). Also from these chapters we see creation in its perfect form. Six times in chapter 1 we are told that God looked at what God had created and saw that it was "good", commenting on the quality of what God had created as well as it's "fitness for it's purpose "(Wenham 1987:18). At the end of chapter 1 we are told that when God was finished God surveyed all that God had created and saw that it was "very good", again emphasizing the perfect nature of the created order and God's pleasure with it. In Chapter 1 we have a more detailed account of the creation of humanity with the final verse again emphasizing the harmony of the created order and it's perfect nature.

All of these comments made in the first two chapters are set against what is given in chapter 3 and following. Chapter 3 records what has traditionally been

⁵ Richard Hays in *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* offers what he calls three focal images which provide guidelines for discussion New Testament ethics; community, cross, and new creation. His discussion is similar to the one that will be undertaken here, but the order and emphasis is somewhat different.

called "the Fall of Humanity", giving an account of humanity's disobedience toward God and its consequences. Even a cursory reading of the chapter makes it clear that things changed dramatically. The man and woman, who in chapter 2 were presumably comfortable with the presence of God and not ashamed of their nakedness, now hide from God because of it. The pronouncements from God (vss. 14-19) further indicate that the relationship between man and woman has been altered, as well as the fact that nature itself has also been affected by humanity's sin. The final, and perhaps the most serious, consequence is seen in Adam and Eve's expulsion from the Garden of Eden, a definite break in humanity's relationship with God. The severity of the change is perhaps seen in chapter 6 where, after a number of generations, instead of "seeing that all was very good" God looked at his creation and saw "that every intent of the thoughts of his [humanity's] heart was only evil continually" (Gen. 6:5, New American Standard Version).

There are many theological insights to be drawn from the above material, but for our purposes only one is necessary. The perfect nature and the idyllic existence that was before the Fall is no longer with us. The Bible calls this change sin and it becomes the focal point for the rest of the Biblical record.⁶

Revelation chapters 21 and 22 give a similar picture to what we found in Genesis 1 and 2 except now this idyllic state comes at the end of history instead of the beginning. At the start of chapter 21 the apostle John tells us that he saw a "new heaven and a new earth" and that the first heaven and earth had passed away. At the center of this new heaven and earth is the presence of God and God's new,

⁶ The term "sin" in our contemporary culture carries a variety of nuances, some of which are not very helpful in building a sound biblical theology. The Hebrew concept of shalom is of great value in keeping the biblical view of sin front and centre. Cornelius Plantinga Jr. in his book, *Not The Way It's Supposed To Be – A Breviary of Sin*, essentially defines sin as the "vandalism of shalom". The Jewish concept of shalom, often translated as "peace", carries more the idea of wholeness or, the way things are supposed to be. Sin is the breaking or vandalizing of shalom. In other words, sin is not the way things are supposed to be. This understanding is very important to our current discussion because it helps us to appreciate the extensive nature of sin. Sin is not just an individual problem, but also a communal issue that shapes and

and rather spectacular, city of Jerusalem and along with that presence comes a number of other significant qualities. This new heaven and earth will be marked by the fact that God will "...wipe away every tear from their eyes..." and that death, mourning, crying and pain will cease since the first heaven and earth have passed away (21:4). As well, in this new existence there will no longer be a need for light since it will be illuminated by the glory of God, no night, "...its gates shall never be closed...", and no one unclean will abide there.

Without going into all the details concerning apocalyptic imagery, the focus of these two chapters is relatively clear. What John sees is the restoration of creation that is promised throughout scripture. Whether it is a return to the pre-fall state or something different all together is not the issue; what is envisioned for us in these chapters is what life will be like when the consequences of sin are finally dealt with and God consummates his plan for human history. The language used signifies an existence where death and all the struggles that lead up to it are done away with, life will be as it was intended to be before sin entered the world.

What we have in scripture then is perfection at the beginning of history and perfection at the end of history. However, the totality of our human experience lies between Genesis 1-2 and Revelation 21-22. No one has experienced what life would have been like before the fall and we are yet to experience what life will be like at its consummation. Because of this the biblical context for ethics is the existence we have between these two "bookends". This existence looks back to its mythical state for guidance as to what it was supposed to be like, and to the future in hope of what it will be like. In the meantime, however, we must live life as it is now and work towards the goal that has been laid before us.

To understand or appreciate the Christian approach to ethics then it must be seen in the context of the Redemption story. The biblical witness is not just that the world is fallen and not as it should be, but that God has sought to redeem his

affects us all. Our assertion that communal concerns must play a more predominate role in our ethical

creation from that fallen state. In fact, one could summarize the entire message of the Bible as God's redemption of fallen humanity. Redemption seeks to restore what once was or seeks to make things the way they ought to be. This redemption, according to the Bible, focuses primarily on the relationship between God and humanity or, in other words, humanity's spiritual concerns. This spiritual restoration forms the cornerstone for Christian ethics.

The scope of redemption goes beyond the individual however. The social element of humanity as well as the condition of nature are also wrapped up in God's redemptive scheme. The implication of this is that we must take sin and redemption seriously in our discussion of Christian ethics because they fundamentally shape our entire existence. Stephen Mott, in Biblical Ethics and Social Change (1982:17), pointedly sums up this concern:

If sin is as pervasive as we say that it is, if it violates a divine intent which is not removed from history, if it is not tolerable in life but a force which is viciously destructive of person and society, if it is not only against the will of God but against nature, then it will affect not only our personal motivations, decisions, and acts, but also our social life. It will powerfully influence our customs, traditions, thinking, and institutions. It will pervert our *cosmos*.

What Mott is emphasizing here is that sin affects every part of our lives and we must see our social responsibility in light of that influence. Later in his book he brings in the idea of how redemption affects this entire discussion:

The Reign of God is a central biblical concept which incorporates the imperative for social responsibility into God's goals in history. Rather than merely an ethical principle, justice is made part of the story of God's provision - the fall of humanity, the coming of Christ, and the final reconciliation of all things under the sovereign rule of God. *We can then understand social righteousness in the context of God's patient toil to win back God's lost creation* (emphasis mine, Mott 1982:82).

Although Mott does not specifically deal with the subject, personal righteousness

decision making process is a desire to re-establish a key element of shalom.

must also be understood in this same context. The ethic that is prescribed in the Bible operates within the redemption story and this story shapes our understanding of what personal righteousness is to be. This leads us to the second component of our foundation: God's redemptive work - grace, salvation, and character.

3.3. God's Redemptive Work - Grace, Salvation, and Character

When we understand the context in which biblical ethics takes place, "God's patient toil to win back God's lost creation" (Mott, 1982:82), we can better understand what the Bible says about how we are supposed to live and, perhaps more importantly, the "why" of doing so.

God's response to a fallen world is founded in the concept of grace. Throughout biblical history God is shown as actively seeking His lost creation. This activity, or presence of God, is a significant part of what we mean by grace. The ultimate example of God's grace is God's work through Jesus on the cross. Through Jesus God entered into the suffering of humanity and redeemed it, paying an enormous cost. This act of grace has become the foundation on which all of Christian ethics is based. Victor Furnish in *Theology and Ethics in Paul* expounds this emphasis on God's grace. "The Pauline ethic is first of all radically theological because it presupposes that man's whole life and being is dependent upon the sovereign, creative, and redemptive power of God" (1968:213). Quite simply, we begin with grace and everything else in the Christian life, including its ethic, comes after.

Stephen Mott also emphasizes the priority of grace in Christian ethics but he furthers the discussion by adding the transforming nature of grace. Mott suggests that there are two aspects to God's redeeming grace, God's power for us and God's power in us. Grace as God's power for us is shown through God's redemption of us through God's Son, while grace as God's power in us is what changes or transforms us. "As God's power in us, grace gives us strength to be

what we cannot be in ourselves. The Spirit empowers us to act ethically, including social action, as grace 'reigns through righteousness for eternal life' (Rom. 5:21)" (Mott, 1982:27). This is one of the more dramatic elements of the Christian ethic. Not only are we told, in some fashion, how we are supposed to live our lives, but we are enabled to do so. Likewise, the motivation to live the Christian life comes not just from a concern to do what we are supposed to, but from knowing and experiencing what God has already done for us.

The order of things in Christian ethics, therefore, is grace, salvation and then Christian character. In this "life between the bookends" God's grace is offered freely to all. Those who respond are saved and "re-created" (2 Cor. 5:17) by this grace and then are encouraged to "walk in a manner worthy of their calling" (Eph. 4:1). Mott calls this an indicative and imperative ethical appeal. "Our ethical behavior is to correspond to what God has enabled us to be by adoption and grace based on God's historical, once-for-all act in Christ's death and resurrection. Be (imperative) what you are (indicative) in Christ..." (Mott 1982:24). Mott uses Romans 6 to illustrate this idea. In this chapter Paul explains to the Christians at Rome what God has indeed done for them. In the first part of the chapter Paul describes God's grace and how being buried with Christ in baptism means that not only have we died with Christ but we will also be raised with Him. Along with this is the idea that we are no longer slaves to sin since this dying with Christ indicates a "newness of life". For Mott (1982:24) the key sentence comes in verse 12 where Paul writes, "Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body that you should obey its lusts". This verse links together the emphasis on grace in the first part of the chapter with the ethical exhortation that follows.

What we have in scripture then is the working of God that leads to salvation and then the subsequent development of Christian character based on that salvation. As Mott has already pointed out (1982:26), this emphasis is what is

found in scripture. Those who have been saved by the grace of God are challenged to live according to that calling; Christian character comes out of grace and redemption.

Other biblical examples can be given to illustrate this thought. The entire book of Romans also gives this "indicative-imperative appeal". Furnish calls attention to the fact that many authors have divided Paul's letters, especially Romans, into the theological and the ethical, giving the impression that one could easily distinguish between dogmatic and moral themes in Paul. Furnish contends however that this approach is hard to justify when looking at the biblical text (1968:98-106). After reading Romans it is obvious that in chapters 12-15 we find the most explicit imperatives in the letter and that many of these exhortations seem loosely connected, if not entirely unconnected. Never-the-less, Furnish argues that we must not draw the conclusion that Paul is merely stringing together a number of traditional statements on ethical behavior without consciously tying them into the theological statements that preceded them. Again, the implication of such an approach would be that Paul sees theology and ethics as two separate entities. Neither are we to consider the transitional passage of 12:1-2 as drawing a sharp distinction between the dogmatic and the moral. While there is definitely a transition being made in these verses, the language they use is "...but the restatement, now to be sure, in an explicitly hortatory mode and context, of the theme which had already been emphasized in 1:16-17" (Furnish, 1968:103). [Furnish has previously argued that the theme of Romans is found in 1:16-17; "the gospel, for those who receive it through faith, reveals the righteousness of God and is the power of God for salvation" (1968:103)]. Instead of making such a distinction Furnish argues that the objective of the first eleven chapters does not differ significantly from the objective of chapters 12-15. He aptly summarizes the point being made here:

God's righteousness, revealed in the event of Christ's coming, death, and resurrection, made real for the Christian in the event

of his baptism into Christ, is also revealed in the claim God makes for the believer's obedience. This obedience is expressed as man places himself at God's disposal, "presents" himself for service. The exhortation of Rom. 12:1-2 and the specific appeals which are thus introduced summarize and focus the whole preceding argument. The first verses of chap.12 offer a fresh statement, now in the imperative mood, of what it means to receive by faith the revealing of God's righteousness (1:16-17). Romans 12-15 is not, therefore, just an appendix on Christian morals. These exhortations not only presuppose the "theological" assertions of chaps. 1-11, but supply a further and needed explication of that one gospel (God's power for salvation) which both "theology" and "ethics" seek to unfold (Furnish, 1968:106).

Another strong example of this can be found in Paul's letter to the Ephesians. Ephesians is somewhat unique in that the themes covered there are very broad and that there are no specific references to events particular to the city receiving the letter. A number of conclusions have been drawn from this fact that cannot be addressed here, but what is helpful for our purposes is that the themes covered are at the core of Christian theology. As with Romans, many have remarked that there is a noticeable transition in Ephesians between the "theological" and the "ethical". In the first three chapters of Ephesians Paul uses broad strokes to describe the Church and how it came into existence. Paul goes back to the beginning and stresses the idea that God had chosen us "before the foundation of the world that we should be holy and blameless before Him" (Eph. 1:4) and that in Christ Jesus we have been adopted and redeemed (Eph. 1:5 & 7). Paul makes it clear that we were dead in our trespasses and sins and that because of God's rich mercy we have salvation in Christ (Eph. 2:1-4). Along with all of this Paul talks about the "mystery of the gospel"; that the Gentiles are included in God's plan as well as the Jews and that the Church is made up of all who are partakers of the promise (Eph. 3:4-6). All of this, according to Paul, is because of the grace of God. Many times throughout the first three chapters Paul emphasizes the fact that "by grace you have been saved".

The transition comes at the start of chapter 4 where Paul writes, "I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, entreat you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called." Following this initial statement Paul deals with a number of foundational ethical issues including unity in the Church, purity, and the marriage relationship.

On 4:1 Markus Barth remarks that "When the conjunction 'therefore' is used, at the beginning of a second, hortatory part of Pauline Epistles, it bears great weight; it emphasizes the logical dependence of ethical advice upon the preceding doctrinal statements" (1960:426). Similar to Romans, the emphasis is not just on a number of ethical statements, but how those ethical statements are contingent upon the doctrinal statements made previously. Barth does point out that Ephesians is different from other passages that illustrate this dependence in that Ephesians is more doxological than doctrinal. It could be argued that although this is true, what Paul is praising God for, salvation by grace through faith, are in fact doctrinal items. What Ephesians tells us is that we are to praise God for all that He has done for us and because he has done these things for us we are to live in a particular way. Again the order is grace, salvation, Christian character or, "be what you are".

Romans and Ephesians are only two examples in the New Testament of this indicative-imperative ethic. In many other places the same emphasis can be found even if it is only within a single verse or chapter. In 1 Corinthians 6:20 Paul uses the same formula to encourage a congregation that was riddled with moral difficulties. He tells them that "you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body" or, in other words, because of who you are in Christ, live this way. Even though the book of James deals more with practical living than doctrine per se, the second chapter is foundational to our understanding that faith must result in action. This is really just another way of saying that the lifestyle we are to have is dependent upon our identity in Christ.

Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5-7, is probably the text that has received the most attention in the discussion of Christian ethics and it too follows this same formula. Hauerwas and Willimon summarize it this way:

Ethically speaking, it should interest us that, in beginning the Sermon on the Mount with the Beatitudes, Jesus does not ask disciplines [sic?] to *do* anything. The Beatitudes are in the *indicative*, not the *imperative*, mood. First we are told what *God* has done before anything is suggested about what we are to do (1989:83 - emphasis authors').

Therefore, we cannot, and must not, make a sharp distinction between theology and ethics since ethics in the life of the Christian flows out of the theological statements that are made about who we are in Christ Jesus. In fact, it has been suggested that the only way to truly understand the Christian ethic is to keep it intimately linked to the theology from which it flows.

Only if we back off some distance from the actual content of the Pauline letters can we posit a dichotomy between Paul's *theology* and his *ethics* – or between *kerygma* (the proclamation of the gospel) and *didache* (the teaching of standards of conduct), or between *indicative* (what God has done in Christ) and *imperative* (what human beings are called upon to do). The more closely we read Paul's letters, the more fragile these familiar dichotomies appear. In these texts, it is difficult to draw a clear distinction between theology and ethics. They are packed together, under pressure: specific pastoral problems in Paul's churches elicit his theological reflection. Thus, we see theology in progress, unfolding. Paul is not simply repeating already formulated doctrines; rather, he is theologizing as he writes, and the constant aim of his theological reflection is to shape the behavior of his churches. Theology is for Paul never merely a speculative exercise; it is always a tool for constructing community (Hays, 1996:18).

The theological story that we participate in through Jesus directly influences the ethical lives we are to live today as well as the community in which we live those lives.

It is important to realize that this relationship between grace, salvation, and character or ethics is not only a New Testament concept but is very much a part of

the Old Testament as well. The key example of this is found in the birth of the nation of Israel in the book of Exodus. After a lengthy stay in slavery to the Egyptians the book of Exodus tells us that God heard the groaning of the Israelites and that he "remembered His covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob" (Ex. 2:24). Exodus goes on to give account of God's deliverance of the Israelites and eventually His establishing of a covenant with them at Mount Sinai. The Law, what we know as the Ten Commandments, given at Mount Sinai is obviously very important to any discussion of biblical ethics. It should be pointed out that even they begin with a reminder to the Israelites that the one giving them the Law is the one who delivered them from Egypt. As a matter of fact this deliverance from Egypt and the covenant that was formed became the focal point for all of Hebrew history. The prophets continually reminded Israel of the grace that was shown to them by God in the exodus and encouraged them, therefore, to be faithful to the covenant that they had with God.

Two examples serve to illustrate this emphasis in the Old Testament. In the book of Amos God tells the northern tribe of Israel that even though they follow all of the festivals and sacrifices that went along with the Mosaic covenant God was angry with them because they had forgotten about justice and righteousness. Amos 5:21-27 has become a classic expression of a people who do many of the right things but have forgotten the reason for doing them. The fundamentals of the covenant had been abandoned. A more dramatic picture is found in Hosea. The very life of the prophet becomes an illustration of how the people have prostituted themselves by worshiping other gods and how they were going to be judged because of it. The covenant had been forsaken and again they were called to remember the God that had delivered them and to live a life appropriate to the covenant that had been made.

Bruce Birch summarizes the teaching of the Old Testament this way; "When we take seriously the self-revelation of God in creation, promise, and

deliverance we can then properly understand covenant as response to what God has already done. *Obedience to the commandments of God is not submission to divine fiat but response to divine grace*" (1991:126 - emphasis mine).

The "be what you are" theme runs throughout biblical ethics. It is based on an understanding that the world as we now experience it is not as it was first created and that God has responded to that situation through grace. Because of this initial act of grace we have salvation or redemption from our fallen nature and are subsequently exhorted to live a life worthy of such a calling.

The distinctiveness of such a position is rather apparent and the significance of it should not be underestimated. Hauerwas and Willimon suggest, "Christian ethics only makes sense from the point of view of what we believe has happened in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth" (1989:71). Much of what the Bible asks people to do is not possible on their own. Only within the context given in scripture is it possible to understand and "do" biblical ethics. Hauerwas and Willimon outline the implications of this view even further when they write,

As believers, we are called to act right, not simply because an act can be demonstrated to be universally right but because it is an act God commands. We are called to base our lives and actions on something which, to Kant, seemed woefully contingent - a Jew from Nazareth. Our claim is not that this tradition will make sense to anyone or will enable the world to run more smoothly. Our claim is that it just happens to be *true*. This really is the way God is. This really is the way God's world is (1989:101).

For Hauerwas and Willimon this explains why people will disagree with the ethical position of the Church. It is not because they are irrational, but because they are not a part of, nor do they understand, the story that shapes the Church's ethic. "Christian ethics is about following this Jew from Nazareth, being a part of his people. Therefore, this ethics will probably not make much sense unless one knows that story, sees that vision, is part of that people" (1989:102).

3.4. God's Community of Faith

On the basis of what has just been discussed, we can proceed into specifically what the Bible says about the role of community in ethics.

"Religion...reminds us that we are not isolated individuals but members of communities with common memories and a shared life" (Barbour, 1993:42). The context that we have established, and the process of grace, salvation, ethic, is not just applied to the individual in scripture, but serves as a basis for understanding what it means to be the people of God. Both the Old and New Testaments emphasize this.

In the Old Testament it becomes abundantly clear that the existence of the nation of Israel, inclusive of their social, economic, and political structures, held a predominantly theological foundation leading to moral application.

In the age of the classical prophets and legislators of Israel, before the Babylonian exile, the existence of the nation could be taken for granted. The issue was how the nation could be just. In all the subsequent ages, Israel's existence itself was in question. The first point in each form of the variety of Jewish ethics, therefore, is to *be* Israel (Meeks, 1986:96).

The issue at hand in the Old Testament is the formation of a people, a nation through whom God interacts with his creation. Being a member of this community was the basis for moral action. Birch is even more pointed in his discussion of this:

The Bible had its origins and received its final shape as the canon of scripture in the faith community. As a resource for the Christian moral life it can be appropriated only in the context of the faith community.^[7]

⁷ This assertion raises many further questions. The formation of the canon itself is a long-standing concern in biblical studies let alone the discussion of what to do with the material itself once a position on the canon has been taken. Birch's assertion, and one shared by myself, is that we need to see the Old Testament (and the New Testament for that matter) as primarily a faith based source. While sociologists, anthropologists, and the like may find the Bible to be a great source for them, it is not primarily written in that fashion. The primary concern of the biblical writers is to record a people's theological journey, their interaction/relationship with God. To remove this from the equation, something very common – almost the norm – in many approaches in biblical studies over the last 200-300 years, robs the biblical text of its

The Bible is always the story of a people. Further, the Bible assumes that the moral life is never just a matter of individual character and conduct, but is to be located in and held accountable by the faith community. That community in turn is called into being by the graceful activity of God, and it is through the life and witness to the community that individuals are related to God and seek to understand the implications of their faith for moral life in the world.

In both Israel and the early church individual moral life was seen in the context of a community identity (Birch, 1991:30).

Although the social and historical issues are quite different, the emphasis on community is the same for the New Testament. In fact, this emphasis in the New Testament is because of the theological continuity between the faith community of ancient Israel and the New Testament church. The stories of the Old Testament, with both their theological and moral emphases, are part of the Church's story as well. Gordon Fee goes to great lengths to show how the apostle Paul in particular uses Old Testament language in understanding the nature and purpose of the New Testament church. Fee traces the Old Testament emphasis on the presence of God expressed through the tabernacle and temple and its central role in defining the nation of Israel through to Paul's use of the same language to describe the New Testament church. Fee (1996:17-18) points out that when Paul tells the Corinthian church that they are the temple of God (1 Corinthians 3:16) he is firmly entrenching them in the theological and ethical story of the Jewish nation. In the Old Testament God's presence was a sign of God's blessing and providential care for God's people and God's symbolic absence (when the nation is sent into exile and the temple is destroyed) is a sign of God's judgment. The language of the New Testament also indicates that the presence of God, now existing in the hearts of God's people through God's Spirit, is key to understanding the moral significance of the church. On this basis Fee asserts that Christian ethics is not primarily an individualistic, one-on-one-with-

primary intention. To look for moral instruction in these texts apart from membership in the theological communities that "produced" them is inappropriate.

God brand of personal holiness; rather it has to do with living the life of the Spirit in Christian community and in the world...Paul's accent here falls heavily on the community. His concern is with the local church as the people of God in their city. Hence most of his instructions to them are in the second person plural, with the whole church in mind (Fee, 1996:99).

This understanding of moral life is significant. Far from being merely guides to personal morality, both the Old and New Testaments place ethical life distinctly in a communal environment.

In both the Old and the New Testaments *doing is intimately tied to being*. Those with ethical concerns most often approach the Bible asking, "What shall we do?" The Bible resolutely tells us that what we do is dependent on who we are called to be. We are called to be the faithful community of the people of God. It is out of this identity that we are to decide and act. The tendency is to seek help in deciding an ethical issue without attending to the summons into relationship with God which comes through the community of faith (Birch & Rasumussen, 1989:165).

A common concern often voiced at this point is that this kind of emphasis on the communal aspect of morality leads to a devaluation of the individual. Without question this is an important concern, but it must be understood that neither the Old nor New Testament leave individual concerns out of the equation.

The New Testament is not a rulebook, not a cookie cutter for forming identical people or identical communities. Instead, the New Testament texts call us to respond in imaginative freedom, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to form communities that will embody the truth of the Word, demonstrating metaphorically the power of God's grace in our midst (Hays, 1996:469).

Rather than seeing the emphasis on community as a restrictive thing, it actually becomes a source of moral liberation and strength. The day to day issues of personal life, not to mention the less frequent but larger issues of moral life, are addressed not merely by the individual, but in the context of a caring community. "...[W]ithout social support, the moral efforts of persons are frustrated. Then,

everything has to be done anew, alone, and from scratch. People become incapable of making wider social contributions” (Stackhouse et al, 1995b:13). The sum of the matter is that in general ethics is dependent on community. “We cannot and do not muster moral insight for ourselves apart from our communities, any more than we are or can be human beings apart from others” (Birch and Rasmussen, 1989:17). All of our ethical achievement is done as a communal enterprise and even though we recognize individuals and individual choice, that individuality only makes sense or has meaning in our social experience. We might also interject at this point that this is not just a religious position or experience, but a fact of all ethical life. Religious or not, a person’s ethical decision making always takes place and ultimately finds meaning in the context of a larger community. Individual ethical decisions rarely, if ever, involve only the decision maker. Never-the-less, Birch and Rasmussen suggest that given the truth of this idea for society in general, it is even closer to the heart of things for Christianity.

Whatever moral consciousness we possess does not exist prior to, or apart from, or independent of social relatedness. Communities are the forms of our social relatedness and the material reality of the moral life.

If we accept this as a fact of human existence, we must recognize it as true with even greater force for the Christian moral life, and for Christian ethics. The reason is this: Community is at the very heart of Christian faith itself (Birch and Rasmussen, 1989:19).

Birch and Rasmussen go on to point out how the early communities of God, both Jewish and Christian, did not even ask the ethical question that has marked later culture. According to Birch and Rasmussen later philosophers were concerned with the universal good and what the individual's role in keeping it was, whereas the early Jewish and Christian communities asked, "What character and conduct is in keeping with who we are *as a people of God?*" (Birch and Rasmussen, 1989:19

emphasis authors'). The concern of those communities was not personal morality per se, but rather what lifestyle best reflected faithfulness toward God as expressed in the community; morality was a dimension of community life. Birch and Rasmussen see support for this idea throughout scripture and use Paul's letter to the Thessalonians as an example. In that letter Paul uses a number of phrases that encourage and praise the Thessalonians for the community life that they have that expresses God's moral will for their lives.

In sum, both Judaism and Christianity conceived of the moral life as the practical outcome of the community's faith, as shown in the sorts of lives members of the community, and the community as a whole, lived. The community's task was to socialize its members into forms of life which displayed the kind of conduct befitting the experience of God in community (Birch and Rasmussen, 1989:21).

Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon take an even stronger stance on the role of community in Biblical ethics. The following quote is from the preface of their book, *Resident Aliens*.

A colony is a beachhead, an outpost, an island of one culture in the middle of another, a place where the values of home are reiterated and passed on to the young, a place where the distinctive language and life-style of the resident aliens are lovingly nurtured and reinforced.

We believe that the designations of the church as a colony and Christians as resident aliens are not too strong for the modern American church - indeed, we believe it is the nature of the church, at any time and in any situation, to be a colony (Hauerwas and Willimon, 1989:12).

Later in the book Hauerwas and Willimon build on this idea and suggest that the biblical witness is that the Church as a community or colony allows us to be better people than we could be on our own. The Sermon on the Mount, they suggest, implies that "as isolated individuals...we lack the ethical and theological resources to be faithful disciples" (Hauerwas and Willimon, 1989:80). Accordingly, "the

Sermon on the Mount cares nothing for the European Enlightenment's infatuation with the individual self as the most significant ethical unit. For Christians, the church is the most significant ethical unit" (Hauerwas and Willimon, 1989:81).

This kind of language can be rather strange or even offensive to a North American culture that puts such great stress upon the individual. The biblical witness is clear that individual choices are intimately linked to the community to which they belong, both by way of motivation for making those choices, as well as in realizing that the results of those choices affect many more than the individual making it. Even those who have been in the North American Church for an extended period of time struggle with the concept of community. We are raised to be independent and praised for individuality. While these things are important an over-emphasis on them can give a false understanding of what biblical morality genuinely is. We miss out on the fact that within community we find not only the content for much of our moral decision making, but also the strength for it. We need to be reminded that our philosophical heritage has much to do with this concern:

The existentialist longing to find individual authenticity independent of society and culture is doomed to failure. Who we are is always who we are in relation to others. There is no authentic self that can be discovered or defined in isolation from the community. This perspective is confirmed by many Asian cultures, which prefer the image of a family over that of a social contract as their basic conception of society (Adeney, 1995:110).

Adeney's comment reminds us that the West's preoccupation with individuality is not necessarily shared by other cultures. In his book, *Strange Virtues*, Adeney discusses ethics in cross-cultural situations. He offers a number of illustrations of how many other cultures simply have a different moral agenda than many in the west. The emphasis on community in the ethical decision making process is quite pronounced. He goes on to suggest that struggling with

ethics in a cross-cultural situation may go a long way in helping us to deal with our over-emphasis on the individual.

The previous section, by itself, might give the impression that learning goodness in a crosscultural situation is a heroic individual pursuit. Crosscultural types are often adventurous individualists who relish the challenge of crossing new frontiers and learning through experience and study how to serve God in a foreign culture. But even experience and knowledge grow more from communion with others than from individual experience. Goodness is the gift of God through a community to its members. It is not the private achievement of a moral athlete. (Adeney, 1995:63).

This kind of thinking process would represent a considerable change in how most North Americans, Christian and non-Christian alike, approach the ethical decision making process. The change is a fundamental one and would significantly shape our discussion of many of the ethical issues that face us.

Westerners...have to undergo a certain reorientation in our habitual pattern of ethical thought in this matter if we are to see things from a biblical perspective. We tend to begin at a personal level and work outwards. We think of ethics as the means to the goal of a good and happy life. So our emphasis is to persuade people to live a certain kind of life according to this and that moral standard. If enough individuals live up to such a morality, then, almost as a by-product, society itself will be improved, or at least maintained as a safe environment for individuals to pursue their personal goodness. This is the kind of person you must be; that kind of society will result as a bonus.

However, the Bible tends to place the emphasis the other way round: here is the kind of society that God wants. His desire is for a holy people, a redeemed community living under his kingship according to his standards, a model society in whom he can display, as far as is possible in a fallen world, a prototype of the new humanity of his ultimate redemptive purpose. Now, then, if that is the kind of society God wants, what kind of a person must you be to be worthy of your inclusion within it, and what must be your contribution to the furthering of these overall social objectives? (Wright, 1995:24-25).

A further facet of this discussion revolves around the purpose or mission of the Church. Stephen Mott points out that understanding the Church as community

aids in understanding not only the Church's evangelistic mission, but also its role in social ethics. The power of the Church comes from being Christ's representative or body in this world; it is the agent of reconciliation and change. Therefore not only are the members within the community transformed or changed, but the world outside of the community should also be transformed or changed through the presence of the community. "Growth in one's Christian life is strongly dependent upon the growth and maturity of others in Christian community" (Mott, 1982:134). Likewise, Christ calling his disciples "a city set on a hill" (Matthew 5:14) indicates that there is an involvement or witness that is extended beyond the community's boundaries. "Since we are fulfilled in love and companionship in this community, we do not pursue mission to satisfy our own social needs; we are freed to work on behalf of the needs of others and to relate openly to them" (Mott, 1982:135).

For Mott, as well as the other authors that we have highlighted, it is imperative to understand the communal element of the Church in order to fully comprehend its ethical position. Without this understanding the power and distinctiveness of that position is severely weakened.

3.5 Conclusion

There are some significant consequences to understanding the foundation of the Christian ethic in this way; all of which set the context for our remaining chapters. First, this understanding provides the 'why' of Christian ethics that has been lost by many in the contemporary Church. In recent years not only those outside of the Church but those within it have seriously questioned the Church's position on many ethical issues as well. There is no denying that the Bible calls for a lifestyle that is demanding, especially in our current cultural climate; and, as mentioned in the introduction, it is important for people to know why they are asked to follow a certain course rather than told just to follow it. The concern is

also this. When one asks those outside the Church what a Christian is they often respond that a Christian is one who does certain things and does not do certain other things. If one asks many faithful Churchgoers what makes them a Christian they also often respond in much the same way. One often hears answers like, "I am a Christian because I go to church on Sunday" and so forth. Obviously there is a connection between the outward actions and one's identity as a Christian. Jesus made it clear that the world would know his disciples by the love that they showed to one another (John 13:35), but their showing love to one another is not what made them Christians. They love one another because they are Christians. What makes one a Christian is their relationship to God through grace by faith in Jesus Christ, that is the foundation that we have established. The first step in Christian discipleship then is not outward change, but is the inward change that comes from understanding sin, God's grace, and personal redemption. Out of that then comes the ethical changes, or Christian character. All of this takes place within the community of faith or the Church. What is important here is the sequence of events. One is not Christian because of what they do; one does certain things because they are Christian.

The implications of not understanding Christian ethics in this way can be immense. The "plagues" of the North American Church presented earlier come out of this misconception. Apathy easily sets in when one does not understand, or loses touch with, the motivation for following a certain course of action. Athletes are a good illustration of this. It would be very difficult for an athlete to endure the rigors of training if they did not know why they were training in the first place. Likewise, it would be hard to expect a Christian to follow through with a particularly unpopular or difficult course of action if they did not know why they were supposed to do so. For instance, the Bible asks Christians to love their enemies and forgive them. For most of us this is a difficult task and it would be easy to give up on those who we do not get along with. But when we understand

that we were first loved and forgiven by God when we were "enemies" with Him, we should be motivated to forgive and love others. God's graciousness to us should bring about graciousness in us.

Legalism is also a direct result of not understanding the biblical order stated above. Legalism essentially rests in the idea that something is done for its own sake with no regard given to the reasons for doing so or the context in which something is done. Many North American Christians take this approach to their Christianity. As long as they have done certain things or not done certain things they feel they are in right standing before God. In other words, their Christianity is defined by what they do, not who they are in Christ. This betrays the same attitude that we examined in the books of Amos and Hosea where the people thought all they had to do was the sacrifices and forgot about the covenant that was underlying them. By following a similar course the North American Church has added a great deal to the definition of a Christian that one never finds in scripture. By going back to the beginning and understanding the why of our ethical lives we should have the means of escaping the legalist trap.

Instead of seeing Biblical ethics as merely the doing of certain things (or the "not doing" of certain things), Biblical ethics is about being a faith community made up of individuals who strive for certain virtues and adhere to certain values. Biblical ethics is about something larger, but not exclusive of, individual performance. It is about being the people of God striving to carry out God's purpose.

In biblical character ethics, the good we serve is the reign of God, and the reign of God is oriented toward community with God (God's presence and salvation) and community with our fellow human beings (peace and justice). The biblical virtues are keys to community well-being: peacemaking, hungering for justice, doing mercy, integrity, humility and caring for the poor and the mourning. And they are the way of participation in community with God" (Stassen & Gushee, 2003:53).

Second, perhaps one of the most significant problems currently facing the

Church however, is the loss of moral direction when facing difficult situations. The Bible says little about nuclear war and bio-medical ethics for example and yet these areas have been two of the greatest causes for moral concern in our recent history. How one addresses issues such as these is not an easy task, but it must start with a proper understanding of the context in which biblical ethics takes place. When we first understand why we do something, we have at least a foundation from which to approach the moral dilemmas we now face. When the Bible does not give us a clear course of action we must ask how sin, grace, salvation and community address the issue.

This way of addressing these modern issues can help to avoid two extremes. The Church can, on one hand, reject out of hand anything that initially appears ethically questionable on the grounds that it does not "feel" right morally. While our moral intuition can be of great value, sometimes these feelings have more to do with being uncomfortable with new developments instead of actual moral disagreement. Rather than critically examining a topic the Church in the past has sometimes followed more of a reactionary or "knee jerk" response to new issues. A better understanding of the foundation of biblical ethics could help us in accepting certain developments that essentially do not go against the biblical ethic.

The other extreme that the Church has sometimes taken is to accept new developments wholesale, again without critically examining the moral implications of them. Often this acceptance is based on the desire to be socially relevant, tolerant, or even on more pragmatic concerns like the presumed betterment of humanity. Perhaps more attention to the foundation of biblical ethics would allow us to look beyond the immediate "benefits" of an action to see if there is reason to morally question something the Bible does not specifically address. This in turn could allow us to better address the issue of whether or not a certain course of action is actually of benefit to us.

And third, we are left with the question of precisely how this understanding of the Christian ethic, particularly its emphasis on community, influences our decision making in a variety of ethical issues. It is to this final issue that we now turn our attention.

CHAPTER FOUR - CONTEMPORARY CONCERNS AND ISSUES: IMPLICATIONS FOR COMMUNITY

4.1. Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to illustrate how the communal voice in ethics that we have been emphasizing informs our decision making in key areas. Before we address the specific issues, two comments need to be made that will govern the chapter. First, only two general issues will be addressed. While it is the contention of this thesis that a communal mindset has implications for all issues, no matter their size or complexity, in certain issues the need for a communal voice is much more apparent. Therefore, for illustrative purposes we will consider two issues where we are able to see how a more communal focus might apply. Second, while selecting two issues allows us to go into some depth in covering them, the issues considered will not be dealt with exhaustively.¹ Again, the purpose of this chapter is to illustrate how a communal voice applies to key issues, therefore the focus will be on that element. Other arguments or positions that are germane to the respective issues, although very important, may not necessarily receive much attention. The contention of this thesis is not that the communal voice is the only factor that needs to be considered in ethical decision-making, but simply that it is one that has been seriously neglected and therefore requires re-enforcing.

Each issue offers distinctive features for our discussion. The first issue, euthanasia, is generally perceived as a primarily individualistic issue. Meaning, when euthanasia is discussed the primary focus of that discussion predominantly revolves around the idea of whether or not it is the individual's right to choose

¹ Those individuals looking for a more detailed or complete treatment of any of the issues considered may consult the bibliography.

how they die and should they be allowed to exercise that right. By and large the emphasis is placed on the individual as the primary ethical component in this issue.

The intention with this particular concern is not to suggest that the community or a communal voice should be the primary ethical component in euthanasia, but that the community or a communal voice has a vital role to play in the discussion of euthanasia that is often overlooked. Understanding the role of community as part of the overall discussion, I believe, gives us the resources to best address the issue.

The second issue to be discussed is poverty and welfare in the capitalistic setting of North America. While euthanasia is often considered an individualistic ethical concern; poverty and welfare are easily recognized as a social ethic concern so one would expect to hear more discussion regarding the role of community in dealing with them. The contention being made here however is that even though we have approached the issue of poverty and welfare with some sense of community awareness, we have not done so well. This issue has been chosen because it shows how on the surface what has appeared to be community concern has really not been and that something more needs to be considered if we are truly going to address the issue.

4.2 Euthanasia

There have been a number of situations during the last few years that have brought the subject of euthanasia to the forefront of our attention in North America. In the United States, the most public figure in this debate is Dr. Jack Kevorkian who has made headlines in the last two decades by openly practicing physician-assisted suicide.² In the early 1980's Dr. Kevorkian developed a "death machine" which enabled his patients to give themselves a lethal injection if they so chose. He was prosecuted for a number of these incidents but never convicted.

This lack of a conviction seemed to make a statement about the legal status of euthanasia and Dr. Kevorkian openly pushed for the legalization of euthanasia. In 1998 Dr. Kevorkian videotaped himself actively administering a lethal injection into a 53 year old, seriously ill, male, a move from practicing passive to active euthanasia. In an attempt to bring the issue of legalizing euthanasia to national attention, the videotape was shown on national television in the United States. Once again Dr. Kevorkian was charged and this time was convicted of second-degree murder and sentenced to ten to twenty-five years in prison which he is currently serving (Sommerville, 2000:124).

Canada has also had a number of situations that have raised some fundamental questions about the practice. Perhaps the most prominent was Sue Rodriguez, a 42 year old woman with Lou Gehrig's disease (ALS)³ who challenged the Canadian law that made assisting a suicide a crime. Her case was eventually heard by the Supreme Court of Canada which ultimately upheld the current law, but only by a narrow margin. Ms. Rodriguez eventually did commit suicide with the aid of a physician and a rather well known politician. The physician is unknown and therefore cannot be charged. The politician, who is known, has not been charged in the "crime" because of the publicity surrounding the issue. The emotional side of the issue was especially felt when a Saskatchewan farmer was charged in the death of his twelve year old daughter. The girl was severely handicapped and required twenty-four hour care. Her father placed her in the cab of his truck in the garage, ran a hose from the exhaust pipe into the cab, and she died of carbon monoxide poisoning. The man was convicted

² Various websites and newspaper articles indicate that Dr. Kevorkian was involved in the deaths of anywhere from 90-130 people who suffered from a variety of illnesses.

³ "Amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, commonly referred to as Lou Gehrig's disease (after a baseball player who was diagnosed with the disease), "...is a progressive neurodegenerative disease that affects nerve cells in the brain and the spinal cord. Motor neurons reach from the brain to the spinal cord and from the spinal cord to the muscles throughout the body. The progressive degeneration of the motor neurons in ALS eventually lead to their death. When the motor neurons die, the ability of the brain to initiate and control muscle movement is lost. With voluntary muscle action progressively affected, patients in the later stages

of manslaughter and given the maximum sentence of twelve years. The public sentiment was split, if not confused, about the case and the conviction is currently under appeal.

All of these incidents point to the fact that sometime in the near future Canada and the U.S. will need to make some tough decisions about the legalization of euthanasia. It is, like most major ethical issues, an emotional debate and is carried on in a variety of forums. It has also become clear that people are confused about this difficult and complex topic. There is a need to move past the emotions and to define the parameters of this discussion, focusing on the key elements. The primary points of discussion will be summarized throughout this chapter, with emphasis put upon the role of community, with the hope that a foundation will be laid to allow those particularly interested in the topic to go deeper with their own study.

One of the crucial elements in our modern society that greatly influences the debate surrounding euthanasia is our advancing technology. It can be argued that although euthanasia is not a new topic by any means, recent advances in medical technology have brought the issue to the forefront. We are now able to do many things medically that even a few years ago were unheard of and a number of these procedures have to do with the direct prolonging of life. We can now keep someone "alive" for an extended period of time and subsequently prolong the dying process. Neil Postman in his book Technopoly (1992:102) comments that "There are no longer methods of treating illness; there is only one method - the technological one. Medical competence is now defined by the quantity and variety of machinery brought to bear on disease". What Postman is lamenting here is not technology per se, but rather the attitude that is quickly growing in our culture that there is a technological answer for every problem we might face. The discussion surrounding euthanasia is affected by this attitude. Because of some of

of the disease may become totally paralyzed. Yet, through it all, for the vast majority of people, their

the technological advances we have experienced in our modern culture, we are now faced with more difficult questions surrounding the issue of death and dying. We then look to technology for answers to those new situations. Subsequently we have made dying (and living for that matter) primarily a technological and physical matter instead of a spiritual and social one.

This secular/technological worldview has directly affected what is now being said about euthanasia and it becomes clear that there are a number of points of tension that it has created. Robert Kingsbury summarizes a presentation given by D.J. Bakker of the University of Amsterdam that illustrates how pointed this tension has become in one of the world's strongest supporters of legalized euthanasia, the Netherlands.

In his [Bakker's] opinion the loss of transcendent reality and its replacement by the early will to happiness leads from a view of death as a "mystery for everyone" to death as a "problem for the experts." He fears a very slippery slope called progress, referring to WWII and what physicians can do under a satanic government when praising man to be fundamentally good. 'It is pain and the fear of social and spiritual isolation that are the real needs of Dutch patients and this is not being explored' (Kingsbury, 1994:186).

With this context in mind, the following points will structure the discussion in this chapter. First, we will define the issue, clarifying exactly what is euthanasia along with discussing the various forms that it takes. As a part of this first step we will summarize two basic positions on the issue. Secondly, we will highlight some of the key elements within the discussion and critique them, primarily from a Christian perspective. Along with this critique we will offer some distinctive elements that a more communal approach to ethics might provide and how we might address this complex issue. Thirdly, we will consider some of the possible social consequences of legalizing active euthanasia.

minds remain unaffected" (www.alsa.org).

4.2.1 Defining the Issue

The active/passive distinction amounts to this: Passive euthanasia (also called negative euthanasia) refers to the withholding or withdrawing of a life-sustaining treatment when certain justifiable conditions exist...and allowing the patient to die. Active euthanasia (also called mercy killing or positive euthanasia) refers to the intentional and/or direct killing of an innocent human life either by that person (suicide) or by another (assisted suicide) (Moreland, 1992:11).

Whether passive or active, euthanasia can be further classified in other ways as well. It can be voluntary, ie with the fully informed consent of the patient; involuntary, ie against the will or wishes of the patient; or it can be non-voluntary, ie without the consent of the patient in circumstances where the patient is not able to either give or withhold consent (for example, if they are comatose). Therefore one can have six different forms of euthanasia which, as one could imagine, can greatly compound the difficulty in discussing the issue. To allow us to deal with some of the fundamentals of the issue, in this chapter we will focus on active and passive euthanasia in general and mention further distinctions when necessary.

Roughly speaking, there are two major views about euthanasia. The traditional view holds that it is always wrong to intentionally kill an innocent human being, but that given certain circumstances it is permissible to withhold or withdraw treatment and allow a patient to die. [We call this the "traditional" view because individuals other than Christians have espoused this view]. A more recent, radical view...denies that there is a morally significant distinction between passive and active euthanasia that allows the former and forbids the latter. Accordingly, this view argues that mercy killing, assisted suicide, and the like are permissible (Moreland, 1992:9).

It should also be pointed out that in our current situation it may not matter whether one believes that there is a moral distinction between passive and active euthanasia along the lines that we have just discussed. It appears to be the case that many are arguing for the legalization of active euthanasia for other reasons than that it is the same as passive euthanasia. It is to those other reasons that we will now turn our

attention.

4.2.2 Key Elements To The Discussion

One of the key issues that have come out of a secular/technological worldview that is at the heart of the euthanasia debate is the emphasis on individual autonomy. Our current society holds individual autonomy, the right to self-determination, as one of the fundamental principles of life. The phrase "personal rights", used in the context of promoting autonomy, has become a powerful and popular one in our society as individuals try to determine what is the appropriate lifestyle for them. "Autonomy is the watchword of the twentieth century ethicist and philosopher. The desire to control one's own life is one of the most frequently mentioned items in death-by-choice literature and writings" (Voth 1994:199). The emphasis on personal rights or autonomy has been applied to many areas, but in the area of biomedical ethics autonomy is a core value. A competent patient has the right to determine their own course of medical action and those wishes must be respected. The purpose for this is to allow the patient to have more say into how they are being treated. Traditionally the medical field has functioned quite paternalistically. Doctors were looked upon as the final authority as to how the individual would be treated and generally the doctor's view prevailed. The emphasis on autonomy has shifted the emphasis away from the doctor and more to the patient. This is not to say that the doctor is not influential in the decision making process. On the contrary the doctor is still very influential; however, it is becoming much more common for patients to dictate what course of action will be taken in their medical treatment.

In the issue of euthanasia it is argued then that this emphasis on autonomy includes the freedom to choose death along with the means to achieve it, including assistance from others if necessary and desired. As a matter of fact it has been asserted that choosing the time of one's death, to some degree, is the ultimate act

of personal autonomy. Often combined with this emphasis on autonomy is the assumption that humanity sets the standard for ethics or morality. If, as the secular/technological worldview holds, the individual determines the standard for ethics, then why should the individual not be allowed to choose to die if they wish to? To impose a moral code upon an individual that they have not personally chosen would be an affront to their autonomy and therefore we must allow them to choose to die if that is their desire. Further to this is the belief that this personal choice and expression of autonomy ought to be legally protected.

There are a number of initial critiques that can be offered of this position. Obviously there is a place for holding to the rights of the individual, but our society has taken this view to such an extent that we are now starting to believe that our "private" actions have few or no public consequences. Or, we have started to believe that personal rights exist in and of themselves outside of any significant community context. This is an inherently dangerous position. It can also be asserted that the assumption that private choices have few or no public consequences is simply not true. This contention is supported by Voth's comment that "...every state places limits on a patient's autonomy when his choice may endanger the fabric of society" (Voth, 1994:198). For example, active euthanasia is not a "private" act. As soon as you enlist the help of another to aid in your death it has become a "public" event. A public event does not necessarily mean that a large number of people are involved, but simply that more than the individual is involved. Voth continues, "...[V]oluntary euthanasia also involves the autonomy of the physician as well as the patient. If we expect a physician to silently acquiesce to the patient's every wish, are we not thereby destroying the physician's own sense of morals?" (1994:198)⁴ Because you are a part of a community and how you live and die affects that community you cannot live an

⁴ There is a great deal of discussion with the euthanasia debate regarding the role of the physician. (For more information see *Questions of Right And Wrong*, edited by Edwin Hui, Regent College, 1994.) The

entirely autonomous life.

To justify active euthanasia on the principle of autonomy betrays our culture's bias against the common good in favour of individual rights, which should be held in tension with society's common goals and values. Individual desires must not be satisfied at the expense of communal interests, for 'we flourish as individuals in so far as society as a whole flourishes' (Hui & Gibbard, 1993:208).

Even if self-determination can justify the right to die, it does not include the right to authorize someone else to kill.

[T]o be able to choose the manner, timing and circumstances surrounding one's own death - and the 'right' to impose this obligation in some way on others - wholly distorts and vastly exceeds the substance and scope of common-law 'rights' as traditionally understood. Every right imposes some obligations - i.e., moral demands - on others. And should such a right be granted, what is to prevent the right to kill from being followed by the duty to kill? Will the 'right to die' only serve as a precursor for the duty to die? (Charles, 1995:272).

These statements also subtly critique the belief that the individual is the standard for ethics or morality. As individuals we no doubt choose our own morality, but this is significantly different from suggesting that the foundation of ethics is the individual. As individuals we must choose how we are going to live but this does not mean that something is right or moral simply because I, as the individual, chose it. It must be maintained that the individual does not determine what is wrong or right, the individual simply makes a choice as to whether or not they will live morally or immorally. The standard for morality must be found outside of individual preference, otherwise there is no real basis on which we can talk about community.

The proponents of active euthanasia would suggest that the autonomous individual's request or plea for euthanasia is a personal choice, rationally made, in their given circumstances. But can we assert that someone's request to die is

fact that there is so much discussion regarding what role the physician should or should not play only

always rational? Many would suggest that we cannot do so. "The mental anguish of most dying patients is due to the loss of human relationships, the loss of control and simple fear - psychologic factors that call into question the rationality of a patient's request for euthanasia" (Hui & Gibbard, 1993:210). It is not unreasonable to assert, then, that pleas to die could be more likely pleas for help and comfort. Again, what is needed is more attention given to the social and spiritual nature of death rather than just the scientific or technological elements, which is, in part, what movements like hospice seek to do.

Underlying much of this discussion is the usually unspoken but very important concept of where human value and meaning come from.⁵ It is becoming generally assumed that both value and meaning are found in individual choice, a very existential and postmodern concept, and one encouraged by the dominant secular worldview of current culture. In other words, as long as the individual is expressing their personal choice they are giving their lives meaning. Consequently, no external source should be allowed to stand in the way of allowing the individual to choose. There are, however, other factors to consider. For example, Margaret Somerville suggests that,

...if we see ourselves (and others) as having worth and dignity just because we (and they) exist, euthanasia is not acceptable because it contravenes this intrinsic worth and dignity. We might, however, be able to perceive this worth and dignity only when we can see ourselves as part of a community – as part of the past, present and future human family. Intense individualism interferes with this perception. Put another way, recognition of the inherent worth of an individual - as opposed to his or her attributed or extrinsic worth – might flow only from having a very deep sense of the worth of all people (Somerville, 2000:122).

And further,

further underscores the point that euthanasia is not a purely individual/autonomous act.

⁵ This is a key element in the discussion surrounding euthanasia and other biomedical issues. Exactly what gives human life value and meaning and where does that value and meaning come from? On what basis do we ascribe dignity to any human person and what factors or situations render an individual with a life "not worth living"?

Still another confusion that might be relevant to the euthanasia debate is that between individualism and a sense of personal identity. It may be that when we are dying we need a sense of personal identity to assure us that our life has had meaning and to allow us to die peacefully. Currently, as a result of intense individualism, we are likely to seek a sense of personal identity through feeling in control. Euthanasia is a powerful expression of seeking control. Most people, however, probably cannot find a sense of personal identity in intense individualism; rather, hermits, aside, they need to interact with others in order to do so. They find personal identity in a structure of complex human relationships that include those that can be created only through feeling that one is a member of a community. As the philosopher Isaiah Berlin says, "I am [at least in some important respects] what I see of myself reflected in the eyes of other people." Paradoxically, we might be able to find full individual identity only through participation in community, that is, through the immersion of our individuality in the greater whole. This issue again brings us face to face with the major problem of the loss of a sense of community in many of our societies, which, in turn, raises the question whether euthanasia is yet another response to this loss (Somerville, 2000:135).

To some extent we find meaning and value in our relationships with others. To attempt to deal with ethical issues apart from this leaves a significant void in the discussion.

4.2.3 Distinctive Christian Perspectives

We have indicated previously that our worldview will greatly shape how we deal with our toughest ethical issues. When we hold certain fundamental beliefs other views naturally follow. Therefore for many of us it is appropriate to at least highlight some of the distinctly Christian perspectives, and their emphasis on community in ethics, in the euthanasia debate.

The biblical perspective is that life belongs to God. God created us and life is God's gift to us and we are stewards of this gift. This openly confronts, or at least contextualizes, the emphasis given individual autonomy in our society. Understanding life as a gift from God acknowledges God's sovereignty over life and death, as well, it encourages an attitude of gratitude towards God for God's

gift. We are creatures and our care or welfare rests with our Creator. While God has given us freewill, and therefore a measure of autonomy, we are not independent of God but are dependent on God. This dependence upon God, and the stewardship of God's gift, is exemplified not just in how we live, but also in how we die. Therefore we cannot merely claim death as an "autonomous right."

The importance of community in this discussion and the Bible also affirms that we must consider the community as well as the individual. The New Testament's answer to Cain's question to God, 'Am I my brother's keeper?' (Genesis 4:9) is 'yes'. In some measure we are responsible for those around us. From a Christian perspective the idea of community cannot be over-estimated because it is foundational to the New Testament. Individual needs are important, but they are to be met in a community of care and compassion. "A community of faith and love has an obligation to care for the sick and the dying, and to receive care and hospitality is a privilege accorded to a member of a community to trust and compassion" (Hui & Gibbard, 1993:213). Asking for help is not a sign of weakness; it is an important part of being a member of a larger community.

This emphasis on community gives a very important context in the Bible for dealing with the issue of suffering, a key theme in the euthanasia debate. In an article entitled, "Can I Know That My Time Has Come? – Euthanasia and Assisted Suicide", John Burgess identifies in scripture "...five strands of thinking about pain, suffering, and death..." and suggests that "...each stands in relation to the others" (1994:207). All of the strands that Burgess highlights enlighten the general discussion on euthanasia, but what is particularly important for our discussion is the emphasis on community that runs through them. By understanding these five strands and the tension that exists among them, Burgess asserts that we can better address the entire discussion of euthanasia from a Christian perspective. First, scripture identifies pain, suffering and death as the consequence of human sin. The biblical material makes it clear that sometimes we

experience one or all of these three because of our personal disobedience or sin. The biblical witness is also that in Christ, and only in Christ, the problem of pain, suffering, and death is ultimately dealt with and that the community of faith must proclaim that they need not be feared because of this very fact. Second, pain, suffering and death are perceived as a mystery. Job in particular did not understand his suffering and there are many in Job's position today. We do not necessarily understand the reasons for suffering in any given situation. "The duty of the community is to stand with those who protest, to join its protest to theirs, and to bear their burden as its own, not to explain it away" (Burgess, 1994: 208). Third, pain, suffering and death are seen as redemptive. While there is mystery to suffering there can also be purpose, the ultimate example being the death of Christ, where an innocent individual suffered for the benefit of the whole. Fourth, scripture sees pain, suffering, and death as the enemy. The Bible recognizes that all is not as it is supposed to be with God's creation and that part of our existence is resisting the enemy of God's purpose. Part of that enemy is death, which the Bible talks about as being "conquered" through the death of Christ. As Christians we resist death and proclaim victory over it in Christ. Likewise, we cry against those forces that inflict pain, suffering and death. Finally, pain, suffering and death are seen in Scripture as natural limits. "One can understand pain, suffering and death not only in relation to sin and redemption but also in relation to human finitude" (Burgess, 1994: 209). There are limits to our human existence and the acceptance of those limits is a natural part of our lives. The gospel allows us to understand and accept those limitations while proclaiming that Christ has transcended them and creates the way for us to ultimately do so as well.

Burgess suggests that each of these strands are part of the Christian experience of pain and suffering and admits that there is a tension or "conflict" that exists between. Even though the relationship between the strands is complex, they all speak to the issue of euthanasia.

"[T]he Christian community will seek to live in a faithful tension. On the one hand, it will not fear death, and it will seek to be present to the dying. It will seek to make one's physical condition as comfortable as possible, and it will not seek to prolong one's dying. It will proclaim the new life in Jesus Christ and entrust the dying in his care.

On the other hand, Christians will also remember that God may be acting redemptively in one's dying, either for one's own sake or on behalf of others. They will be reluctant to hasten death, especially so long as they find redemptive possibilities in one's dying. They will be open to the ways in which the dying may teach them about trust, love, and surrendering control to God" (Burgess, 1994:210).

For Burgess this role of pain and suffering only enhances the role played by the community. "Pain and suffering do not require an explanation but, rather, the community's presence and solidarity. Christians seek to bear one another's burdens and to share in each other's pain and suffering" (Burgess, 1994:211).

4.2.4 Possible Social Consequences

An important part of the discussion, therefore, is some of the possible social consequences that could occur if active euthanasia was legalized. While it may be possible to assert that there are immediate benefits to the person who is requesting euthanasia (cessation of suffering, etc.), we must also take into consideration the effects of fulfilling such a request on the larger group. This part of the euthanasia debate is a difficult one. In raising concerns about possible social consequences we are not necessarily dealing with certainties, but with projections or "educated guesses." We cannot argue with certainty that the following events would occur, only that there appears to be sufficient reason to believe that they may.

Robert Wennberg in his book, Terminal Choices, suggests that in this discussion about negative social consequences there are two kinds of arguments: negative-fallout arguments and slippery-slope arguments (Wennberg, 1989:187). A negative-fallout argument is one that suggests that even if euthanasia can be restricted to the terminally ill, there would still be serious repercussions that would

outweigh any benefit the practice might have. In our context a slippery-slope argument contends that there is the possibility that the scope of euthanasia would be extended beyond the terminally ill to other categories of individuals.

Wennberg gives a number of examples for each of these types of arguments, some of which we will summarize here.

One of the negative-fallout concerns is that if euthanasia was to become legalized there is a likelihood that it would gradually become involuntary. The concern is that "...the terminally ill will be manipulated - consciously or unconsciously - into viewing themselves as unnecessary burdens and thereby pressured into opting for euthanasia" (Wennberg, 1989:187). It is possible that a social atmosphere would be created where terminally ill patients would feel pressured into euthanasia in order to spare the family financial and emotional strain, as well as conserving society's limited resources. It could become easy to "convince" people that their request for euthanasia would be for altruistic reasons so that those they are leaving behind could live better lives. In these cases euthanasia would not be the choice of an autonomous individual, but the result of coercion or unnecessary pressure; involuntary instead of voluntary.⁶

We also need to consider those who may have decided against euthanasia, even though it was a legal choice they could have made. These individuals could feel guilty for not accepting family recommendations or resentful towards those who pressure them, questioning what their motives may have been. This would introduce unnecessary fear, anger and anxiety among the terminally ill instead of the peace and harmony needed to face the dying process.

Legalized euthanasia could also become a medical solution to tough clinical cases. There has been a notable change in attitudes toward abortion since its

⁶ It could be suggested that this would be more of a concern in an American style of health care system with its emphasis on private funding than a Canadian style of system which is built on public funding. One system might be more susceptible to the problem than the other, but a publicly funded system would not be immune from it.

legalization; abortion clinics have replaced homes for unwed mothers as the solution to unwanted or unexpected pregnancies. In the same manner, it is possible that euthanasia could become acceptable as a legitimate solution to difficult cases of terminal illness. Instead of taking the time to do the "hard work" of caring for those in desperate need, we could take the "easier" way out. Palliative care is by no means an easy task, but it could be made that much more difficult if euthanasia became the "easier answer".

Essentially, legalized euthanasia could create a further and unnecessary fear about the dying process. It could create the impression that all who are terminally ill will suffer a horrific death and therefore should opt for euthanasia before things get worse, or, it could create pressures for those who are terminally ill that should not be there.

With slippery-slope arguments Wennberg points out that one needs to be especially cautious. A slippery-slope argument suggests that if one practice is adopted other practices will eventually follow that are clearly undesirable. Caution is necessary because it is difficult to say that one action will definitely lead to the practice of another. Societies, and the individuals who make them up, are not always logical and do not always draw the conclusions one would expect them to draw. Nevertheless, there are some slippery-slope arguments that need to be addressed as part of the euthanasia debate that would involve the larger community.

Wennberg suggests: "once voluntary active euthanasia for the terminally ill is legalized, one can reasonably expect pressure to mount to secure legalized euthanasia for those individuals whose illness or physical impairment is incurable, of a distressing character, but *not* terminal" (1989:194).⁷ The concern here is that there could be many individuals who are handicapped or are incapacitated in one way or another who feel, or are made to feel, that they cannot live the life they

want; therefore they should be allowed to die. Their "natural" death is not imminent, but their future does not look like they want it to; therefore euthanasia becomes the appropriate choice. The natural question to ask in these situations is, "Am I better off dead than alive?" Considering the emotional concerns that go with someone in this situation this question is not an uncommon one, and respect for an individual's autonomy suggests that we should give that person the right to answer this question in the negative. The outcome would be a very short step from euthanasia for the terminally ill to euthanasia for the incurable, non-terminally ill.

Once euthanasia has become acceptable for the incurable, non-terminally ill then the door has been opened to include others who suffer from conditions such as Alzheimer's, senility, or other degenerative diseases. If these individuals had indicated at some point in their lives that they wish to die if they were ever to exist in one of these states, then how could they be denied given all that has been said to this point? Respect for autonomy would lead to the extension of euthanasia to these individuals as well.

This development raises yet another issue. The medical community recognizes the need for "substituted judgment" in certain cases. There are obviously situations where the patient, for whatever reasons, is incompetent and cannot express their desires concerning their treatment. In these cases, particularly those involving life support, the next of kin or some other individual duly recognized speaks for the patient and tries to answer the question, "What decision would this incompetent person make if in fact they were competent?" Wennberg's concern is that substituted judgment would be applied to those individuals we have previously discussed who suffer from a degenerative disease but did not leave advance directives. The consequence would be that we have moved euthanasia further down the slope to include situations that are non-voluntary and

⁷ There has been some question of this in regards to some of Dr. Kevorkian's patients. Some have

perhaps involuntary (1989:199-200).

Wennberg goes even further in his argument. If all of the above has occurred, and in Wennberg's words, "These are not, I suggest, unrealistic projections" (1989:200), then there would also be strong reason to believe that severely handicapped infants and terminally ill children would be included in active euthanasia as well. Given the emotional appeals made concerning active euthanasia Wennberg suggests that it is not unreasonable to suggest that those infants or children who face an "undesirable" future could be included. If an individual would want euthanasia for themselves if they were suffering from a terminal illness, would they not want the same for their child if that child could not make their own choice?

Wennberg's final point to his slippery-slope argument is that if all of these preceding events occurred, then would it not stand to reason that the mentally ill or the feeble-minded would also be included in active euthanasia? If, for whatever reasons, their life is "not worth living", or if their humanity is in question, then why wouldn't the claim of mercy apply to them as well as those whom we first had in mind when this discussion began?

One response to these "further situations" is that strict guidelines on the practice of euthanasia would make these concerns invalid. While strict guidelines would no doubt cut down on the possible abuses and mistakes, it is naive to believe that we could ever come up with a fool-proof system, or that in an age of cost containment, social injustice and ethical relativism, that such a system would ever be applied adequately. The Dutch system is often pointed to as one that practices euthanasia "safely", but it has been noted that many of the concerns expressed by Wennberg have been found in the Netherlands. The question is whether or not humanity has the ability to adequately govern it's own morality and history seems to make it clear that, in general, we are unable to do this. Greed,

suggested that his patients were not always terminally ill.

power, and a host of other things usually get in the way.

We must consider the impact of legalizing euthanasia not only at an individual level (which has been the focus of the debate in the media), but also at institutional, governmental and societal levels, and not only in the present but also for the future. We need to consider not only factual realities such as the possibility of the abuse of euthanasia, but also the effect that legalizing it would have on important values and symbolism that make up the intangible fabric of our societies, and on some of our most important societal institutions, especially medicine and the law (Somerville, 2000:119).

4.2.5 Summation

With a deeply emotional issue like dying it is easy to understand why the tendency in North American culture is to regard it as a personal issue. But understanding the role that the larger community plays in the issues surrounding death, especially when euthanasia is being considered, helps us understand the issue more clearly. The emphasis on community does not take away from the dignity of the individual. Nor does an emphasis on community threaten the autonomy of the individual, but rather it gives that personal expression or control an appropriate context in which to best express itself.

From a Christian perspective there is a great deal of support and clarity that can be offered. The following thoughts by Hui and Gibbard summarize how a Christian ethic with its community emphasis allows us to better deal with the issue of euthanasia.

"...[T]he sanctifying and enabling work of the Holy Spirit draws attention to the need for an inner transformation of our character as moral agents. Virtues such as compassion, patience, gentleness, kindness and faithfulness must be acknowledged and fostered in personal and public life, to create a community in which death need not be hastened in despair, but embraced in hope and with courage.

Ultimately, the healing profession is a personal ministry, not a technologic industry. We must, therefore, attend not only to the medical needs of those who are dying, but to their basic human needs as persons.

To meet the needs of the dying requires a personal, compassionate and trusting community, where suffering is acknowledged and responded to within the context of loving relationships that include family, friends and health care providers. We believe that these themes, offered from the Christian tradition, may find resonance in society as a whole and furnish moral guidance in the opposition of active euthanasia" (Hui & Gibbard, 1993:214).

4.3 Poverty and Welfare Dependency: The North American View

The issue of poverty is a large and complex ethical concern but our focus will need to be very specific. The underlying problem assumed is that the dependence sometimes created by the welfare system only perpetuates a distorted view of poverty rather than dealing with it. The sub-culture that has come to rely on “free” money eventually finds itself without the skills or attitude necessary for it to care for itself or to develop a healthy and responsible lifestyle. For the individuals concerned, a life of poverty or an “attitude of poverty” has become a way of life and it creates some difficult social issues for the larger society that need to be addressed. An important component of dealing with this concern is understanding how a community emphasis addresses the fundamental issues surrounding poverty.

The structure of our discussion will be as follows. Initially we will need to define poverty, it’s nature, and some of its primary causes in the North American setting. Secondly, we will establish what the Biblical social teaching is regarding poverty, the poor and work. Considering the appropriate portions of scripture in their own historical contexts that deal with these themes will do this. Finally, some conclusions will be drawn as to what alternatives or correctives the Bible might offer for our current welfare system.

4.3.1 Definition and Understanding of Poverty

We have already stated that one primary assumption is that our current system of social aid has created a sub-culture of people who no longer have the will or sometimes ability to work and care for their own needs. This is, quite honestly, a very significant assumption that at some point would need to be evaluated more critically than is possible in the scope of this initial treatment. The factors that would contribute to the existence of such a sub-culture would be many and varied, so again some caution is required. Never-the-less, there appears to be enough anecdotal information available to us to at least proceed with this assumption and begin to address some of the details surrounding it, especially as it underscores the need for a more community oriented approach to poverty. Whether we consider studies done by sociologists and economists or just listen to those who deal with the situation daily, there seems to be an understanding that this dependent sub-culture exists.

At first glance a definition of poverty should be a simple and straightforward task, but in some social contexts it is not. The traditional definition or understanding of poverty is the lack of the basic necessities of life; food, clothing and shelter. But in North America this definition has changed somewhat. The definition of poverty in this region is no longer limited to the lacking in these areas; poverty is now not having the standard in these areas that has come to be expected in our society. For example, the issue is not just enough food, it is the kind of food and the ability to choose between kinds of food. The issue is not lack of clothing, but lack of fashionable clothing and more of it. The issue is not the lack of adequate shelter for the climate, but housing that has all of the “extras” that have come to be the norm in American culture. In many situations, poverty is no longer defined by not having the basic needs of life; poverty in many ways is defined as not having what my more affluent neighbor has. The significance of this is that it partially shapes our understanding of poverty in North America and how to deal with it. We have created a group of people that

sees itself as “poor” despite the availability of adequate resources, and it is this mind-set that contributes to the problem that we have set out to discuss. We must be careful not to suggest that there are no “truly poor” people in North America. This is obviously not the case. There are many who do not have the basic necessities of life and this issue obviously needs to be dealt with. In this regard there are many who fall under the more traditional definition of poverty. But it is also possible that many of the “truly poor” may have become so because of the problem we have raised here, they are part of the dependent sub-culture. They would also be a part of the primary focus of this discussion, those people who have become “perpetually poor” because of a system that has helped take away their motivation and skill to provide for themselves. This “attitude of poverty” is strengthened by the faulty understanding of poverty that we have just covered. People who have been defined as “poor” by cultural expectations (ie. the lifestyle you are supposed to live) or by government statistics come to see themselves differently. They view themselves as dependent or unable to provide for themselves in the manner in which society expects them to and it is this attitude that contributes to the “cycle of poverty.” How one thinks about oneself more often than not comes out in other areas of life.

Herbert Schlossberg in his book, Idols For Destruction (1983), deals at length with the dependency that is created by long-term financial aid. He quotes a number of individuals who have also recognized the same problem. For example, Michael Harrington has pointed out that immigrants to America may have had poor food and housing, but they had a will and determination that helped take them out of that situation. They may have been poor materially, but not internally (Schlossberg, 1983:62). It is this kind of attitude, or lack thereof, that we need to appreciate in order to understand why we have developed such a strong dependent sub-culture. Some people begin to see themselves as poor and therefore accept that fate as somehow inevitable. It is a subtle but dangerous shift in thought.

Schlossberg goes on to suggest a number of other factors that contribute to our situation. One of his primary concerns is a further development of our emphasis on attitude. He points to a study by P.T. Bauer, which "...concludes that economic progress depends more on human abilities and attitudes, on the social and political institutions, shared values and historical experience than on the material factors that are often the only considerations mentioned" (Schlossberg, 1983:63). The study of Bauer is on a much larger scale than North America, but it is helpful in the following way. It indicates that what we have come to see as poverty in our culture has more to do with a system that we have created and perpetuated than simply economic factors. A vital part of that system is the mental attitude that it creates and, as we have begun to see, it is this attitude that greatly shapes our dependent sub-culture.

Schlossberg goes on to point to a number of studies done throughout the world that have established a direct correlation between the reception of social benefits and unemployment and poverty. In a number of countries it was found that the lower end workers could make just as much living on social assistance as they could if they were working. The result was, of course, more people on social assistance, not to mention greater absenteeism at work (Schlossberg, 1983: 65-6). If a person's standard of living could remain about the same and they did not have to work for it, then what motivation is there for them to work? Again, the resulting attitude is one that favors "hand outs" instead of work, an attitude that further supports our dependent sub-culture.

Schlossberg points to other studies that have approached the problem from a more direct angle.

Poor people who live admirable lives are very different from those in the modern culture of poverty. The mere absence of money gives no explanation for this disparity, and in fact those in the latter group often have much more of the world's goods than those in the former. They may have adequate housing and diets but are sunk in the social pathologies of crime, delinquency, family disintegration, and addiction. Most of all, they

are dependent. Moynihan concludes, as do many others, that dependence is the distinguishing mark of the culture of poverty. “To be poor is an objective condition; to be dependent, a subjective one as well.” He argues that dependency is a creation of the welfare system itself (Schlossberg, 1983:67).

This moves directly to the heart of our discussion. The core problem of our sub-culture is that the individuals who make up that sub-culture have grown increasingly dependent upon the welfare system that they are a part of. Moynihan, via Schlossberg, points out that France, “which has no institutional structure to create and maintain dependency” has dependents, but does not have the same significant sub-culture found in North America (Schlossberg, 1983:67-8). The assumption in France is that the people have a responsibility to take care of themselves. In North America however we have a different approach. While we do believe that people are to take care of themselves, we have also created a mentality that expects the government to take care of us as well. This is a paradox of our culture; we are both independent and dependent at the same time. It is this expectation of the government, encouraged by the fact that the government continues to use social programs as a tool for getting votes, which has helped to create our dependent sub-culture.

We should also note that there appears to be a general perception in our larger culture about those who have been caught up in this “cycle of poverty”. This kind of information is difficult to process since it is rather subjective. One needs to distinguish between prejudice and an opinion that accurately reflects the state things are in. For example, there seems to be an impression that employers are hesitant to hire individuals on welfare because they lack the motivation to do the job well. Likewise, landlords are hesitant to rent their properties to welfare recipients because they are concerned about receiving payment and the care that will, or will not be, shown for their property. How does one evaluate such perceptions? We must at least be wary of such statements in case they are

motivated out of prejudice rather than fact, but we must also be prepared for the idea that they may accurately portray the facts of the situation. The reason for addressing this concern at all is that public (community) perception can be as influential, if not more so, as self-perception. If those who have been on welfare for an extended period of time or are children of a welfare family not only see themselves in a certain light but also have that re-enforced by public perception, then the effect is even stronger.⁸ Somewhere in the process individuals begin to identify themselves with the dependent sub-culture we have been discussing. If that identification carries with it the public perception that they are also untrustworthy as well as poor, then eventually they will begin to believe it. It does not take long for someone to begin believing that they are unable to do something if they are told that often enough and by an adequate number of people. It would appear that the welfare system that we have in place carries this element with it. There is a stigma applied to being on welfare that further perpetuates the problem. People begin to believe the perceptions the public may have about them which further hinders their ability to care for their own needs, they begin to live out the proverbial self-fulfilling prophecy.

Of primary concern is the number of children living in poverty in Canada and the U.S.⁹ In many cases these children are a sad testimony to the problem we have set out to discuss. It is the children of welfare families that perhaps face the most difficult struggle. If attitudes are more “caught” than “taught”, then they are especially susceptible to the attitudes that we have just dealt with. The will to provide for oneself and not to “overly expect”¹⁰ government or social aid must be instilled at an early age.

⁸ Throughout this thesis we have been suggesting how a more community-focused approach to ethics is needed. However, we must also acknowledge that there are negative community influences as well and this is a prime example of that.

⁹ For a further discussion regarding this issue see http://www.canadiancrc.com/Child_poverty.htm (Canadian Children’s Rights Council) and <http://www.nccp.org/> (National Center for Children in Poverty).

¹⁰ I use the terms “overly expect” because there is a delicate balance to be maintained here. As I will discuss later in the chapter, it is essential for people to understand that it is all right to receive aid when it is

The results of all of this have been rather profound. Taking a further look at how poverty has been dealt with can give further insight into the nature of the problem. For example, during the post World War Two era both the U.S. and Canada have seen the gap between the rich and the poor growing and the trap of dependence appears to be growing as well. The provincial government of Alberta has tried to implement cuts to a number of social programs (primarily because we are spending a great deal of money on them). This action has met with mixed reviews, but one journalist has suggested that the call to reduce the social net spending in Canada is short sighted. Robert Bragg, in his editorial “We Fail To See That Poverty Is More Than A State of Mind” (Calgary Herald, August 31, 1997) suggests that we are forgetting where we came from. He quotes Statistics Canada as saying, “In the final analysis it may well be argued that poverty is simply too subjective a concept to be measured in a statistically objective manner.” Bragg goes on to suggest that those who lived through the Great Depression of the 1930’s understand that poverty is “more than a state of mind” and therefore understand why our social programs were created in the first place. Bragg is essentially correct, the Depression taught us a valuable lesson in what it means to be poor and to care for the poor. As a nation we learned that there were things the government could put into place that would help us avoid some of the situations we have faced in the past. We have implemented a universal health care and education program in order to insure that all have access to these important services and for the most part they have worked. But what has happened is that we have become critically dependent upon these services, especially in the areas of welfare. We are not questioning the need to offer assistance, what we are questioning is whether or not the methods that we have chosen to offer assistance have only fueled the problem rather than dealing with it. If Schlossberg and the

needed. We must fight the impulse to be overly independent and not ask for or accept help when we are truly in need. At the moment we are discussing the other side of the problem however, those who have come to expect help all the time and therefore do not or cannot care for their own needs.

individuals he has quoted are correct, then we have in fact done just that. We have created a much larger problem than we had to begin with. Again, this issue of welfare dependency serves to illustrate the complex nature of poverty. Poverty is not simply a question of economics, but has spiritual and communal elements as well.

What we need to ask is where do we go from here. If we have created a dependent sub-culture, then what can we do about it? We need to consider how to reverse the trend of dependency and break the cycle of poverty. While this issue is remarkably large and many elements and factors lie beyond the scope of this article, we can at least begin to build a foundation by considering what the Bible has to say about poverty and work, and how an emphasis on community will help in better addressing the issue.

4.3.2 The Biblical Perspective On Poverty and The Poor

We need to begin our discussion of the biblical material by establishing the context in which poverty and the poor are discussed. We need to understand, at least in summary fashion, what the Bible has to say about the poor and poverty, and secondly, we need to understand what it says about work as it relates to poverty. Again, the component that ties these two points together is the role of community and how the poor find their place in the larger community.

The Biblical perspective on the poor has been summed up in a variety of ways. The most common phrase that is used today however is that the Bible has an option or bias towards the poor. We can see this option in a number of passages, especially as we consider the birth and development of the nation of Israel. After the descendants of Abraham were liberated from slavery in Egypt, according to Exodus, God established God's covenant with them. The Exodus event and the subsequent giving of the Law established the nature of the covenant community of Israel. In the Law, which was to be at the heart of that community,

we have numerous passages that discuss the social, political and economic relationships that existed. Of primary concern was how the poor or disadvantaged were to be treated. Deuteronomy 15:7-11 is somewhat indicative about the legal precedents set for the nation of Israel when it came to dealing with the poor and the issue of poverty.

However, there shall be no poor among you, since the Lord will surely bless you in the land which the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess, if only you listen obediently to the voice of the Lord your God, to observe carefully all this commandment which I am commanding you today...If there is a poor man with one of your brothers, in any of your towns in your land which the Lord your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart, nor close your hand from your poor brother; but you shall freely open your hand to him, and shall generously lend him sufficient for his need in whatever he lacks...You shall generously give to him, and your heart shall not be grieved when you give to him, because for this thing the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in all your undertakings. For the poor will never cease to be in the land; therefore I command you, saying, 'You shall freely open your hand to your brother, to your needy and poor in your land.'

The promise was that the Lord God who had freed the people would also bless them if they were faithful to the covenant that He had established with them. But also with that promise was the recognition that because of human nature there would always be poor in the land. This fact was not to discourage the nation when it came to the issue of poverty, but the nation was to understand that poverty was to be met with generosity and that they could not simply ignore the needs of the poor.

This "command" for generosity is more fully understood when one considers the comments made within the wisdom and prophetic literature of the Old Testament. Throughout the "interactive" material found in this portion of the Old Testament we find both an appeal to care for the poor and a condemnation for not doing so. The prophets are particularly forthright about Israel's transgressions

against the poor and the judgment that was to follow because of those transgressions.

The Lord arises to contend, and stands to judge the people. The Lord enters into judgment with the elders and princes of His people, “it is you who have devoured the vineyard; the plunder of the poor is in your houses. What do you mean by crushing My people, and grinding the face of the poor?” Declares the Lord God of hosts (Isaiah 3:13-15).

Thus says the Lord, for three transgressions of Israel and for four I will not revoke its punishment, because they sell the righteous for money and the needy for a pair of sandals. These who pant after the very dust of the earth on the head of helpless also turn aside the way of the humble; and a man and his father resort to the same girl in order to profane My holy name. And on garments taken as pledges they stretch out beside every altar, and in the house of their God they drink the wine of those who have been fined (Amos 2:6-8).

Woe to those who scheme iniquity, who work out evil on their beds! When morning comes, they do it, for it is in the power of their hands. They covet fields and then seize them, and houses, and take them away. They rob a man and his house, a man and his inheritance (Micah 2:1-2).

There is without question an overriding concern on the part of the prophets for the weakest and most vulnerable of Israelite society and this concern rises out of the covenant requirements God gave to the nation. In large measure the poor and oppressed were unable to voice their concern because they were essentially helpless, so the prophets spoke for them as well as God. Because the people of Israel had not dealt with the poor justly the people of Israel were to be judged, and judged harshly. The nation had not honored the basic social requirements of the covenant and it was condemned for it. This concern in particular underlies the fact that the nation was to view themselves as a community, not as isolated individuals. “It is the task of the covenant community to secure value and place for full life to those most unable to secure it for themselves. That Israel had failed to do this is the subject of the prophets’ harshest indictment and most energetic advocacy”

(Birch, 1991:268). The strength of a community can be measured by the status and care shown to its most vulnerable persons.

Stephen Mott develops this idea further when he discusses the attention the Bible gives to redress the securing of justice for the poor and oppressed. Mott notes that throughout scripture we are reminded that in the end it is God who will act on behalf of those who cannot care for themselves (1982:67). In the closing verses of Psalm 107 we are told that it is God who “pours contempt upon princes, and makes them wander in a pathless waste. But he sets the needy securely on high away from affliction, and makes his families like a flock.” This kind of assurance not only provides hope for the disadvantaged, but also indicates the option given to them.

The priority given to redress on behalf of those who have fallen below the minimum necessary for participation in social life means that, in the words of Norman Snaith, there is ‘a deep-seated and fundamental bias at the root of {this} ethical teaching. Biblical justice is biased in favor of the poor and weak of the earth (Mott, 1982:70-71).

We should note that the issue of redress, much like the entire concept of “an option for the poor”, is not just a financial issue. The fundamental concern is making sure that justice is given to those who cannot secure it for themselves. We would be amiss if we were to assume that the only concern expressed is about material possessions. When the prophets condemn the nation of Israel for not caring for the disadvantaged they also had basic issues of fairness in the courts along with fairness in business deals.

Unless we give the impression that the option for the poor is only an Old Testament concept we must also consider the New Testament. Many point to the Beatitudes as clear indication of Jesus’ particular concern about the poor. It must initially be pointed out that Matthew records Jesus as saying “blessed are the poor in spirit” (Matthew 5:3) whereas Luke reads simply “blessed are the poor” (Luke 6:20). Our purpose is not to solve all of the redaction issues surrounding these

passages, but we can at least point out that there is not necessarily a contradiction between the two. Each gospel writer accents a different element of what it means to be poor, Matthew emphasizes the spiritual and Luke the material. (This is particularly seen in the corresponding “woe to the rich” that Luke includes in 6:24).

It is not a matter of Matthew contradicting Luke; each brings out a different emphasis of a term that had both a material and a spiritual dimension to it (Meadors 1985; Jorns 1987). Luke 6:22-23 clearly demonstrates that Luke saw a spiritual as well as a material component to those whom Jesus blesses in his beatitudes...So, too, Matthew 5:3 is not appropriately defined if all elements of physical destitution are removed (Blomberg, 1999:128-29).

The significant point implied is that poverty is not simply a financial issue but a spiritual one as well.¹¹ The sentiment that Jesus expresses in the Beatitudes is consistent with the rest of his teaching and lifestyle. He favored the poor and took pity on their situation. Likewise, he challenged the rich and often spoke against their misplaced faith.

Even though there are some who would not agree with stating that the biblical position is an option for the poor, most recognize that the poor have a special place in God’s concern about justice. Richard Mouw in his article, Toward An Evangelical Theology of Poverty, highlights some of the points of discussion but in the end concludes, “...any Christian who takes the Scriptures with utmost seriousness must acknowledge that the God of the Bible cares very much about the poor” (1988:228). Mouw goes on to suggest that the issue is not really about goals, we all understand the need to deal with the poor, but rather the issue is about strategies; that is, how best to deal with the poor. We will address that issue in a moment.

¹¹ The discussion surrounding these two passages is rather involved. It could be suggested that each writer is talking about two different kinds of people, those who are spiritually poor and those who are physically poor. Matthew and Luke obviously use the Sermon on the Mount to serve different purposes and different audiences but the basic conclusion is still valid. To be poor is much more than to be financially

That the Bible has an option for the poor seems clear, but establishing this fact does not give us the complete picture. For sure, if we were to end here we would have only an incomplete understanding of the biblical perspective that could, and has, lead to misguided ideas.¹² As uncomfortable as we may be with the idea, there are distinctions and clarifications that are made within the Biblical material regarding the poor. This is particularly clear when one asks the question, “who are the poor that the Bible is talking about?” Richard Mouw is helpful in this area. He remarks that the Biblical material not only speaks in general terms in regards to the poor and oppressed, but also includes specific categories of people who are objects of special divine concern. He notes that the writers often “refer to God’s care for the widow, the orphan, the prisoner, the sojourner, and the beggar” (1988:230). These categories of people are the “voice-less” or helpless in their culture, the ones who have no social standing and therefore often no significant recourse of action. They are also among those who are considered “poor and oppressed” by the Biblical writers. The significance of this is that we cannot simply see poverty as an economic condition, but that there are political, communal, and spiritual issues involved as well. Mouw clarifies even further when he remarks that we must also be careful of what other classifications we make. For instance, he suggests that one tendency that has developed is to see the poor as the oppressed and the rich as the oppressor, or, to equate the “poor” with the “saved” and the “rich” as the “unsaved”. These kinds of generalizations are neither useful nor accurate. Either the poor or the rich can be oppressors or unsaved.

A recognition of the connection between helplessness and poverty also gives support for making some kind of distinction between the “deserving poor” and the “undeserving poor.” It seems clear that the Scriptures

challenged, there is also a spiritual element as well that needs to be understood if the biblical perspective is to be understood (see Carson, 1984:130-31; Liefeld, 1984:891-92; Marshall, 1978:249-50).

¹² Blomberg comments that using this phrase, or something similar, should not lead us to show partiality to the poor. “Reverse discrimination may be as immoral as the initial discrimination it seeks to rectify” (1999:49).

condemn idleness - as in Proverbs 6:10-11,...Those impoverished people whose poverty is due to their own refusal to work are judged by the Lord. But the idle poor are not to be confused with those persons - like the widow and the sojourner - whose difficulties are not due to a refusal to accept responsibility for their lives but to oppression of unjust economic and political structures (Mouw, 1988:232).

Divine judgment is reserved for those in power who oppress, or do not even offer aid, to those who cannot care for themselves. We do not have any indication that judgment is pronounced in the case of the poor who will not help themselves.

This kind of distinction may be an uncomfortable one to make in that it calls us to judge a person's situation and perhaps even their character. But it is a necessary distinction if we are going to understand how to truly deal with poverty, especially in an affluent nation. Somehow we must distinguish between those who are unwilling to help themselves and those who are unable.

Perhaps the best way to understand the practical outcomes of this distinction is by examining what suggestions the Bible makes for how to deal with the poor. We have also noted, via Mouw, that the Bible condemns the lazy or idle and suggests that poverty is the justified outcome for these people. However, we have already firmly established that the Bible has a certain bias towards the poor. The blending of these two positions can be seen in the laws or practices put into place to deal with poverty, especially in the Old Testament. The issue is responding to poverty in a way that allows the poor to become, and remain, contributing members of the larger community. This includes attitude and status as well as sufficient material goods. Generosity was to be normative in the covenant community of Israel (and the Church for that matter), but personal initiative was also to be present. There are a number of statements made that indicate that the "poor" were to make every effort to provide for themselves.

When you enter your neighbor's vineyard, then you may eat grapes until you are fully satisfied, but you shall not put any in your basket. When you enter your neighbor's standing grain, then you may pluck the heads with

your hand, but you shall not wield a sickle in your neighbor's standing grain (Deuteronomy 23:24 & 25).

When you reap your harvest in your field and have forgotten a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it; it shall be for the alien, for the orphan, and for the widow, in order that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands. When you beat your olive tree, you shall not go over the boughs again; it shall be for the alien, for the orphan, and for the widow. When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, you shall not go over it again; it shall be for the alien, for the orphan, and for the widow (Deuteronomy 24:19-21).

Now when you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very corners of your field, neither shall you gather the gleanings of your harvest. Nor shall you glean your vineyard, nor shall you gather the fallen fruit of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the needy and for the stranger. I am the Lord your God (Leviticus 19:9-10).

All of these laws are based on the generosity of the covenant community and the opportunities it was to provide for the poor to care for themselves. But these laws also reflect the idea that the poor or disadvantaged were to avail themselves of these opportunities. One could not simply expect the charity of others to come as mere handouts, but they were to make the initiative to meet their own needs. In this way the interests of all were upheld. The poor retained the dignity of both caring for their own needs and being a part of the community. Both of these are essential when dealing with the poor.

These passages are quite significant for our overall discussion, but before we can deal with the implications of them more fully we need to consider a second element; what the Bible says about work.

4.3.3. The Biblical Perspective On Work

In many ways we have already begun this portion of our discussion. We have seen that the dignity of the poor was upheld by their own initiative to provide for themselves by taking the opportunities given to them. There are however a

few other comments to be made. We can begin with one subtle yet important observation. According to Genesis 2:15, Adam was told to care for the land before the Fall; his work was part of the created order. The implication of this is that “work” is not a result of the Fall, but existed before it in a perfect world. The result of the Fall was that work, or at least certain forms of it, would now be difficult or more intensive.¹³ We must therefore avoid any suggestion that work itself is sinful and a product of a fallen world. “The point is made clear here that physical labor is not a consequence of sin. Work enters the picture before sin does, and if man had never sinned he still would be working” (Hamilton, 1990:171). From the creation account in Genesis 1 & 2 we can actually go a step further and suggest that in some measure work allows us to share in the creative nature of God.

The human creature is to care and tend the garden. The word pair, “till and keep,” may suggest a gardener or a shepherd. In either case, work belongs in the garden. Work is good, surely, to enhance the garden. From the beginning of human destiny, God is prepared to entrust the garden to this special creature. From the beginning, the human creature is called, given a vocation, and expected to share in God’s work (Brueggemann, 1982:46).

Work is not just something we do to pass the time or keep us busy, but it is an expression of our being created in the image of God.¹⁴ As part of us being created

¹³ Elaborating on this idea, R. Paul Stevens states, “When we turn to Genesis 3 we discover that work has been cursed through human sin. Now there is sweat, toil, drudgery, futility, meaninglessness and injustice. Fallen powers and structures render some work dehumanizing, create structural unemployment or demand a workaholic lifestyle” (The Other Six Days, 1999).

¹⁴ There are a number of interesting side issues that come as a result of this idea. For instance, what does the growth in technology mean for humanity and its work? A number of authors have lamented that a number of technological developments have taken the creative element out of work and turned it into something less than it should be. In essence, the worker is somehow alienated from the outcome of his effort (similar to Marx). Examples of this can be large farming operations instead of a more “hands on approach” or the mass production of products instead of doing it by hand. Ian Barbour, Ethics In An Age of Technology, Volume 2 (1993) spends some time discussing the role of the computer in our society and some of the consequences of it. Part of that concern is the impersonal nature by which work can be done and the effect that has on how individuals perceive themselves within their communities. See also Stevens, 1999.

in the image of God we have been given dominion over the earth. Some form of this dominion is essentially embodied in our work or labor.¹⁵

Two other elements are significant in the biblical material regarding work. First, work is for self-fulfillment. As we have already indicated, part of our created nature is the dominion that God has given us. From this John Stott suggests that we can confidently affirm that “...work is intended for the fulfillment of the worker. That is, an important part of our self-fulfillment as human beings is to be found,..., in our work” (Stott, 1984:166). An essential part of our identity is found in our work, or our activity. There is a fundamental importance to being constructive, whether or not pay is attached to that activity. Stott goes on to suggest that “...we must say that if we are idle (instead of active) or destructive (instead of creative), we are denying a basic aspect of our humanity, contradicting God’s purpose for our lives, and so forfeiting a part of our own fulfillment” (Stott 1984:167). This emphasis on personal fulfillment can be seen in other parts of scripture as well. The book of Ecclesiastes is, in large measure, a description of all that is futile about the world we live in and the activities we take part in. But in the midst of all that despair about futility the writer expresses the following about work. “There is nothing better for a man than to eat and drink and tell himself that his labor is good” (Eccl 2:24) and, “And I have seen that nothing is better than that man should be happy in his activities, for that is his lot” (Eccl 3:22). One could take these references to mean that work is a “necessary evil”, but at the very least it would appear that the author sees work or activity as one of the few possible real enjoyments in life. One other passage helps us to understand this idea of self-fulfillment as well as the dignity that comes with work.

The second significant element that we see in the Biblical material on work is that work is also service for the community. Ephesians 4:28 combines both our

¹⁵ There are a number of foundational themes that could be developed in this discussion, but lie outside the specific scope of this thesis. John Schneider suggests that, “The Law, the Prophets and Wisdom, and even

initial element and this second one together. “Let him who steals steal no longer; but rather let him labor, performing with his own hands what is good, in order that he may have something to share with him who has need.” The emphasis is not only on the fact that stealing is wrong, but that through honest work an individual has the opportunity, the privilege really, to contribute to the community and the poor.

Here also, working hard with one’s hands is thought of as doing something good, because it produces that which becomes the means of sharing.

This is the explicit motivation provided for work in the last part of the verse. It is the medium for caring for the needy person...The motive for work is not individual profit but communal well-being (Lincoln, 1990: 304).

Through this contribution the dignity of the individual is also upheld along with serving the community. This emphasis can also be seen in many of the Old Testament passages we have already considered and some we have not. The emphasis on caring for the poor assumes that there are those who are able to do so through their labor. This is highlighted through the Old Testament commandment to give a tithe, along with its teaching on the various Sabbaths and festivals. The main emphasis of these elements of Israel’s social and religious fabric was for Israel to recognize their dependence upon God and help them to understand that at least part of their labor, and the resources that it produced, was intended to build and support the community of which they were a part.¹⁶

There is one final passage that we need to consider in a discussion on work in the Bible. Perhaps the most well known passage on this subject is 2 Thessalonians 3:6-15, and we need to consider it for no other reason than that it is the passage most people think of first when they think about the subject of work and the Bible. It is a lengthy passage that is summed up by its most quoted part;

the Gospels and Epistles of the New Testament are so thoroughly immersed in the vision that is introduced in Genesis that they cannot really be comprehended in any depth apart from it” (2002:41).

“...if anyone will not work, neither let them eat” (vs. 10). The sentiment that Paul is expressing in this passage is more involved than this simple quotation, however. In many ways he echoes the Old Testament precedents that we have already discussed. While working in the midst of the Thessalonians Paul and his cohorts did not want to be a burden on the people, so they worked and provided for their own needs. Paul uses this personal example to discuss those who are leading “undisciplined lives” (vs. 11) by taking from the church community but not putting anything back into it. They expect to eat the bread of their neighbors and not work or pay for it.

...”If any one refuses to work, let him not eat,” need not be taken as a summary of the Christian doctrine of labor, but it does teach that it is scandalous for those who profess and call themselves Christians to lead idle lives and look to others for support if they themselves have opportunity and strength for working to maintain themselves and to help others who are less fortunate (Bruce, 1982:208).

Paul’s admonition is that these people must learn what it means to be a part of a community and discipline themselves. If they want to receive the benefits of being in a community then they must also contribute to it.

By reminding the community of his instructions regarding work, Paul provided the community with the justification for stopping support to those who preferred to rely on the largesse of the wealthier members of the community rather than work themselves (Wanamaker, 1990:286).

This agrees with what we have already established from the biblical text. There is a communal responsibility in work and dealing with poverty.

There are a number of conclusions that we can draw from the material that we have considered. Two are of particular importance to our discussion. One, there is a need to take special care of the disadvantaged, those who cannot care for themselves. We need to have systems in place whereby the needs of these

¹⁶ For a more detailed discussion of this theme and the larger context that it is found within the Old Testament see Wright, 2004: esp. 158-62, 172-74, and 295-97; and Blomberg, 1999:40-50.

individuals can be met. Two, there is a need to distinguish between those who require charity and those who, for their own benefit, need to be encouraged to work to provide for their own needs. There are, of course, a number of “gray areas” in this distinction and we are not often comfortable with making them, but the Bible does give us some principles from which we can build. The most basic consideration is the requirement to meet basic needs. All of the passages that we have considered focus on the basic requirements for life: food, clothing, shelter. It is in these areas that the covenant community has a responsibility to be generous and charitable. This emphasis should provide some clarity to the issue. Also, charity or aid is to be given in a way that upholds the dignity of the individual and their role in the community. This is the core of the Biblical teaching. There were times when an outright gift was required, but it would appear that other methods were favored. Money could be lent to those in need, but no interest was to be charged (Exodus 22:25, Leviticus 25:35-37, Deuteronomy 23:19-20). In this way the needs were met but with the understanding that the debt was to be repaid. In other words the person in need was still expected to meet their obligations even if it took an extended period of time. Likewise the passages that we considered above made it very clear that the needy or disadvantaged were to take the initiative and “work” for their provisions. Grain and produce was to be made available, but those who needed it harvested it for themselves.

4.3.4. Summation

The issue of poverty and how to deal with it is indeed a large and complex one. There are many factors that must be taken into consideration when dealing with it. However, if one does not start with the premise that poverty is also largely a social/spiritual issue, hence communal, rather than strictly a monetary one, the heart of the issue will not be dealt with. Emphasizing the role of community in the issue of poverty allows us to keep the long-term goal in view; that is, restoration

of the poor to full standing in the community. In a system that is predominantly built upon a secular/technical worldview the impulse is to view poverty as just a physical or political problem; no spiritual dimension is possible. These facets are without question part of the issue, but addressing them alone does not go deep enough. The following quote from Bryant Myers summarizes well:

The poor are poor largely because they live in networks of relationships that do not work for their well-being. Their relationships with others are often oppressive and disempowering as a result of the non-poor playing god in the lives of the poor. Their relationship within themselves is diminished and debilitated as a result of the grind of poverty and the feeling of permanent powerlessness. Their relationship with those they call “other” is experienced as exclusion. Their relation with their environment is increasingly less productive because poverty leaves no room for caring for the environment. Their relationship with the God who created them and sustains their life is distorted by an inadequate knowledge of who God is and what God wishes for all humankind. Poverty is the whole family of our relationships that are not all they can be (1999: 13).

In this thesis we have begun to address one aspect of the issue of poverty by putting forth an understanding of “charity” that challenges a current welfare system and some of the principles and assumptions it operates with. Instead of allowing people to receive “free money” on an on-going basis, some method must be devised that allows the able-bodied to somehow have a participatory role in the benefits that they receive. The Biblical material sought to preserve the dignity of everyone, especially those who required assistance. At the present it would seem that as good intentioned as our welfare system is, it is ultimately lacking in this regard. Individuals who have been on welfare for a significant period of time, especially when it is across generations, speak about the “degrading” feeling that accompanies it. Eventually that attitude simply becomes an assumed and accepted part of life, but with disastrous consequences. When the initiative to take care of one’s own basic necessities is taken away then something of the person is lost.

4.4. Conclusion

It is no doubt apparent at this point in the discussion that there are numerous details that demand further attention in both issues we have addressed in this chapter. As mentioned at the outset, the purpose of the chapter was not to deal exhaustively with each issue, but to use these issues to highlight how a worldview with a more communal aspect to it might offer a different perspective to them.

While the issue of euthanasia has a deeply personal aspect to it, it is also true that it is deeply relational and communal. How a society views the dying process and the myriad of issues that go with it will say a great deal about how it believes life should be lived and which values are of ultimate worth.¹⁷ Poverty and the related issues of welfare and work also have a distinctly personal element to them but perhaps they are more easily seen as a communal concern. If both issues have that communal element to their nature, then the communal element needs to be addressed in the solution. At the core of both issues are the extended relationships that each individual is in. It is shortsighted not to recognize this relational or communal aspect to the discussion.

It is the contention of this thesis that the Biblical worldview, with its emphasis on community, offers a better context in which to deal with both the issues of euthanasia and poverty. As we have pointed out throughout this chapter, the emphasis on community allows us to deal with the issues at a much deeper and more satisfactory level. There are fundamental elements in human existence that can only be dealt with by an ethical system that maintains a strong emphasis on community as well as on the individual. Each of these issues illustrates this. Our predominant philosophy, which over-emphasizes the role of the individual, does

¹⁷ In an interesting book entitled Tuesdays With Morrie, Mitch Albom records his final 'classes' with his favorite university professor, Morrie Schwartz, who is dying from ALS (Lou Gehrig's disease). In those

not give us the adequate resources, or the appropriate context, to deal with some of our most basic ethical needs.

sessions they discuss a number of topics including death. In that session Morrie makes the following comment: “The truth is, Mitch,...once you learn how to die, you learn how to live” (1997: 82).

CHAPTER FIVE - THE CHURCH AS AN ETHICAL COMMUNITY IN A SECULAR SOCIETY

5.1 Introduction

At the beginning of this thesis it was indicated that there are a variety of communities to which each of us as people belongs. From our families to our wider world each of us has a number of social groups that we are members of. It was also indicated that each of these communities would present its own unique set of concerns and elements within our overall discussion of the role of community in ethics. Exploring each of these unique settings would be a worthwhile endeavour, but the focus of this thesis needs to be narrowed. The assumption made at the outset of this thesis was that the church has a significant role in the way the gospel is presented in our world and that the church does and should affect the culture in which it finds itself. In this chapter we will discuss, in part, how this might happen.

Before we look at the heart of our discussion, we need to acknowledge some related issues that contribute to the context of this chapter. While the primary focus of this chapter is to consider the social-moral role of the church, along the way some comments will also be made regarding the theological nature and political role of the church as well. The reason for this is that the identity of the church, its theological nature, forms the basis from which its ethical or moral role can be determined. Also, inherent in any discussion regarding the role of a community, including the church, in the larger society is the political element. The two are intimately woven together. A specific expression of this political role, the legislation of morality, will be discussed in our final chapter.

As well, we must also be careful in our discussion of being too simplistic. It would be easy to simply categorize various social-moral approaches the church has or can take and give the impression that they are 'cut and dried', but this is

simply not the case. We are attempting to deal with a number of variables, which can make the discussion rather complex. Individuals seldom, if ever, fall into one nice neat category and therefore any overarching descriptions made of human behaviour needs to be held somewhat tentatively. Having said this, it would be impossible to discuss all of these variables and therefore some kind of broad overview or simplification must be given in order to keep our discussion focused on its primary purpose.

Discussing the role of the Church as an ethical community in a secular society is a large issue that could be approached in a number of ways, each with their own merits and limitations. Given the previous material presented in this thesis, the structure of this chapter will be as follows. On the basis of the biblical foundation established previously in this thesis we will consider how the church might interact as an ethical community in a secular society. To do this we will take the following path. First we will discuss H. Richard Niebuhr's treatment of how the church interacts with culture, taken from his book Christ And Culture. This section of the chapter will focus on the social-moral task of the church and its relationship with culture. Second, we will consider a critique of Niebuhr's approach and some alternative suggestions. Finally, we will evaluate this material and summarize what conclusions we might draw from it with reference to the biblical foundation for ethics we established in chapter two.

5.2. Richard Niebuhr's Perspective on the Church and Culture.

Richard Niebuhr's Christ And Culture has been a significant resource for discussing the role of the church in culture since its publication in 1951. Niebuhr understood that politics and the social structure of society influence theology and that theology influences politics and the social structure of society. The end result was that there was a cultural impact from the entire process. Niebuhr approached the situation from a sociological perspective and described five ways in which the

church had, in his estimation, typically responded to the culture around it.

Niebuhr's classifications or patterns of interaction are important because each has consequences for how one might think about the moral task of the church. Since a thorough discussion of everything that Niebuhr addresses would take us far afield from our primary objective, our discussion of Niebuhr will focus on the key summary concepts that he suggests and their implication for the social-moral agenda of the church.

Niebuhr's first description is "Christ Against Culture". Churches or Christians that follow this type of interaction attempt to divorce themselves from the culture at large and all the entrapments contained within it. Niebuhr characterizes these groups as wanting as little to do as possible with the secular world since they see it in opposition to their faith and who they are called to be as Christians. In Niebuhr's words, "The first answer to the question of Christ and culture we shall consider is the one that uncompromisingly affirms the sole authority of Christ over the Christian and resolutely rejects culture's claims to loyalty" (Niebuhr, 1951:45). Using the early church father Tertullian and the 19th century novelist Tolstoy as examples, Niebuhr illustrates how this position sought to separate itself from all forms of social involvement. There are a wide variety of expressions of this belief, but underlying all of them is the idea that culture is ultimately at odds with the Christian mission. Niebuhr suggests that "Tertullian's rejection of the claims of culture is correspondingly sharp. The conflict of the believer is not with nature but with culture, *for it is in culture that sin chiefly resides*" (Niebuhr, 1951:52, emphasis mine). Niebuhr goes on to suggest that some form of this belief exists in varying degrees in all groups that hold this position.

The consequence of such a belief of course is that the political and social-moral role of the church is minimal at best. This kind of involvement would be unacceptable for the faithful since it would be too 'worldly' of a focus. In most

instances this type of church would function with a confrontational approach to culture, and especially to those elements of culture that it saw as overtly sinful. It would be characterized by an ‘us against them’ kind of mentality that would set the moral agenda of the church as the community to stand against evil culture. A church modeled after this classification would discourage its members from participating in activities that seemed to express the sinful values of culture.

Niebuhr suggests that it is easy to critique this particular approach, although there are some things to take note of. In his mind, the strength of the position is found in the sincerity with which this position is held by its adherents and in that this view provides an essential element in the discussion of Christ and culture (Niebuhr, 1951:65). Many who hold to this view take very seriously their allegiance to Christ and the implications of that allegiance to their everyday lives. “Part of the appeal of the ‘Christ-against-culture’ answer lies in this evident reduplication of profession in conduct. When we make it we seem to be proving to ourselves and others that we mean what we say when we say that Jesus Christ is our Lord” (Niebuhr, 1951:66). Niebuhr goes on to state that this kind of withdrawal from culture has served an important role in the history of the church and its mission. Although not its intended goal, this position has led to significant social reform throughout history (Niebuhr, 1951:66-67). Along with this, this position also provides an important sense of balance for other Christian groups that do not specifically hold this view.

The relation of the authority of Jesus Christ to the authority of culture is such that every Christian must often feel himself claimed by the Lord to reject the world and its kingdoms with their pluralism and temporalism, their makeshift compromises of many interests, their hypnotic obsession by the love of life and the fear of death. The movement of withdrawal and renunciation is a necessary element in every Christian life, even though it be followed by an equally necessary movement of responsible engagement in cultural tasks. Where this is lacking, Christian faith quickly degenerates into a utilitarian device for the attainment of personal prosperity or public

peace; and some imagined idol called by his name takes the place of Jesus Christ the Lord (Niebuhr, 1951:68).¹

Niebuhr does express a number of concerns with this view however. One of the most significant concerns is the failure of its adherents to understand that they, whether they acknowledge it or not, are products of a specific culture and that everything they do, in some fashion, expresses the culture to which they belong. “Christ claims no man purely as a natural being, but always as one who has become human in a culture; who is not only in culture, but into whom culture has penetrated. Man not only speaks but thinks with the aid of the language of culture” (Niebuhr, 1951:69). The core of the issue is that each person carries with them some expression of the social structure they exist in. From birth, our socialization includes socialization into the culture in which we were born. This is true for all of us, including those who specifically denounce cultural involvement and influence.

It is so with all the members of the radical Christian group.^[2] When they meet Christ they do so as heirs of a culture which they cannot reject because it is part of them. They can withdraw from its more obvious institutions and expressions; but for the most part they can only select – and modify under Christ’s authority – something they have received through the mediation of society (Niebuhr, 1951:70).

In other words, each of us expresses something of our culture in the exercising of our faith. We understand ‘Jesus as Lord’ within the worldview that we were socialized in. Without question, this view could take on a radically Christian perspective, but total isolation is practically impossible.

¹ It should be pointed out that when Niebuhr published his book inclusive language, as we know it today, was not an issue. Therefore, throughout his book Niebuhr uses the male forms of pronouns etc., as a general reference to all of humanity. While in today’s society we may try to use more inclusive language I have chosen to leave Niebuhr’s material as originally published. Also, I have not chosen to use the ‘[sic]’ reference within a quote in those instances where Niebuhr uses exclusive language. His use of the male pronoun is not an error, given the context when the book was originally published.

² I would add into this quote, “and all of us”.

Further to this idea is the suggestion that even if it were possible to be totally isolated from culture, Niebuhr suggests that it is not desirable to do so. “The spirit in which both Scriptural and non-Scriptural regulations are presented also shows how impossible it is to be only a Christian without reference to culture” (Niebuhr, 1951:72). Inherent to the mission of the church is a requirement to engage in the culture in which it finds itself. To withdraw entirely from this engagement would be to deny a crucial aspect to the purpose of the church. Quoting Tertullian, Niebuhr concludes,

“Eating the same food, wearing the same attire, having the same habits, under the same necessities of existence,” sailing together, ploughing together, even holding property together and fighting together, the Christian does everything with a difference; not because he has a different law, but because *he knows grace and hence reflects grace*; not because he must distinguish himself, but because he does not need to distinguish himself (Niebuhr, 1951:80, emphasis mine).

Niebuhr’s second classification is “The Christ of Culture”. The belief of this classification is that the highest values of the prevailing culture are, at their core, expressions of faith and therefore need to be accepted into the presentation of the gospel and the beliefs that embody it. “In every culture to which the Gospel comes there are men who hail Jesus as the Messiah of their society, the fulfiller of its hopes and aspirations, the perfecter of its true faith, the source of its holiest spirit” (Niebuhr, 1951:83). These groups seek to accommodate the gospel to whatever they see as most valuable to the world or culture at any given time.

Niebuhr suggests that this group

...feel[s] no great tension between church and world, the social laws and the Gospel, the workings of divine grace and human effort, the ethics of salvation and the ethics of social conservation or progress. On the one hand they interpret culture through Christ, regarding those elements in it as most important which are most accordant with his work and person; on the other hand they understand Christ through culture, selecting from his teaching and action as well as from the Christian doctrine about him such points as seem to agree with what is best in civilization. So they harmonize Christ and culture, not without excision, of course, from New Testament

and social custom, of stubbornly discordant features...Hence the great work of Christ may be conceived as the training of men in their present social existence for the better life to come; often he is regarded as the great educator, sometimes as the great philosopher or reformer (Niebuhr, 1951:83-84).

The emphasis of this approach is to see the underlying good of culture because it is part of God's creative activity. This stands in sharp contrast to the first classification which saw culture as inherently sinful. This group sees culture as an expression of the work and grace of God, therefore the Christian message, and the faith community that holds to it, should identify itself with its cultural surroundings, choosing to accent the best of what that culture holds.

Niebuhr suggests that this view has various degrees of historical representation in the different forms of Gnosticism that were found in the early church, along with theologians such as Abelard. As the most modern expression of this view, Niebuhr points to what is generally referred to as 'liberalism' or 'liberal protestantism', although he believes the term 'Culture-Protestantism' is more accurate (Niebuhr, 1951:84). Niebuhr also offers that since the middle of the 18th century there have been thousands of variations of this approach (Niebuhr, 1951:91), Albrecht Ritschl being "the best modern illustration of the Christ-of-culture type" (Niebuhr, 1951:94).

While there are many differences between each of these groups and theologians, in Niebuhr's estimation there is a common thread that runs through all of them. Each of them have suggested that in some fashion Jesus needs to be freed from the confines of his historical setting and understood as the redeemer of all ages within all cultures. By understanding and appropriating the highest values of Jesus, each person and culture truly expresses the will of God.

...Jesus is the great enlightener, the great teacher, the one who directs all men in culture to the attainment of wisdom, moral perfection, and peace. Sometimes he is hailed as the great utilitarian, sometimes as the great idealist, sometimes as the man of reason, sometimes as the man of

sentiment. But whatever the categories are by means of which he is understood, the things for which he stands are fundamentally the same – a peaceful, co-operative society achieved by moral training (Niebuhr, 1951:92).

The social-moral agenda of the church if it followed this position would be, essentially, exactly the opposite of the first classification. Rather than seeing culture as the enemy, culture would be viewed as an intimate expression of the church's mission. The best values of the church would be the best values of culture therefore those values should be expressed and encouraged by whatever avenues deemed appropriate in that cultural setting. The church modeled after this classification would view culture as its partner and it would seek to align itself with expressed cultural values wherever it could.

Niebuhr suggests that while this position has been heavily critiqued in recent times, there are some key strengths that it offers. A significant strength to consider is the notion that it has done a great service to the mission of the church by helping people to see and understand God within their own culture and language. In the beginning of its history, the church had an impact because it so often stood out so radically from the culture around it. However, as time went on, the church had an impact because it began to connect Christ and culture.

Though the aim of many of the Christians who interpret Christ as the Messiah of a culture is the salvation or reform of that culture rather than the extension of Christ's power, they contribute greatly to the latter by helping men to understand his gospel in their own language, his character by means of their own imagery, and his revelation of God with the aid of their own philosophy (Niebuhr, 1951:103).

Jesus did not just belong to a small group of 1st century Jews, but belongs to the world and can be understood in a variety of languages and within a variety of worldviews.

“Christ above Culture”, Niebuhr's third classification, describes those groups which believe that you somehow needed to form a synthesis between the

eternal values of the Church and the wisdom of the world. This position suggests that there is a natural quest in the world for justice and truth and that this quest needs to be honored but ultimately can only be fulfilled in Christ.

If Christ and culture are the two principles with which Christians are concerned, then most of them will seem to be compromising creatures who somehow manage to mix in irrational fashion an exclusive devotion to a Christ who rejects culture, with devotion to a culture that includes Christ (Niebuhr, 1951:116).

There is a strong theological element within this position. "...the fundamental issue does not lie between Christ and the world, important as that issue is, but between God and man" (Niebuhr, 1951:117).

In some respects, this classification of Niebuhr's seems to be the most nebulous. He acknowledges that while there are a number of common characteristics within this group, there are at least three main divisions: the synthesist, the dualist, and the conversionist (Niebuhr, 1951:120). For the purposes of this thesis it is not necessary to go into all of the subtle differences that Niebuhr explores, but we must at least acknowledge the variety of expressions that Niebuhr finds here. It should also be pointed out that the dualist position is further developed by Niebuhr as his fourth classification, *Christ and Culture in Paradox*, and the conversionist position is further developed as Niebuhr's fifth classification, *Christ the Transformer of Culture*. Both of these classifications will be considered momentarily. For now we will concentrate only on the synthesist position.

In contrast to the two classifications already discussed, the synthesist position sees the problems of Christ and culture not as an 'either-or' issue, but as a 'both-and' issue (Niebuhr, 1951:120).

...the synthesist affirms both Christ and culture, as one who confesses a Lord who is both of this world and of the other. The accommodator of Christ to the views of the time erases the distinction between God and man by divinizing man or humanizing God, and worships either a divine or a human Jesus Christ. The synthesist maintains a distinction, and with it the

paradoxical conviction, that Jesus, his Lord, is both God and man, one person with two “natures” that are neither to be confused nor separated...Something of the same sort is true of his understanding of culture; which is both divine and human in its origin, both holy and sinful, a realm of both necessity and freedom, and one to which both reason and revelation apply. As his understanding of the meaning of Christ separates him from the cultural believer, so his appreciation of culture divides him from the radical (Niebuhr, 1951:120-21).

In essence, the Christ above culture view attempts to take both elements of the discussion in a balanced relationship. The proponents of this view would suggest that the previous two do not deal with both elements seriously. A core issue with the Christ above culture or synthesist view is the understanding that there is both a significant distinction and significant connection between the theology of the Christ and the anthropology of human culture. While it values the best things in prevailing culture, it seeks to hang onto the distinctiveness of Christ.

Although there are many individuals who have historically developed this position, Niebuhr suggests that the early church father Clement, and Thomas Aquinas are key representatives. Niebuhr suggests that Clement represents an early form of the Christ above culture classification. “A Christian, in Clement’s view, must then first of all be a good man in accordance with the standard of good culture...His Christ is not against culture, but uses its best products as instruments in his work of bestowing on men what they cannot achieve by their own efforts” (Niebuhr, 1951:127). Niebuhr suggests that in actuality, Clement combines a Christ above culture with a Christ of culture position.

Clement’s attempt to combine appreciation of culture with loyalty to Christ was made at a time when the church was still outlawed. It represents more of a sense of responsibility in the church for maintenance of sound morals and learning than the feeling of obligation for the continuance and improvement of the great social institutions. It is more concerned with the culture of Christians than with the Christianization of culture (Niebuhr, 1951:128).

For Clement, the issue seems to be finding a place within culture that does not compromise one's values as a Christian nor one's values as a member of society. "Whatever else is required of the disciple, the good, sound training the best culture affords, and the avoidance of that license that characterizes revolt against custom, are fundamental demands made upon him" (Niebuhr, 1951:126).

In Niebuhr's estimation, Thomas Aquinas "is probably the greatest of all the synthesists in Christian history" and "represents a Christianity that has achieved or accepted full social responsibility for all the great institutions" (Niebuhr, 1951:128). For Aquinas the Christ and culture question is definitely a 'both-and' issue and yet "his Christ is far above culture, and he does not try to disguise the gulf that lies between them" (Niebuhr, 1951:129). As a representative of the synthesist view, Aquinas suggests:

As there is a double happiness for man, one in his life in culture and one in his life in Christ, and as the former is again a double happiness, one in practical activity and one in contemplation, so the ways to blessedness are many yet form one system of roads (Niebuhr, 1951:133).

Thomas does not seek to find a rule for human social life in the gospels. These rules must be found by reason. They constitute in their broad principles a natural law which all reasonable men living human lives under the given conditions of common human existence can discern, and which is based ultimately on the eternal law in the mind of God, the creator and ruler of all. Though the application of these principles in civil law will vary from time to time and place to place, the principles remain the same. Culture discerns the rules for culture, because culture is the work of God-given reason in God-given nature. Yet there is another law besides the law rational men discover and apply. The divine law revealed by God through His prophets and above all through His Son is partly coincident with the natural law, and partly transcends it as the law of man's supernatural life (Niebuhr, 1951:135).³

Again, these groups would be deeply concerned with the social-moral aspect of society and how they relate to the Church. They would stress the need to be

involved in the social and political workings of culture in order to form the synthesis they would be looking for. According to Niebuhr, this kind of unification of religious and social life is one of the great strengths of this position. “Man’s search for unity is unconquerable, and the Christian has a special reason for seeking integrity because of his fundamental faith in the God who is One” (Niebuhr, 1951:141). Niebuhr goes on to suggest that “apart perhaps from some radical and exclusive believers, all Christians find themselves in agreement with the synthesists’ affirmation of the importance of the civil virtues and of just social institutions” (1951:142); and that “...the synthesist offers to Christians an intelligible basis for the work they must do in co-operation with nonbelievers” while maintaining their Christian distinctiveness (Niebuhr, 1951:143).

However, Niebuhr levies two primary critiques against this position. First, he suggests that the end result of the synthesist position is one of fundamental error. In Niebuhr’s estimation the synthesist view most likely leads to “...the absolutizing of what is relative, the reduction of the infinite to a finite form, and the materialization of the dynamic” (Niebuhr, 1951:145). He continues:

It is one thing to assert that there is a law of God inscribed in the very structure of the creature, who must seek to know this law by the use of his reason and govern himself accordingly; it is another thing to formulate the law in the language and concepts of a reason that is always culturally conditioned. Perhaps a synthesis is possible in which the relative character of all creaturely formulations of the Creator’s law will be fully recognized. But no synthesis answer so far given in Christian history has avoided the equation of a cultural view of God’s law in creation with that law itself (Niebuhr, 1951:145).

The institutionalization of religious life that this view seems to inevitably lead to is problematic to Niebuhr. As he suggests above, the equating of God’s law with a particular culture’s interpretation of God’s law seems to remove the cross-cultural impact the church has been commissioned to have. Niebuhr succinctly states “that

³ For a more recent defense of the Natural Law position one should consider Budziszewski’s [Written On](#)

integrity and peace are the eternal hope and goal of the Christian, and that the temporal embodiment of this unity in a man-devised form represents a usurpation in which time seeks to exercise the power of eternity and man the power of God (Niebuhr, 1951:147).

Second, and more importantly, is the critique that the Christ above culture classification does not take the sinfulness of the world seriously enough. According to the biblical witness, there is a radical evil present in the world that greatly influences human culture. Of the five classifications that Niebuhr examines, the Christ above culture view speaks the least about this influence.

Niebuhr's fourth classification, "Christ and Culture in Paradox", is offered as a description of those believers who wish to be an active force in the world but are unsure of how much success they will actually have in bringing it under the lordship of Christ. These individuals appreciate the ironies that come with living in two kingdoms or realms. Niebuhr describes this group as dualists because they see two main arenas in which Christians must function; the church or God's arena and the world.

For them [dualists] the fundamental issue in life is not the one which radical Christians face as they draw the line between Christian community and pagan world. Neither is it the issue which cultural Christianity discerns as it sees man everywhere in conflict with nature and locates Christ on the side of the spiritual forces of culture. Yet, like both of these and unlike the synthesist in his more irenic and developing world, the dualist lives in conflict, and in the presence of one great issue. That conflict is between God and man, or better – since the dualist is an existential thinker - between God and us; the issue lies between the righteousness of God and the righteousness of self...The question about Christ and culture in this situation is not one which man puts to himself, but one that God asks him; it is not a question about Christians and pagans, but a question about God and man (Niebuhr, 1951:150).

Like those who hold to the Christ against Culture view, dualists significantly emphasize not only the sinfulness of human culture, but also the sinfulness of

Christians and the church. In a sense both are at odds with God; however, in God's mercy and grace God has redeemed his church and works within it. These redeemed individuals who make up the church now must live within God's community as it is found expressed in this life as well as living within the fallen world or culture. These two places of residence created a tension or paradox that infuse all of the Christian's life.

All human action, all culture, is infected with godlessness, which is the essence of sin. Godlessness appears as the will to live without God, to ignore Him, to be one's own source and beginning, to live without being indebted and forgiven, to be independent and secure in one's self, to be godlike in oneself (Niebuhr, 1951:154).

Hence the dualist joins the radical Christian in pronouncing the whole world of human culture to be godless and sick unto death. But there is a difference between them: the dualist knows that he belongs to that culture and cannot get out of it, that God indeed sustains him in it and by it; for if God in His grace did not sustain the world in its sin it would not exist for a moment (Niebuhr, 1951:156).

When it comes to offering examples of this classification, Niebuhr suggests that "it is more difficult to find relatively clear-cut, consistent examples of this approach than of the others; and the *motif* often appears in some isolation, confined to special areas of the cultural problem" (Niebuhr, 1951:159). Therefore, the social-moral task of the Church would vary within this group since it would depend on how successful a particular course of action would be. Individuals in this description would most likely describe the social-moral task of the Church as a "choose your opportunities with care" process as they seek to find the areas in which they would have the greatest chance for some success. It is also entirely possible that these groups would avoid the social political arena if they deemed such participation held little or no possibility for influence.

Even though relatively clear-cut examples of this classification might be difficult to find, Niebuhr does go on to suggest that this kind of thinking is found in a number of theologians including the apostle Paul and Luther. He clarifies that

it might not be possible to place Paul entirely within this classification, but does suggest that Paul at least represents the kernel of this view for many other thinkers. Niebuhr suggests that for Paul the issue of life "...lies between the righteousness of God and the righteousness of man, or between the goodness with which God is good and desires to make men good on the one hand, and on the other the kind of independent goodness man seeks to have in himself" (Niebuhr, 1951:159-60). All of life has been tainted by sin, but new life is offered in God's gift of His son. In essence, all cultural distinctions are rendered irrelevant in the encounter with Jesus since "...in all of them men were open to the divine ingression of the grace of the Lord" (Niebuhr, 1951:160). The work of Christ has brought righteousness to all men, despite their cultural or social situation and therefore new life brought change to the individual person and, consequently, to the cultural situations that they found themselves in.

The new life, moreover, was not simply a promise and hope but a present reality, evident in the ability of men to call upon God as their Father and to bring forth fruits of the spirit of Christ within them and their community. The great revolution in human existence was not past; neither was it still to come: it was now going on (Niebuhr, 1951:162-63).

With this position in mind, Paul refuses to take the path of the radical who rejects, and thus tries to escape from, any participation in human culture. He warns about participating in elements of human culture that are expressly against the will of God, but since sin is present not just within human institutions, but in humans as well, there is no place to escape to.

Since the battle was not with flesh and blood but against spiritual principles in the minds of hearts of men, there was no hiding place from their attacks in a new, Christian culture. The Christians' citizenship was in heaven, their hiding place was with the risen Christ. As far as this world was concerned it was their task to work out their salvation, and their gift to live in the spirit of Christ in whatever community or station in life they had been apprehended by the Lord. It was not possible to come closer to the reign of Christ by changing cultural customs, as in matters of food and drink or the keeping of holy days, by abandoning family life in favor of celibacy, by

seeking release from chattel slavery, or by escaping from the rule of political authorities (Niebuhr, 1951:163-64).

What we are left with is an uneasy existence within two spheres. In one sphere the believer is encouraged to participate in an ethic that reflects the values of the faith community and the God it worships. In the other sphere the believer is encouraged to participate in the same ethic, but with a view to preventing further degradation of society. Since the second sphere is so marred by sin, the only ethical influence the Christian can have is a preventative one whereby the culture in which the Christian finds himself is kept from experiencing the full effects of sin. Social structures are in place, a result of God's grace, to bring some sense of order to larger society and culture, but inherently they are sinful as well. As Niebuhr summarizes, "As long as man remains in the body he has need then, it seems, of a culture and of the institutions of culture not because they advance him toward life with Christ but because they restrain wickedness in a sinful and temporal world" (Niebuhr, 1951:167).

Luther follows in Paul's footsteps and echoes a number of the same ideas already mentioned. For Luther life was divided into two kingdoms; the kingdom of God and the kingdom of the world. And even though each work according to vastly different principles and a sharp distinction between the two must be kept, for Luther there was still a strong emphasis on the Christian ethical life that was to be lived out in both kingdoms. Niebuhr is quite emphatic when he writes, "More than any great Christian leader before him, Luther affirmed the life in culture as the sphere in which Christ could and ought to be followed; and more than any other he discerned that the rules to be followed in cultural life were independent of Christian or church law" (Niebuhr, 1951:174). The ethical standard that we received from Christ was to be lived out in the kingdom of the world, influencing it toward the values of God. How exactly this influence would come about or which courses of action should specifically be chosen would vary from person to

person and situation to situation. Rather than avoiding culture, as the Christ against culture position would suggest is necessary, or, in some fashion, embracing culture as the Christ of culture and Christ above culture positions would suggest, the dualist offers that we must participate within culture with the understanding that it is fallen and that our presence there will have varying degrees of influence.

By way of evaluation Niebuhr states, “whether or not the dualistic accounts are intelligible from the viewpoint of their inner consistency, they are intelligible and persuasive as corresponding to experience” (Niebuhr, 1951:185). When one considers the day-to-day experience of the believer, an emphasis on two kingdoms seems to resonate as true. There is a strong element to the Christian life where one feels the tension of living in two different worlds and attempting to hold on to the Christian ethic while functioning in a sinful world.

Far more than any of the preceding groups with which we have dealt they [the dualists] take into account the dynamic character of God, man, grace, and sin. There is something static about the radical Christians’ idea of faith; it is for him a new law and a new teaching. To a great extent this is true of the synthesists also, except as in the higher reaches of the Christian life a dynamic element is recognized. The dualist, however, is setting forth the ethics of action, of God’s action, man’s and the wicked powers’...It is an ethics of freedom not in the sense of liberty from law, but in the sense of creative action in response to action upon man (Niebuhr, 1951:185-86).

Because of this approach, the dualist view has, in Niebuhr’s estimations, done much to advance a vigorous Christian ethic in secular society. Nevertheless, he suggests that there are at least two main critiques of this classification: “...that dualism tends to lead Christians into antinomianism and into cultural conservatism” (Niebuhr, 1951:187). Niebuhr believes that the dualists’ emphasis on the pervasiveness of sin has led some to a more lax ethical standard rather than a higher ethical standard. If sin is found in all people and in all structures, then one could be led to the conclusion that it is inevitable and therefore attempting to live a vigorous Christian ethic is not necessary. This is obviously not the intention

of the classic dualist position as exemplified in Paul and Luther, but Niebuhr suggests that the dualist “must accept responsibility for putting, if not temptation, at least forms of rationalization for refusing temptation, in the way of the wayward and the weak” (Niebuhr, 1951:187).

As for the second concern, it seems historically accurate to state that the dualist position had led to a more conservative approach to culture. While both Paul and Luther may be credited with some concern for cultural reform, Niebuhr offers that they both were more concerned with individual or internal reform rather than overall culture reform. In the ethical imperatives offered by the dualists, the emphasis is generally placed on the individual making appropriate choices within a sinful or undesirable social structure rather than changing the social structure. Niebuhr points to Paul’s apparent acceptance of the institution of slavery and the patriarchal character of family life as examples of this. Paul encouraged masters, slaves, fathers, mothers, etc., to live Christian lives, but did not encourage change of the social structures they found themselves within. All of this leads Niebuhr to conclude that “Conservatism is a logical consequence of the tendency to think of law, state and other institutions as restraining forces, dykes against sin, preventers of anarchy, rather than as positive agencies through which men in social union render positive service to neighbors advancing toward true life” (Niebuhr, 1951:188).

The fifth and final classification is “Christ the Transformer of Culture” or the conversionists. In many respects this classification represents for Niebuhr the summation of his discussion. While it might be unfair to suggest that he adopts this view wholeheartedly, he does use this classification to summarize his views.

For Niebuhr, there are a number of contrasts and similarities between this classification and the others, some of which are helpful in understanding what he means by this classification.

The men who offer what we are calling the conversionists answer to the problem of Christ and culture evidently belong to the great central tradition

of the church. Though they hold fast to the radical distinction between God's work in Christ and man's work in culture, they do not take the road of exclusive Christianity into isolation from civilization, or reject its institutions with Tolstoyan bitterness. Though they accept their station in society with its duties in obedience to their Lord, they do not seek to modify Jesus Christ's sharp judgment of the world and all its ways. In their Christology they are like synthesists and dualists; they refer to the Redeemer more than to the giver of a new law...(Niebuhr, 1951:190).

In their understanding of sin the conversionists are more like dualists than synthesists. They note that it is deeply rooted in the human soul, that it pervades all man's work, and there are no gradations of corruption, however various its symptoms (Niebuhr, 1951:191).

Niebuhr goes on to suggest that "what distinguishes conversionists from dualists [and some of the other views] is their more positive and hopeful attitude toward culture" (Niebuhr, 1951:191).

Niebuhr's presentation of this classification is deeply theological. The conversionist's position is firmly grounded in the theology that God created and continues to have an ordering presence in His creation. While sin has corrupted this creation, the inherent goodness or order is still present and is something which humanity, with God, strives to re-establish or emphasize. The problem with culture, and humanity as well, is not that it is inherently evil, but that it has been corrupted and therefore must be redeemed.

The word that must be used here to designate the consequences of the fall is "corruption." Man's good nature has become corrupted; it is not bad, as something that ought not to exist, but warped, twisted, and misdirected...Hence his culture is all corrupted order rather than order for corruption, as it is for dualists. It is perverted good, not evil; or it is evil as perversion, and not as badness of being. *The problem of culture is therefore the problem of its conversion, not of its replacement by a new creation*; though the conversion is so radical that it amounts to a kind of rebirth (Niebuhr, 1951:194, emphasis mine).

Combined with this view of creation is an understanding of history that sees God as actively involved in renewing His corrupted creation.

For the exclusive Christian history is the story of a rising church or Christian culture, and a dying pagan civilization; for the cultural Christian, it is the story of the spirit's encounter with nature; for the synthesist, it is a period of preparation under law, reason, gospel, and church for an ultimate communion of the soul with God; for the dualist, history is the time of struggle between faith and its fulfillment. For the conversionists, history is the story of God's mighty deeds and of man's responses to them...the conversionists is less concerned with conservation of what has been given in creation, less with preparation for what will be given in a final redemption, than with the divine possibility of a present renewal (Niebuhr, 1951:195).

For examples of this classification, Niebuhr relies mainly on three people. He begins with the apostle John, particularly the fourth gospel, and then offers a survey of the theology of Augustine, not because he sees Augustine as the best example of the conversionist's position, but because he sees Augustine's thinking as formulating some of the key foundation for the classification. Finally, he highlights some key ideas from F.D. Maurice. It is not necessary to deal with everything that Niebuhr writes regarding these three historical examples. While there are a variety of nuances and differences between these examples, for our purposes we can summarize Niebuhr's treatment of them.

Niebuhr acknowledges that neither John nor Augustine presents a pure example of the conversionist's motif. In his thinking each combines elements of the other views with a conversionist emphasis. For Niebuhr, both John and Augustine see Christ as a regenerator or transformer of culture through the re-birth of individuals. The goal of Christian conversion is not just eschatological in nature, but presents a very real possibility for current transformation and change. Even though human nature is corrupted and perverted, Christ "...redirects, reinvigorates, and regenerates that life of man, expressed in all human works..." (1951:209). A significant emphasis is placed upon the current power of the gospel to transform the lives, and the culture they make up, of those it touches. Again, this view attempts to take sin seriously, but unlike the dualists sees God's dealing

with sin not just in a future context, but a present one, and not just for the individual, but for larger human culture as well.

In Maurice, Niebuhr sees a clearer example of the conversionist's viewpoint. The key for Maurice is the kingship of Christ who comes to earth not just as saviour, but also as ruler of all, regenerate and unregenerate alike. "What made Maurice the most consistent of conversionists, however, was the fact that he held fast to the principle that Christ was king, and that men were therefore required to take account of him only and not their sin..." (Niebuhr, 1951:224). This emphasis on the rule of Christ rather than on human sinfulness helps maintain the more positive view of culture which marks the conversionists position. Both individually and collectively humanity is sinful, but this is remedied by the work of Christ. Humanity's true meaning and purpose then, is found partially in renewed interpersonal relationships, but ultimately only in community with Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Niebuhr, 1951:221). For Maurice, there is an intimate connection between the kingdom of God and the rest of the human experience. Niebuhr quotes Maurice as stating, "The kingdom of God begins within, but it is to make itself manifest without...It is to penetrate the feelings, habits, thoughts, words, acts, of him who is the subject of it. At last it is to penetrate our whole social existence" (Niebuhr, 1951:228). He then follows up that quote with the supreme goal of the conversionists' position: "The kingdom of God is transformed culture, because it is first of all the conversion of the human spirit from faithlessness and self-service to the knowledge and service of God. The kingdom of God is real, for if God did not rule nothing would exist..." (Niebuhr, 1951:228).

This optimism provides a basis for significant cultural involvement. The individuals who hold this view would attempt to influence or mold the secular culture around them with the values of the gospel through service. They believe that the gospel impacts everything in culture and that one has to work towards

shaping culture to reflect the ideals of the Christian message. Individuals or groups following this classification would greatly emphasize the political task of the church since they would see it as a primary area of both service and transformation.

The fact that Niebuhr does not offer a critique of the Christ the transformer of culture classification as he did with the previous four views is telling. It is obviously the view to which he most closely aligns himself. In his conclusion, however, Niebuhr does attempt to establish a balanced context within which he believes a position can be taken in the Christ and culture problem. Throughout his conclusion he emphasizes caution in this discussion and suggests that while any person of faith may be able to give *a* Christian answer they may not give *the* Christian answer. And even though he leans heavily toward the conversionist position, Niebuhr is very clear in stating that we are indebted to all positions in one way or another. In his closing thoughts Niebuhr focuses on the idea of faith and how each individual, and the communities that they are a part of, needs to address the issue of Christ and culture according to their own circumstances. While he does not come out and say so in specific fashion, he intimates that each position may be a 'correct' response depending on the situation at hand.

5.3. Critique of Niebuhr and Alternative Suggestions

As a starting point, most scholars seem to find Niebuhr's descriptions quite helpful. The purpose was not to exhaustively list the ways in which the church could respond to culture, but to offer some tools with which to work. Many have used those tools in the last fifty years to address a variety of issues that face the church. There are those however who critique Niebuhr's approach.

In their book, Resident Aliens, Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon argue for a different cultural task than the one indicated by Niebuhr and those who would follow him. More pointedly, they (Hauerwas and Willimon, 1989:40)

clearly say that they believe that few books have been a greater hindrance to the Church than Niebuhr's Christ and Culture. The general problem with Niebuhr's assessment, according to Hauerwas and Willimon, is that Niebuhr addresses the situation as all or nothing. In his descriptions one is either with culture or against it, a dichotomy that Hauerwas and Willimon reject. The concern that Hauerwas and Willimon have is that Niebuhr's classifications did not provide any method for Christians to critique culture and to look for both the good and the bad in it. While trying to remain objective in his treatment, it was obvious that Niebuhr felt that the "Christ the Transformer of Culture" category was the best method in dealing with society. However, Hauerwas and Willimon suggest that this position only reaffirmed something we already, and desperately wanted to, believe in.

Niebuhr set up the argument in such a way as to ensure that the transformist approach would be viewed as the most worthy. A democracy like ours must believe that it is making progress, that the people are, through their own power and choice, transforming the world into something better than it would be without their power and choice. Thus Niebuhr set up the argument as if a world-affirming "church" or world-denying "sect" were our only options, as if these categories were a faithful depiction of some historical or sociological reality in the first place (Hauerwas and Willimon, 1989:40).

The concern of Hauerwas and Willimon is that Niebuhr merely justified something that was already there. Their assertion is that Niebuhr's classifications led the church to believe that it was somehow transforming the world when in actual fact the world had tamed the church (Hauerwas and Willimon, 1989:41).⁴

A more helpful approach according to Hauerwas and Willimon is that of John Howard Yoder, which they summarize in their book. Yoder describes three kinds of churches; the activist church, the conversionist church, and the confessing church. The activist church is concerned more with the betterment of society than

⁴ It is important to note that Hauerwas & Willimon do not question Niebuhr's motives. In their estimation Niebuhr honestly set out to find a way to affirm the unique witness of the church, but did so while giving

the reformation of the church. Emphasis is placed on social change and activity as the members of these churches glorify God by supporting whatever movements bring about greater justice in the world. A key element for this position is the trust that is placed in their ability to read the direction of history and to take the appropriate positions. The concern expressed by Hauerwas and Willimon is that these churches often lack the theological insight necessary to do this and that “[their] politics becomes a sort of religiously glorified liberalism” (Hauerwas and Willimon, 1989:45).

The conversionist church is much more individual oriented. The way to change the structures that promote injustice is by calling the individuals involved to repentance before both God and their fellow humans. This group affirms the destructive presence of sin within humanity and sees no possible solution to it other than a spiritual one. “The promises of secular optimism are therefore false because they attempt to bypass the biblical call to admit personal guilt and to experience reconciliation to God and neighbor” (Hauerwas and Willimon, 1989:45). Consequently, society or culture is changed from within rather than from without. Hauerwas and Willimon’s concern here is that because this church works only for inward change it can offer no alternative social ethic or social structure to the world. In their words, “...the political claims of Jesus are sacrificed for politics that inevitably seems to degenerate into a religiously glorified conservatism” (Hauerwas and Willimon, 1989:45).

Yoder’s final grouping, the confessing church, is, according to Hauerwas and Willimon, not a middle ground between the activist and conversionist churches, but rather is a radical alternative. Instead of the individualism of the conversionist church and the secularism of the activist church, “...the confessing church finds its main political task to lie, not in the personal transformation of individual hearts or the modification of society, but rather in the congregation’s

in to categories that ultimately lead to the “all-or-nothing relationship to the culture; that we must

determination to worship Christ in all things” (Hauerwas and Willimon, 1989:45). The confessing church still calls people to repentance, but emphasizes that repentance is not merely an individual thing but calls the person into a counter-culture structure called the church.

The confessing church, like the conversionist church, also calls people to conversion, but it depicts that conversion as a long process of being baptismally engrafted into a new people, an alternative *polis*, a countercultural social structure called church. It seeks to influence the world by being the church, that is by being something the world is not and can never be, lacking the gift of faith and vision, which is ours in Christ. The confessing church seeks the *visible* church, a place, clearly visible to the world, in which people are faithful to their promises, love their enemies, tell the truth, honor the poor, suffer for righteousness, and thereby testify to the amazing community-creating power of God (Hauerwas and Willimon, 1989:46).

This kind of church would participate in any number of secular movements against the evils our world faces, simply because they see doing so as an act of proclamation. The belief is that the church influences the world by being the church; that “living, breathing, visible community of faith” (Hauerwas and Willimon, 1989:47) that only God can create. What Hauerwas and Willimon would like is,

...a church that again asserts that God, not nations, rules the world, that the boundaries of God’s kingdom transcend those of Caesar, and that the main political task of the church is the formation of people who see clearly the cost of discipleship and are willing to pay the price (Hauerwas and Willimon, 1989:48).

5.4. Evaluation/Summation

Niebuhr, Hauerwas and Willimon give us a foundation from which to consider how the church might act as a moral community within larger culture. What they clearly highlight is that the matter is open for much debate.⁵ There are

responsibly choose to be “all,” or irresponsibly choose to be sectarian nothing” (1989:41).

⁵ Hauerwas and Willimon have also had their detractors. Their book, Resident Aliens, created enough of a response to write a follow up book entitled Where Resident Aliens Live. This book highlights some of the

obviously a variety of proposals as to how the church has in the past, and can in the present, interact with the society around it and what political and moral implications there are for any of those options.

We have contended throughout this thesis that there is a strong connection between theology and ethics and that the endorsed belief system or worldview of a particular nation, or church, will eventually affect how it conducts its moral life. Since we believe this to be inevitable, an effective way of discussing this issue of a church as a moral community is to evaluate the suggested models before us in light of the biblical foundation for ethics that we established in chapter two.

The connection between theology and the models of cultural interaction presented by Niebuhr, Hauerwas, and Willimon, is readily apparent. Each of their suggestions carries with it a theological agenda. For those churches that adopt a more ‘with culture’ view (eg. Niebuhr’s Christ of Culture and Christ Above Culture models, and Yoder’s activist church model) theology has been shaped to reflect more of the cultural context these churches find themselves in. The general critique offered of each of these views is that the uniqueness of the Christian message has been removed to the point where there is little or nothing distinct about it at all. Seeing the identity of Jesus and the mission of the church in more sociological terms has led to a ‘taming’ of the church, as Hauerwas and Willimon stated earlier. Without the key theological anchors of the historic Christian faith, churches that have endorsed this kind of social agenda usually end up being overly influenced by culture rather than being an influence on culture. These models of cultural interaction have a moral voice to be sure, but one wonders what makes that voice Christian in any historic or meaningful sense of the word. Speaking from an American context, J. Daryl Charles in his book, The Unformed Conscience of Evangelicalism, affirms this conclusion when he writes,

positive responses they have become aware of to the material they presented in their first book, but it also includes a number of more negative responses as well.

...[A]n optimistic synthesis between secular culture and Christian values, such as that espoused by twentieth-century Protestant liberalism, is untenable. We might call this the vision of a “de-Christianized” society. It is one that views throwing off “repressive” restraints of Christian orthodoxy as *necessary*; alas, it has made peace with surrounding culture (Charles, 2002:23, emphasis author’s).

Charles goes on to quote Hebert Schlossberg as saying

People [thinking thusly] fail to appreciate the worth of society’s Christian underpinnings, because they are unconscious recipients of its blessings. The most vigorous atheist in the world has grown up in a world in which love and justice are ideals. But such ideals have no objective referent outside of the biblical accounts (Schlossberg, 1983:288 as in Charles, 2002:23-4).

The churches that find their place at the other end of the spectrum (Niebuhr’s *Christ Against Culture*, and to some extent, *Christ and Culture in Paradox*, and Yoder’s conversionist church) face different, but no less significant, concerns. Here the issue is not so much the lack of emphasis on theology and Christian orthodoxy, for these churches usually expend a great deal of energy and attention on these concerns, but rather the issue is lack of cultural awareness. For many groups within this broad category the isolationist spirit has rendered any concern for cultural involvement almost mute. Hauerwas and Willimon described this position as pigeonholing the church as an isolated sect that avoids any real interaction with the culture around it. Not wanting to be stained by the evils of culture they find themselves in, churches hide behind the walls of the church trying to remain pure and faithful. A different expression of this view, although based on much the same thinking, is the agenda of some American Christians in particular to ‘re-Christianize’ the United States by using the political process to rebuild a Christian nation. Charles describes this position as “...a vision based on a false or romantic reading of our nation’s history, with its corresponding dismissive attitude toward culture in general” (Charles, 2002:24). The emphasis on theology found in this position is positive; however, the theology tends to be too narrow

and, ironically, as Niebuhr among others has pointed out, often simply reflects an enculturated view as well. In the American context, what this position has often passed off as Christian theology is really only a romanticized expression of past American culture (Charles, 2002:24).

When considered in light of the biblical foundation we established earlier, neither of these ‘extremes’ adequately does justice to the biblical text and what it says about the nature and mission of the church. There is a familiar tension found between these two extremes and perhaps a mediating or alternative approach can be found. Niebuhr puts forth his ‘Christ Transforming Culture’ model as a middle ground and Hauerwas and Willimon promote Yoder’s confessing church. More than suggesting this approach as a middle ground however, Hauerwas and Willimon suggest that “...the church doesn’t have a social strategy, the church is a social strategy” (Hauerwas and Willimon, 1989:43) and in saying this they

...are attempting to indicate an alternative way of looking at the political, social significance of the church. The church need not feel caught between the false Nieburian dilemma of whether to be in the world or out of the world, politically responsible or introspectively irresponsible...The church need not worry about whether to be in the world. The church’s only concern is how to be in the world, in what form, for what purpose (Hauerwas and Willimon, 1989:43).

This statement, and the critique of Niebuhr that goes with it, summarizes well how the church ought to function as an ethical community in a secular society, but before we endorse all of what Hauerwas and Willimon have to say we need to consider some other issues.

In our biblical foundation of ethics we suggested that there were three primary components upon which to build; God’s redemptive story, God’s redemptive work, and God’s community of faith. Individually, each of these has some bearing on how we might view the social-moral task of the church, but we will consider them collectively. This foundation with these components suggests that God is actively involved in the world that He created. This idea was

highlighted in a number of the classifications discussed above and it is an important place to begin. The biblical story is not one of a deistic God who is unconcerned and uninvolved with humanity, but rather tells of a God who is intimately involved in it.⁶ This foundation also makes it clear that there is something wrong with the world. We have previously emphasized that the biblical picture takes sin seriously and deals with it as a significant reality within the human experience. In this context we see God's use of a faith community to carry out His redemptive purposes. This theological foundation carries with it some significant consequences for the church's social-moral agenda, consequences that deeply challenge the profound individualism we see expressed in contemporary culture. There are traces of these components found in all of the models discussed above. However most of them are inadequate in accounting for all of the components.

When considering the North American situation the confessing church model appears to embrace more of our biblical foundation than the others. Whether or not one agrees with all of Hauerwas and Willimon's critique of Niebuhr, they have exposed a serious concern. In many respects, the church in North America has become "tamed" or enculturated. The church has bowed unnecessarily to the power of the State to regulate or determine what life should be like. This is not to suggest that we are to be disrespectful of our political leaders but it would appear that in many areas we functionally believe that the government controls our destinies instead of God. What Hauerwas and Willimon are responding to is the growing American belief that they can create a "Christian nation" by putting Christian politicians in office and Christian laws on the books. A similar approach, although on a much smaller scale, is a part of political life in Canada as well. In Canada we also have a number of people who have expressed concern that we are no longer a "Christian nation" because of changes in our laws.

⁶ It should be noted that amongst those who agree with this statement, there is still a great deal of

What Hauerwas and Willimon appear to be saying is that this approach to the social-moral task of the church has created a false understanding of the true nature of the church and what it means to be Christian.

An implication of Hauerwas and Willimon's depiction of the confessing church is that it calls people to repentance, which would include the conversionist church approach, but they also visibly proclaim what difference that conversion or repentance makes in daily life regardless of what public opinion may be. In many ways this succinctly describes the social-moral task of the church. The church can participate in many kinds of political processes but at the core of that participation is an understanding that we have a much higher Ruler and calling. True to the biblical foundation set before us, the agenda proposed here is one based on the understanding that the Christian ethic takes sin seriously, understands that it is God who is ultimately at work in the world, and that a significant part of God's work is the formation of a faith community that proclaims and practices God's values.

If it is true that values divorced from character become empty in society, it is even more true in the Church. The character of which we speak here is not simply the cultivation of natural virtue but the intensely conscious sense of living morally before God. Without this sense, built into character, our moral conduct disintegrates (Wells, 1998:16).

In many ways the Church thrives in a culture that oppresses it. What we have had for centuries now in North America is a culture that has passed itself off as "Christian". What the confessing Church seeks to do is re-establish the fact that the gospel calls for a radically different lifestyle and allegiance than many North American Christians are prepared for and to use whatever means necessary to preach this message. If political processes are part of that means then we must use them. We must call our people, churched and unchurched alike, to accountability before God, but we must not allow ourselves to believe that this can be achieved

discussion about exactly how much God is involved with His creation.

solely, or even primarily, through the political process. While the political task of the Church may be to keep social concerns before our leaders we must not leave the implementation of social justice entirely up to them. We can no longer rely on the government to provide those things for us that once we only thought God could provide. One Canadian example is how we address the issue of poverty. In Canada the general impression seems to be that it is the government's responsibility to provide a social safety net that will deal with the poor and the concerns surrounding poverty. Within the church one often finds the attitude that the taxes we pay to support this safety net somehow absolve us from the responsibility to deal with the poor in our midst. The agenda that we have been discussing to this point would suggest a more involved response.⁷ We may well have a social system that provides something of a safety net for the poor, but that is not enough. The demands of the gospel require the church to be more proactive in seeking to address poverty. When we suggest that we need an agenda that takes sin seriously, understands that it is God who is ultimately at work in the world, and that a significant part of God's work is the formation of a faith community that proclaims and practices God's values, as mentioned above, then we will look beyond the surface of the issues before us. Included in this would be asserting that poverty is not just a physical concern, but a spiritual one as well. In addition to actively creating and supporting local food banks, employment agencies, and similar organizations that meet the initial physical concern of the poor, churches should also seek to address the spiritual and social issues that perpetuate the cycle of poverty. Character building opportunities that include such life skills as forgiveness, faithfulness, and fidelity need to be part of the process. As we saw in

⁷The administrator of an organization that attempts to deal with these issues among the aboriginals of northern Saskatchewan shared with me some of her experience and frustration with this attitude. Amongst the many things her organization seeks to do, a primary effort is given to helping individuals acquire the necessary basic skills that would allow them to not only gain employment, but keep it. The administrator regularly seeks to place these individuals in local businesses. She recounted to me one particular conversation with a Christian business owner in the area who expressed the view that "these people just

chapter three, dealing with poverty in a biblical fashion means restoring the person in question to a meaningful place in the community, not simply feeding them and hoping they go away.

5.5. The Praxis of Community

What our biblical foundation suggests is that we do not need **a** model for the church as a moral community, but rather, what we need is a series of models that affirm the three components suggested above while paying heed to the various cultural settings the church finds itself in. Hauerwas and Willimon's confessing church does this to a large degree, but there is more to say about this concern. Niebuhr seems to talk about "culture" as if there is one universal setting for the church, which is simply not an accurate picture. We may talk about 'culture' in an abstract context, but when we discuss the church's role as a moral community it is essential to keep in mind that in reality we are dealing with many different cultures. On a global scale this is most obvious, but even on a smaller scale we need to be mindful of the fact that any given society that we discuss is most likely made up of any number of smaller sub-cultures. For their part Hauerwas and Willimon seem to focus on the American church and how it relates to its context. The critiques they offer and the comments they make are aimed at challenging the American church to reconsider its role in American society. Nevertheless, their confessing church model seems to take into account that the social-moral role of the church could very well take a variety of forms depending upon where the church finds itself. We have cautioned throughout this thesis that we needed to be mindful of over-simplification and we need to re-affirm that caution again here. The Church as a moral community in America may look radically different than the Church as a moral community in South America, Canada or South Africa.

need to get a job" and the problem would be dealt with. However, when challenged with providing a job for one of "these people" he did not want to get involved because of their unreliable employment record.

Hauerwas and Willimon seem quick to dismiss the possible cultural influence of the conversionist church and they are not alone in expressing concern for that approach.

The pious have allowed matters of conscience to be pushed into the private and spiritual realms of life. To preach about political sin and structural evil is almost considered to be a heresy. Change the hearts of men and women and the world will be changed as well -- that has become the slogan, and what an unbiblical and most misleading slogan it is! We have to rediscover the comprehensive dimensions of the Biblical message and do so before it is too late! (K. Nurnberger, Study Guide for TEA304-F, Ethics of Economic Life, pg. 155.)

However, if we use the Bible, especially the New Testament, as our model in considering the social-moral task of the church, then many would disagree with Nurnberger that the slogan, "Change the hearts of men and women and the world will be changed as well" is not necessarily unbiblical. As a matter of fact, it could be suggested that this position was one of the key elements in the first century church's social-moral life. The first century church held no, or very little, political influence in its culture and therefore had little or no moral influence at the macro level of their world. The early Christians did not have the options that many Christians have today in their cultures. On key issues statements were made about what a Christian position should be but the impression seems to be that there was no expectation of a political response. The issue of slavery is a prime example. Jesus, Paul, Luke or any of the other New Testament writers never call for a ban on slavery or anything close to that. Instead what is called for is a new understanding about what it meant to be a slave and a slave owner at that time. There are many factors to consider in how the New Testament dealt with the issue of slavery, but what seems clear is that the writers, especially Paul, did not call for a political response but rather called for an inward conversion that would result in seeing slavery for what it was. The same principle could be applied to the role of women in the early church among other issues. The point is that there may well

be times when the only thing the Church can do is attempt to change the hearts of those who are in power.

This concern could lead us to believe that Niebuhr's "Christ and Culture in Paradox" or Yoder's conversionist church are the methods that we should follow in establishing our social-moral task, but that seems to be saying too much. What might be suggested is that to appropriately discuss the social-moral task of the Church we must first understand what cultural context the specific church exists in. The Church in North America, with democracy as its political arena may understand its political and social-moral task differently than the Church that existed in the Soviet Union before its breakup. It could also mean that different methods (Niebuhr's types or Yoder's descriptions) need to be employed in different settings.

While it is vital for Christians in a democratic system like the ones found in North America to exercise their right to vote and make their opinions known, it is also important to assert that we must not base the status or the future of the church on the outcome of that political process. A democracy presents us with the opportunity and freedom to voice our opinions and we must not take that privilege lightly. Nevertheless, we must also realize that popular opinion or the majority vote does not change the character or providence of God, or the mission of His people. The church is called to be faithful whether the government or the majority accepts its stance or not. A primary role of the church in the public life of North America is to serve as its moral and spiritual conscience. Included in this conscience is that it must contribute a strong communal concern to counterbalance the over-emphasis we see throughout North American culture. The church has strong beliefs regarding the family, the poor, justice, truth, etc. and it must take advantage of its political and social opportunities to promote these concerns. Even if establishing laws that are based on Christian principles would not make people

Christian, the church must accept its role as a preservative and guide⁸ in society. This kind of social involvement can happen on a number of levels and in a number of ways. Whether it is in the immediate community in which we live or the country as a whole, the church can use the public means available to it to address the social concerns that we have. This kind of emphasis in North America would also have international or global consequences. Once we understand that there are certain things we must stand for we should also come to realize that we must stand for those things outside of our borders. Considering the influence that North American culture, particularly the United States, has on the rest of the globe we must take our task very seriously. The church must actively seek ways to make sure our political, economic, and social systems acknowledge those who cannot care for themselves. We have the opportunity to keep fundamental Christian social concerns at the center of public attention and we need to use that opportunity. If we believe the Christian message then we believe that it is Truth for all and that there are some earthly benefits to living a life that follows Christian principles.

There is one final concern that we need to address. In North America the above approach has often taken on the prophetic role of proclaiming to the world around it what God's expectations are. There is, perhaps, a place for this kind of proclamation, but in a culture that has become inoculated to this kind of approach, other methods need to be considered. If the church is truly to function as a moral community within an increasingly secular society then it must first focus its attention on itself. The church as an ethical community starts within itself.⁹ The issue is to be clear about the moral concerns and expectations that are held for

⁸ This idea comes from the metaphor Jesus employed in his Sermon on the Mount when he described his followers as salt and light (Matt. 5:13-16).

⁹ There is a great deal more that could be said on this point. In many respects the church has lost its voice in North American culture because of the numerous examples of significant ethical failing in its membership. There is a tension, to be sure, regarding holding a high moral standard and understanding that as humans we are prone to failure, but it is still vital to community credibility to be consistent in holding that standard. Exactly **how** the church should fulfill this task is a topic for another time.

those who are declared members of the community. The first place to start is not declaring to the world out there how they should live their lives. When the moment or opportunity presents itself, the biblical foundation that we have established for the church requires a response to the ethical issues that face us, but this needs to take place in a manner and context that allows for an honest hearing instead of an instant rejection. In many areas there is a deep-seated suspicion of the church in North American culture. To re-gain a place of influence the church must first come to some renewed sense of calling and mission within its ranks and combine that with an honest effort to live the values expressed by its creator. When these factors are in place, the church will be able to function as a moral community or voice in a secular society.

5.6. Conclusion

In this chapter we set out to explore how the Christian church and its message can be presented in the various cultures that it finds itself in. It has been asserted that while it is not the only communal voice that can affect social change, the church's voice is an important one nonetheless. Acknowledging that there are some significant issues to be dealt with, the church cannot simply become an island unto itself, but must thoughtfully consider its role in cultural life.

As well, we have concluded that to carry out its role in larger culture, the church must resist the temptation to be simplistic in its approach. Niebuhr's material and the subsequent critique of it remind us that the task at hand is a difficult one that requires honest, and sometimes lengthy, deliberation. Strength is found in listening to different voices from divergent cultures.

CHAPTER SIX - THE LEGISLATION OF MORALITY

6.1 Introduction

The present chapter of this thesis will deal with what is perhaps the most ‘public’ concern of our theme as well as the most controversial, the legislation of morality. This topic generally brings about an immediate reaction or response, particularly in any culture where there has been a significant emphasis put upon the individual’s role in ethics. Because of the controversial nature of this topic it might have been easier simply to avoid this part of the discussion, but it is an important aspect to our overall topic. It is indeed valuable to discuss the foundations provided for ethical decision-making and to show how a more communal voice is needed to deal with the difficult issues that are facing us. But at some point we must ask *how* this communal voice is to be heard in any respective culture. Amidst all of the other roles that the larger community plays in ethics, it is the contention of this chapter that the legislation of morality is one of the primary roles or responsibilities in which it is involved. We assert that a significant aspect of social or community life is the establishing of some form of legal system that promotes and protects the moral values needed not only to sustain human culture but also to help it flourish. It is this assertion or position that this chapter seeks to discuss and defend as a final element to our overall topic of the role of community in ethics.

There are a number of ways in which we could discuss the legislation of morality. There are, quite literally, countless variables and side issues that are raised within this topic. But by necessity the scope of this chapter needs to be significantly narrow if we are to stay with the theme set out for this thesis. Our primary concern is the role of community in ethics. Our effort has been put into analyzing the foundational issues and assumptions that are key to our topic with

the use of specific examples for illustrative purposes. The same approach will be taken here as well. Therefore, the purpose of this chapter is not to deal with all of the issues involved in the discussion surrounding the legislation of morality, but rather, it is to discuss how the establishment and enforcement of law is part of the fundamental role of the larger community. And rather than being something to be avoided, the legislation of morality needs to be carried out with thoughtful care to justice and the common social good.

To achieve this purpose, this chapter will develop along the following lines. After some comments that will establish the context for our discussion, we will consider two primary objections commonly given to the idea of legislating morality: that you cannot legislate morality and that you should not legislate morality. To conclude, we will discuss two instances in which moral matters have been legislated in history and why this role is fundamental to the existence of any social structure. Within this discussion, we will consider the purpose of law and how it influences the moral fabric of society.

6.2. Contextual Comments

As already stated, there are numerous questions and concerns raised by the idea of legislating morality. Many of these would be of some interest to our stated purpose, but there are a couple of general comments that are particularly related to our discussion.

First, the debate over whether or not to, or even if it is possible to, legislate morality is greatly emphasized by our modern/post-modern cultural setting. As we have previously noted in chapter two, historically some sort of divine foundation was always in place for the stated morality of a people and, by extension, the laws that ruled the land were based on that moral or divine foundation. These elements, the divine, the moral, and the legal, were, and are, closely linked together and actions that were deemed ‘sinful’ were also illegal.

When a divine foundation for morality was more prevalent, it was common for the law of the land to openly reflect some form of moral code or foundation. In nations or societies that are expressly theocratic, ancient Israel would be a historical example and some modern Islamic nations could provide contemporary examples; the moral, and generally divine, foundation of law was obvious. This is not to suggest that within these nations there would not have been questions or issues regarding exactly how morality was to be legislated, but simply acknowledges that the connection between morality and law would have been more readily accepted or assumed. However, in cultural contexts that are expressly pluralistic we have another situation.

This equation of sin and crime may well make sense for a confessedly theocratic society where an overwhelming moral consensus exists. But it poses serious problems for human rights and individual liberties in pluralistic contexts, like twentieth-century America or modern Israel (Holmes, 1984:100).

Historically, both the United States and Canada were founded on the Judeo-Christian ethic although neither nation was ever explicitly theocratic.¹ In recent times however, this foundation has been questioned or challenged. As we saw in chapter two, over a lengthy period of time God has been removed from the moral foundation of North American society and replaced with a human foundation in a variety of forms. The resultant relativism has left us with a need to establish some sort of foundation for our moral practices. The intimate connection between moral foundation and legal foundation is also affected by this shift. With God essentially out of the picture in any formal sense, one is left with the question, on what do we base the law of the land? The answer provided is the same as we saw in our previous discussion; instead of a theocentric view of law we have an

¹ For the U.S. this general religious foundation is reflected in the language of both the American Constitution and the Declaration of Independence. For Canada, the Charter of Rights grounds the moral, and subsequently legal, standards contained within on 'the supremacy of God'. It has been pointed out that the language used in all of these documents is not necessarily Christian per se, but does reflect an assertion of 'unalienable rights', etc., based upon the belief of a Creator.

anthropocentric view of law.² Subsequently, what we have in North America is a predominantly anthropocentric view of both morality and law with an apparently growing assumption that there is no real connection between the two.

A second comment that needs to be re-visited is the one made earlier in this thesis regarding the various communities in which individuals reside. As individuals we are a part of a number of communities; family, neighborhood, town, city, state/province, country, etc. Each of these communities has rules by which they function and the foundations for those rules vary. Parents are generally the ones who have established the ‘oughts’ and ‘ought-nots’ that govern the behaviour within any particular family. And, any given community has some kind of authority that establishes the rules of conduct for that community. Although the following discussion could be applied to each of these communities, what we are primarily concerned with is the legislation of morality on a national, and perhaps international, scale. One would assume that there is a connection between a nation’s legal code and the codes that exist in the smaller communities that make up that nation, but our primary concern is focused on the larger picture.³

6.3. What Legislating Morality Means And Related Issues

Before we begin the main discussion under this section, a brief introductory comment needs to be made. The term ‘legislating morality’ can mean a number of different things. For example, when the idea of legislating morality is considered, the discussion can focus on certain specific actions that some might feel need to be legislated for or against. Issues such as abortion, sexual preference, or the use of

² An interesting question to explore would be, if the moral foundation of our culture has shifted from the divine to the human and then further to the individual, then what is stopping the legal foundation from doing the same and what might be the consequences if this were to happen?

³ One particularly contentious issue within our larger discussion is the role a national government should or should not play in family life. For many, this is one area where over-legislation is a significant concern as many people do not want government interference when it comes to saying how families are supposed to function. For example, there are segments of North American society that would like to see corporal punishment of children made illegal, while another segment of North American society sees the disciplining of children as a purely private matter where government should have no place.

certain narcotics for example, become the centre of a debate on whether these practices can be deemed acceptable or unacceptable under a given legal system. However, in this section the idea of legislating morality will be discussed in a broader, more general sense rather than a specific sense, although some specific examples will be given. Thus rather than considering the legislating of specific moral issues, this section will focus on broader concerns of why or how morality can or cannot be legislated and the possible effects such positions have on the community as a whole.

We can now turn our attention to the most basic concerns generally expressed when the issue of legislating morality is considered. The questions of whether or not we should or even if it is possible to legislate morality are ones that are almost immediately raised. As noted previously, this element of the discussion has been brought more to the forefront by the modern forms of liberal democracy that we see in North America today. Combined with a pluralistic view of cultural development, the legislation of any moral code raises many hotly contested questions. The basis for these questions comes from the philosophical foundation for our modern/post-modern society that we summarized in chapter one. If the rights and interests of the individual are paramount to the moral life, then on what basis could we possibly put in place legislation that would in anyway detract from those rights and interests? And, given the independence of the human spirit, again emphasized by the modern/postmodern culture, does it not follow that any attempt to legislate moral behaviour will only end in frustration and failure? Also, on what basis should one group's, or person's, view of morality be established as law while another view is not? There are numerous questions to consider.

For the sake of brevity, this aspect of our discussion will be divided into two primary concerns. First, the initial response of many individuals is that it is impossible to legislate morality because you cannot make someone do something they are not willing to do. Or conversely, you ultimately cannot stop someone

from doing something if they are intent on doing it.⁴ In this part of the discussion, whether or not something is perceived as moral or immoral is not the issue. What is the issue is the question of whether or not declaring a particular action illegal would ultimately influence the choice of the individual intent on carrying out that action. A second common response is that it is not acceptable to legislate morality; we ought not to do it, because that would mean that one particular moral stance is being forced upon individuals who do not necessarily hold that moral position. In a pluralistic society this is unacceptable.

Regarding the first contention, it must be admitted that there is a strong aspect in which it is true. In most instances it is very difficult to actually make someone act morally, without, perhaps, excessive force. And, even if the law is successful in getting someone to comply with a certain rule, that does not ensure that you have created a law-abiding or moral person. As most parents know, you might be able to get a child to eat their vegetables before getting dessert, but that does not mean you have instilled in your child a heartfelt desire to eat nutritiously. It is also plainly true that if someone really wants to do something immoral, they will find a way to do it whether or not it is legal. It is simply not possible to make sure that any law is observed one hundred percent of the time. The issue of Prohibition from the 1930s in North America is generally pointed to as a strong illustration of this position.⁵ It is true that if someone really wants to do something

⁴ For further development of these contentions, among others, see Geisler & Turek, Legislating Morality (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1998), Peach, Legislating Morality: Pluralism and Religious Identity in Lawmaking (Oxford University Press, 2002), and Keister, Crimes With No Victims: How Legislating Morality Defeats the Cause of Justice (New York: Alliance for a Safer New York, 1972). Also, much personal discussion surrounding the idea of legislating morality seems to center around these two contentions.

⁵ This comment can, and probably has been, used in just about every ethical issue we face. For example, it is one of the most common arguments used in the abortion debate. "If someone really wants to have an abortion they can get one, so why not make it legal so it can be done safely?" (Beckwith's article in *JETS*, 32/4, December 1989 is just one example of how this line of reasoning is used in the abortion debate. See also Virginia Ramey Mollenkott's article, *Reproductive Choice – Basic to Justice for Women* in Clark & Rakestraw, Readings in Christian Ethics, Vol. 2, Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996). It can also be a common refrain used in the discussion regarding the prevention of sexually transmitted diseases and unwanted pregnancies. In one community where I was living there was an on-going debate regarding the installation of condom machines in the local high schools. A recurring comment made in support of the

it is very difficult, and perhaps in many cases, impossible to stop him or her. But we must also ask if this is all there is to be said regarding this issue? Is it enough to simply say that because a law cannot be enforced one hundred percent of the time it should not be in place? Is there not another purpose for law besides the stopping of select actions? And while it may be true that simply complying with the law may not make someone a truly law-abiding citizen, is there not some value in having that person obey the law even if their ‘heart was not in it’? These and other elements regarding this first contention will be addressed when we consider the purpose of law and law making in the next section.

The second contention is strongly held in North American culture and, as with the first, has a significant element of truth within it as well. If we value the moral autonomy of the individual, or any particular sub-culture, to any degree, then it is good to ask why one type of morality should be placed over another, or in broader terms, why should some particular moral act be illegal? Especially in a pluralistic, liberal democratic system, how can we justify codifying in law one form of morality as opposed to any other? This question leads us to the contention that we cannot or should not do this. In a pluralistic society, to legislate one form of morality over another is a form of discrimination that needs to be avoided. This position seems almost taken for granted in North America, but there are, however, further considerations to be thought through.

The fundamental problem with this second contention is in the very nature of the contention itself. It seems lost on many people that the statement, ‘we ought not or should not legislate morality’ is, in itself, a general moral statement. Those making this statement use moral language to state their position (ie. they

machines was, “teenagers are going to have sex whether we tell them to or not. So we might as well teach them to do it safely and give them the ability to do so.” Most seemed to accept this line of reasoning as beyond question until one person asked that if this was such an appropriate response to the issue then why did we not take the same approach to drug use? This person asked, “our teenagers are going to use drugs whether we want them to or not so why not provide them with needles and show them how to use them correctly?” This question did not end the discussion, but it did seem to raise awareness that perhaps there were other factors that needed consideration.

state that we **ought not** or **should not** legislate morality). To suggest that we should not legislate morality is, in essence, taking a moral stand on what should or should not happen. In other words, this second contention is suggesting that no moral position should take legal precedence over any other moral position, but makes this suggestion by using a moral imperative. This distinction is subtle, but important. While it may not be done as overtly as those who openly endorse moral legislation, by stating what we **ought not** to do, this second contention is placing (or imposing) a moral expectation on everyone. That moral expectation is that moral decisions should be left strictly to the individual without any formal recognition through legislation.

Further, this statement is generally made under the assumption that it is being done so from some kind of neutral standing when in fact it is also expressing a moral position that is often seeking ‘official’ or legislated status. What this second contention clarifies for us is that there are two closely related aspects to this discussion that lie at the core of our argument. We are suggesting that law, by nature, enforces some kind of moral code, and, that this is morally acceptable within the larger purpose of community.

Lucinda Peach expresses a detailed example of this second contention in her book, *Legislating Morality: Pluralism and Religious Identity in Lawmaking*.⁶ Peach argues extensively that one of the primary concerns facing the legislation of morality in the United States is the fact that religious values inevitably get in the way and influence the position being taken. Peach discusses at length the various options that a person of faith who is also in a position to influence the law of the land can take. She also attempts to validate that the person’s faith commitments

⁶ We must be careful here not to suggest that Peach’s entire position is summed up in our second contention. That would not be accurate. Although part of what she is saying is reflective of the idea that you cannot/should not legislate morality, that is not her full argument. She is simply providing **one** example of how this contention is expressed in current North American culture. Also, it would be unfair to suggest that everyone who voices this second contention would be in agreement with everything Peach says. Peach’s material is simply illustrative of a general theme.

are inherently part of their character and do not necessarily need to be ‘removed’ in order to function in private life.

Although it is not by necessity a part of this second contention, the concept of legislating morality is often expressed as also legislating a religious position as well. For some (see Peach, 2002:7, 11-36), the idea of legislating morality is somewhat synonymous with legislating religion. This assumption is held up by a number of factors. First, because of the close link between religion and morality, any issue that has an overt moral emphasis to it will generally also have some kind of religious link as well. In North America, particularly the United States, the separation of church and state is a foundational principle or concern.⁷ Freedom of religious expression is a primary value in North American culture and when the idea of legislating morality is raised, the concern of legislating some particular religion is raised with it.

To fully understand how Peach’s position illustrates for us the fundamental problem with the contention that we ‘ought not to legislate morality’ we need to spend some time laying out her argument. We need to point out that Peach deals with a number of themes in her book and we cannot address everything that she proposes. However, there are some key comments made in her argument that highlight well the main point of our discussion. It should also be noted that Peach is specifically using the issue of abortion in the United States to illustrate her main points, an ethical concern that raises far more issues than we can deal with here. However, her comments do reflect a deeper, more general sentiment regarding the legislation of morality. As well, it should also be pointed out that even if one is not making the assumption that the legislation of morality is the same thing as

⁷ The issue of separation of church and state raises even more questions. Exactly what constitutes ‘separation’ is one primary question that often is glossed over. For a larger discussion of this issue, and related concerns, again see Peach (ibid). See also Drinan, Can God and Caesar Coexist? Balancing Religious Freedom and International Law (Yale University Press, 2004) and Carter, God’s Name In Vain (New York: Basic Books, 2000).

legislating a religious viewpoint, Peach's material still serves as a good example of the core of this second contention.

Peach argues that religious lawmaking should be avoided in the United States because it is essentially an oppressive act.

Laws that are based on or influenced by religious considerations carry the potential for alienating and coercing citizens who do not subscribe to the religious beliefs that underlie them and thus risk fostering political divisiveness among citizens of different religious (or nonreligious) affiliations. The distinctively coercive character of public law make religious lawmaking morally problematic in a religiously pluralistic society in ways that religious influences on more general public discussion and debate are not and makes it necessary and appropriate to evaluate religious lawmaking apart from other religious influences on public life (Peach, 2002:7).

More pointedly in the abortion issue Peach sees religious lawmaking as oppressive of women. In her own words, "Because most traditional religious views of abortion ignore the oppressiveness inherent in coercing women to continue unwanted pregnancies, laws incorporating such religious views are likely to lack respect for women as moral agents (Peach, 2002:7). To further emphasize this point Peach quotes Teresa Phelps as saying:

'Clearly restrictive abortion laws that take decision making out of the hands of women and place it under the power of the government tell a story about women and society that portrays women as less capable of moral reflection than the state. These laws do not encourage women to be autonomous and moral, but instead tell them they cannot be trusted' (Peach, 2002:7).⁸

Peach does acknowledge that it is not just religious assumptions that affect law. For example, in setting the foundation for her argument she states,

⁸ This quote is a good example of some of the sub-themes that need to, at some point, be addressed in the larger discussion surrounding the legislation of morality. Phelps' conclusion that some sort of law that restricts access to abortion means that women cannot be trusted to make moral decisions is highly questionable at best. Putting a law in place to restrict any activity does not necessarily imply a lack of trust, it can, more profoundly, reflect a sense that some things need to be dealt with on a communal rather than strictly individual level. Again, the assumption seems to be that the individual is the only moral voice needed to be heard in any issue, the assumption being challenged in this thesis.

Certainly, nonreligious laws can also be coercive and disrespectful of individuals' personal convictions. To some extent, coercion is built into the very concept of law because it is designed to regulate society on principles that are authoritative, regardless of the agreement or acceptance of everyone subject to obeying them. However, as Martin Luther King, Jr., taught, it is axiomatic to justice that laws in a democratic society must permit some form of participation by those subject to obeying them. When laws are based on inaccessible religious premises that cannot be openly discussed and debated on terms available to nonbelievers in the way that laws based on secular rationales can, their coerciveness is enhanced. Such laws also may fail to gain widespread support or obedience, which may exacerbate problems of enforcement, because the effectiveness of law ultimately is dependent on citizens' willingness to accept it...

Nonetheless, this problem alone does not warrant singling out religion as especially problematic basis for lawmaking. After all, the lawmaking process is fraught with all sorts of ideological and value-laden influences, from political action committees and special interest lobbies to the advice and suggestions of a lawmaker's spouse or partner, friends, or associates to the political pressures on some lawmakers to satisfy the desires of those constituents who can assure reelection. Rather, I suggest that it is also necessary to examine the other two components of the question, the character of religion and the character of the United States as a morally and religiously pluralistic society. Together, these factors create a significant danger that religious lawmaking will abridge Citizenship Rights and interests and provide a convincing justification for according special scrutiny to religious lawmaking (Peach, 2002:16-17).

Even though she makes this statement, Peach never seems to question the assumption that the concerns she expresses in her book are not exclusive to *religious* lawmaking, but *all* lawmaking. Peach's entire argument is that religious assumptions unduly influence law which non-religious people must abide by, but she never really seems to consider the idea that non-religious assumptions also influence law which religious people must abide by. In fact, as she develops her argument Peach goes so far as to suggest that religious lawmaking has the potential to be significantly more oppressive than other kinds of lawmaking. Again, she pointedly states:

Deeply held religious beliefs thus have the potential to lend themselves to zealotry, intolerance, and even persecution of those with different views or practices..., as history has amply demonstrated.^[9] Part of the tendency of religious beliefs to be intolerant of divergent views may relate to the emphasis of many religions on subjects of ultimate concern...

These characteristics of many religious beliefs make them more likely than nonreligious beliefs to be the subjects of coercion, conflict, and political divisiveness (Peach, 2002:19).

Peach's underlying assumption is that the secular position is the morally neutral one, that it is the only position that can objectively deal with any issue and is the only one that is held by all peoples in common. Further, Peach also assumes that the secular worldview is more "accessible" to all because it is based more on "...reason, empirically demonstrable facts, or some other basis rooted in shareable human experience" (Peach, 2002:18). For example, in trying to establish what religion is Peach makes the following comments.

The family resemblances among different institutional religions generally involve some or most of the following characteristics: a faith in teachings or doctrines that profess access to a universal truth, reality or morality; concern with some kind of liberation or salvation that extends beyond this world; and acceptance of certain premises that are based on faith, revelation, or spiritual authority and *cannot be fully supported or understood on the basis of secular reasons* (Peach, 2002:13, emphasis mine).

A number of characteristics of institutional religious beliefs contribute to their not being accessible to nonbelievers. Traditional religions are concerned with the deepest questions of human existence – issues about the ultimate meaningfulness of life; the purpose of creation, life, and death; the possibility of a better existence elsewhere than that afforded in this world; and questions about how to live rightly – in relation to fellow human

⁹ A detailed rejoinder of this particular comment would take us too far a field from our main theme, but at the very least it must be pointed out that this statement reflects a rather narrow and stereotypical view of history. There have been, without question, many examples of atrocities committed on the basis of religious beliefs. But one only has to consider Stalin, Pol Pot, and modern day China's human rights record, among numerous other examples, to see examples of atrocity carried out on the basis of expressly non-religious views. Contrary to Peach's assessment, it would seem that religious assumptions are not alone in their ability to be intolerant.

beings, to the rest of the natural world, and especially to God or some ultimate reality (Peach, 2002:17).

Peach assumes that it is only institutional religions that have the above characteristics, but this is a highly questionable assumption. The fact of the matter is that *all* worldviews, overtly religious or not, seek to answer questions of ultimate concern like the ones expressed above. A secular worldview may use different terms, but it too professes “access to universal truth, reality or morality”,¹⁰ is concerned with liberation, albeit not of a kind that necessarily extends beyond this world (if they are also purely naturalistic in their assumptions), and also, whether they want to admit it or not, accept certain premises that are based on faith.¹¹ Again, one must rhetorically ask, what worldview does not, in some manner, deal with these issues? Are not these concerns, among others, fundamental to all of humanity? If so, then on what basis can it possibly be stated that they are inaccessible to non-believers? A non-believer may not agree with the specific answers provided by any particular religion, but this is significantly different than saying that the answers are inaccessible to them.

In terms of understanding the contention that one ought not or should not legislate morality, Peach’s argument is illustrative in the following way. It shows how the secular assumption of neutrality is simply unfounded and amounts to a significant blind spot. The suggestion that a secular worldview is somehow more objective and less intrusive on the lawmaking process is unfounded. Whether or not it provides a better foundation for lawmaking in a pluralistic society can be discussed, but to assume outright that it is, is a mistake. Closer to the truth is

¹⁰ This is more true of a modern worldview as opposed to a postmodern worldview which questions the existence of anything that is ‘universal’.

¹¹ See L. Newbigin, The Gospel In A Pluralist Society, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1989, chapter three in particular, for a further development of the epistemological resources of the secular worldview. See also, Sire, The Universe Next Door. 4th edition, Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2004; Sire, Naming The Elephant. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2004; Midgley, The Myths We Live By.

Peach's assertion that "...the lawmaking process is fraught with all sorts of ideological and value-laden influences" (Peach, 2002:17). It might be easier to see the moral agenda of a religious worldview¹², but *all* worldviews, expressly religious or not, hold assumptions about reality and how the moral universe operates. Whenever law is being proposed it will, in some measure, reflect the assumptions of the lawmaker(s). This is not to say that these assumptions cannot be identified and discussed. On the contrary, it is entirely possible to understand one's assumption and carry out the lawmaking process with those assumptions in full view. But the fact remains, and this is the fundamental problem of the second contention, *all* legislation is based on a worldview that carries with it moral implication and force. The assumption being made by the statement 'you should not legislate morality' is that it is possible to have morality that does not have legal sanction or force and this is simply not true. Every law is an expression of a moral sentiment. It may appeal to our sense of fairness or political correctness to say that one morality should not take precedence over any other morality, but in fact it is impossible for this to happen. As soon as a law is made a moral judgment, to some degree, has been made. The following quote from Carter is somewhat strongly stated, but it illustrates this concern.

Nowadays we often hear the argument that it is wrong for you to impose your morality on me. It is offered as a defense against laws on everything

London & New York: Routledge, 2003; and Midgley, *Evolution as a Religion* rev. ed. London & New York, 2002.

¹² A detailed discussion of the relationship between legislating morality and legislating a specific religious viewpoint is not necessary to support the assertion that all worldviews carry a moral agenda. However, at the very least it can be pointed out that legislating a moral principle that is held to by a particular or specific religion does not mean we are legislating all of that religion. Even if certain moral aspects of a religion are being legislated, this does not automatically mean that the doctrinal expression of that religion is being legislated. For example, by and large Jews, Christians, and Muslims all hold a basic position that life is sacred and therefore abortion on demand should not be allowed. A Jewish, Christian, or Muslim lawmaker may endorse laws that emphasize this position because it is what they believe to be true. This is quite different than if a Jewish lawmaker wanted to make it illegal to be non-Jewish or illegal not to follow Jewish dietary laws. Beckwith and Koukl summarize this idea in the following statement. "...the state should not take a position on infant baptism or prefer one race over another or one religion over another. Rather it should discourage prejudice and encourage free expression of one's religious tradition. The state is justified, however, in prohibiting practices of certain religious traditions or philosophical viewpoints that violate those institutions and principles deemed essential to the nurturing of public virtue" (1998:108-109).

from drug use to sexuality to taxes to abortion to smoking to guns. But the argument is, as it has always been, simply blather. If I happen to believe that private property is immoral, and also happen to covet an automobile that you are driving, it is only an imposition of your morality on me that calls the car your property and allows the state to punish me should I act out of my morality instead of yours. And if you answer that most people agree with you that I cannot take the car you say is yours, all you are saying is that the majority should be able to impose its moral sentiment on the minority (Carter, 1998:208).

Again, we reiterate a core idea, that law, by nature, enforces some kind of moral code, and, that within the larger purpose of community this is acceptable and should be expected.

Further to this, when a law is interpreted and carried out it is done so by individuals who have a moral agenda. As Howard Zinn points out, “it is still men (women are mostly kept out of the process) who enact the laws, who sit on the bench and interpret them, who occupy the White House or the Governor’s mansion, and have the job of enforcing them” (in Goodlad, 2001:133).¹³

Legislating morality can lead to intolerance and the limiting of personal freedom or autonomy, but the answer to this concern is not in trying to avoid moral legislation, but to deal with the issue of how the larger community does legislate morality and how it can do so in a just manner.

6.4. Moral Legislation And How It Is Effected

This illustration also provides the opportunity to summarize exactly *how* morality is legislated. Beyond what has been already stated, three further summary comments can be made.

¹³ It is interesting to note the larger context of Zinn’s comment. He is discussing the development of democracy and the faith put in that political system by its adherents. In a brief historical survey he comments how previously law was set by the monarch, chief, dictator, etc., often based on some concept of divine right and ‘rule of law’. Zinn talks about how democracy replaces this rule of law with the ‘rule of men’ and assumes a greater measure of objectivity (since it’s not based in a single person or smaller group of persons) but warns that this change may not be all that it promises to be since, as his quote says, it is still men who establish, interpret, enforce the law.

First, there are those who will see a very close link between morality and law and they will support laws against certain actions because they see those actions as immoral. For these individuals, morality is legislated through the enactment of laws, or a body of laws designed to protect the individual against harming themselves as well as others. This is a more paternalistic view of legislating morality (Holmes, 1984:101). The emphasis of this position is that there is an intimate connection between personal and public morality and that the legislation of morality provides stability for both individual and corporate life. Therefore, the legislation of morality should be carried out through the enactment of specific laws for or against certain actions deemed moral or immoral. Referring to Basil Mitchell (Law, Morality, and Religion in a Secular Society. Oxford University Press, 1967) Peter Forster offers the following which clarifies this position further.

Mitchell suggests that one cannot draw a sharp dichotomy between legislation to protect individuals from harm...and legislation to protect the 'essential institutions of society'...Rather, Mitchell suggests, that these functions overlap, since the sorts of harm an individual might suffer are to some extent determined by the institutions he lives under (Forster, 2001:79).

In this view, the overall good of society is promoted by moral legislation. Using the abortion issue as an example, this view has generally sought or promoted laws that limited access to abortion. It did so on the basis that it viewed abortion as an immoral act that is destructive to the human life of the fetus, possibly harmful to the physical and psychological well-being of the mother, and has, overall, a detrimental effect on larger society.

Second, there are those who will oppose laws such as these because they see morality as a *private* affair and a place where formal government should not have influence. These individuals see a sharp distinction between morality and law and would oppose the legislation of those moral issues deemed strictly

personal in nature. In other words, certain actions should be beyond or outside of government control because they do no harm to others. As referred to previously, the Wolfenden Report essentially took this position. Commenting on this report, Holmes states,

In drawing the line between private and public behavior and matters of public decency, it [the Wolfenden Report] drew on John Stuart Mill's libertarian view that society may only restrict individual freedoms in order to prevent harm to others.³ Since private and voluntary homosexual activity harms no others, it was argued, the law cannot forbid it. Indeed, intrusions on privacy would cause more harm and offense than would allowing it to go on (Holmes, 1984:100-101).

It should be added that this view does not just apply to homosexual activity, but others as well, including issues such as abortion, prostitution, and certain forms of drug use (see Keister, 1972). Continuing to use abortion as an example, this view has generally fought against any laws limiting access to abortion on the basis that abortion is inherently a private decision made by the pregnant woman. This view could possibly add that even if there might be possible physical and/or psychological side-effects to abortion, these are only the concern of the woman, since, in essence, she would only be harming herself.¹⁴ Further, this view would state that any possible harms that might come from the abortion act would be outweighed by the harms to the overall welfare of society that would come from restricting an individual's right to choose or express their ethical autonomy.

The point that these two positions agree on is that the overall social good should be kept in view. The distinction between these two viewpoints is deciding which moral actions should be legislated and which ones should not. In other words, which ones directly affect the common good and which ones do not. In regards to the specific issue of the definition of marriage in Canada, one position

¹⁴ Generally, in this view the fetus is considered to be non-human, less than fully human, or only potentially human and therefore not considered as morally relevant to the discussion as the woman's rights (see Wennberg, Robert. Life in the Balance. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1985 for one development of this theme.)

believes that re-defining marriage to include same-sex couples is not in the best moral interests of larger society and therefore the laws of Canada should not permit it. The other position believes that the re-defining of marriage is a positive step for larger Canadian moral culture and therefore the laws of Canada should allow for it. As has been pointed out previously, both positions have moral assumptions that inform their views, but differ on *how* that view or position should be enacted into law.

There is a third summary issue that underlies much of what has been discussed in the area of legislating morality. That issue is the relationship between the *legislation* of morality and the *legalization* of morality. While there is a strong connection between the two concepts, there is also an important distinction to be made as well. A dictionary definition of both terms is helpful here. For example, the Cambridge Dictionary of American English¹⁵ defines ‘to legislate’ or ‘legislation’ as “to make laws” or “a law or set of laws that is being created” and defines ‘legalize’ as “to allow by law, make legal”. Therefore, the relationship between the two concepts can be summarized as follows.

Legislation has to do with the broader process of law-making and in the context of this thesis the legislation of morality is understood in this way. If something is being legislated *against* it is being said that this action *cannot* or *should not* be done. Hence morality is legislated in this manner by identifying moral values that are enforced, protected, promoted or guarded by law. A community legislates against those actions that are deemed detrimental to the common good. If something is legislated *for*, it is being stated that this particular action *must* be carried out. For example, a government can legislate *against* murder, stating that it cannot and should not be done. Likewise, a government can legislate *for* affirmative action, meaning that business or industry should or must

¹⁵ This dictionary is available online at <http://dictionary.cambridge.org/>.

employ visible minorities in order to ensure justice and non-discrimination in employment.¹⁶

Legalization is a significant part of the legislative process, but in the context of this thesis has a slightly different focus. If something is deemed illegal it is being said that this action *cannot*, and by implication *should not*, be done without risk of punishment by the state. This dimension of legalization is very similar to legislating against something since both prohibit a certain action because it is considered immoral (‘ought not to be done’) and/or that it is detrimental to the common good. Therefore, a government may both legislate against murder and make it illegal to commit murder. The distinction between legislation and legalization is more clearly seen when something is deemed legal. If something is qualified as legal it is being said that this action can be done lawfully within that society. In other words, individuals doing this particular action are not subject to punishment by the state. However, affirming that something can legally be done does not imply that an individual is compelled to do it. In other words, when the state declares that something is legal it is only saying that a person *can* do it, not that they *should* do it. As well, in declaring that something is legal, the state is not necessarily commenting on whether or not that action is moral or immoral, it is simply stating that it can be done.¹⁷ Another standard may still consider a particular practice immoral even if it is declared legal by the state.¹⁸

¹⁶ Information regarding Affirmative Action can be found at <http://www.affirmativeaction.org/>, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/affirmative-action/> and, <http://aad.english.ucsb.edu/>.

¹⁷ In a certain sense this is not absolutely true. In saying that something is legal the state may not intentionally be taking a moral stand, but may be by implication. For example, if the state decriminalizes the use of marijuana it may formally state that the *morality* of marijuana use is not in question but only the legality of its use. However, by deciding that marijuana use is legal the state, at the very least, is saying that its use either falls into the category of a strictly personal moral issue or that its use does not adversely affect greater society to the degree that it should be illegal. Either of these positions has foundational moral implications.

¹⁸ Conversely, it could be argued that something declared illegal by the state could be deemed a moral ought by another standard. For example, proclamation of the Christian faith may be declared illegal in a country, but considered a moral imperative by the Christians within that country.

The issue of same-sex marriage in Canada serves as an illustration of this point. To date, the Canadian government has declared that same-sex marriage is now legal. In doing so they are not *specifically* commenting on whether or not it is moral. Likewise, the Canadian government is not *legislating* same-sex marriage in the sense that they are not saying every same-sex couple *must* get married. Further to this, the Canadian government, to date, has indicated that religious groups will not be forced to perform same-sex marriages. In this, the government has not *legislated* same-sex marriage in larger Canadian culture, but has *legalized* it within Canadian culture.

In the context of this thesis this distinction is a subtle, but significant one. The focus of this chapter is specifically on the *legislation* of morality. The issues dealt with here have to do with the foundational concern of how moral assumptions, embedded in a person's worldview, inevitably influence law and law-making.

6.5. Legislating Against 'Morally Harmful' Practices: Some Historical Precedents

In order to further address the above contentions and to better understand the larger community's role in legislating morality it is important to understand what the general purpose of law is in the first place.

With the possible exception of an anarchist, if you asked anyone what the purpose of the law was they would most likely give answers that emphasize protection of the public good, safeguarding of communal concerns, or the ability to live a peaceful life. Support of the community's stability is the obvious answer. Laws allow people to exist in groups consisting of more individuals than just themselves. Without law, we could not function, at any level, in communities. We need to know what the rules are, how we are expected to treat each other and interact with each other. Law obviously serves the purpose of setting down the limits of action for any given society.

When people disagree (as they frequently do) about the norms according to which social life ought to be conducted, law provides a mechanism for making and enforcing choices amongst competing views. The contribution it can make to facilitating cooperative and productive social life gives those whose views are not embodied in the law a reason to comply with it regardless of the dissonance between what it requires and their own moral vision of the ideal society. Even where there is widespread agreement in the moral domain, law can, by reason of its institutional resources, provide valuable reinforcement to morality (Cane, 2002:15).

To summarize, this function of law is what brings about what we usually call civility, the ability for people to live together despite their disagreements. And since this co-existing means interacting with other people, it takes on a significant moral emphasis.

...[C]ivility...is what enables us to live together. To be civilized is to understand that we live in society as in a household, and that within that household, if we are to be moral people, our relationships with other people (our fellow citizens, members of our civic household) are governed by standards of behavior that limit our freedom. Our duty to follow those standards does not depend on whether or not we happen to agree with or even like each other (Carter, 1998:15).

Some laws obviously reflect key moral values. Laws against murder or perjury for example have an obvious moral emphasis to them. Other laws however are more mundane and seem less concerned with higher moral values. Traffic laws and city bylaws regarding garbage disposal, etc., would seem to fall into the category of pragmatic laws that allow a society to function rather than laws that protect higher moral values. But even these more 'mundane' laws have a moral core to them, even if it is not readily apparent. Speed limits are put in place to protect human life. While it may not be a key moral concern if the limit is set at 50 kms/hr instead of 60 kms/hr, the law itself reflects a morality that says human life is valuable and worth protecting in this way. Laws regarding garbage disposal could be viewed in the same way since inappropriate disposal could lead to disease, contamination of the environment, etc. At this level law prohibits or

suggests certain courses of action that are deemed good for the community. Some of these laws may be overtly moral, some more pragmatic, but all express moral values. The concern of law at this level is the functioning of society, not the inherent morality of humanity. In the words of Niebuhr, “the function of law is to restrain and expose sin rather than to guide men to divine righteousness” (Niebuhr, 1951:166).

However, law can serve another function or, more precisely, a deeper element of this first function. Law does not just enforce the rules of social engagement, but protects social life through the promotion of values and principles. We see an example of this in the more mundane laws mentioned above. To further develop the illustration we used above the presence of speed limits and other traffic laws are not simply an arbitrary expression of those in power, but are put in place because of the deeper value of protecting and preserving human life, even the life of the person who does not feel they need protecting. Precisely what the speed limit, or other traffic laws, should be is a matter of opinion based on context. But the principle does not change. We limit how motor vehicles can be operated because they pose a threat to human safety and welfare. For anyone who has driven in a city of any size, it becomes very apparent that laws involving motor vehicles are difficult to enforce on a consistent basis, but we have them nonetheless and most would agree that they need to be there. Whether we follow the speed limit or not, we are at least made aware that concern for public safety is being expressed. The value or impact of the law in this case is not based upon its enforceability, but on the underlying value(s) that it seeks to protect. This is a key notion to the entire discussion regarding the legislation of morality.

In the first contention mentioned above, we noted that when someone says ‘you cannot legislate morality’ they are often commenting on the fact that you cannot truly enforce some moral rules. While the issue of enforcement is

obviously important to the functioning of law, it is not the only issue. The issue is not just the rules regarding the immediate action itself, but also the intent or core value the rules are meant to protect and promote. And by extension, at this level law deals not just with the external actions of people, but their intentions or heart as well.

History gives us some examples of this position. For example, VanDrunen summarizes Thomas Aquinas in this way:

...Aquinas recognized that an individual's moral action never takes place in a vacuum, but is ineluctably shaped by one's customs and habits – and particularly virtues and vice. As with utility, virtue and vice are issues that concern human law in particular, as well as the moral life in general. Specifically, Aquinas describes human law as an educator in virtue. The purpose of law is to accustom people to act in certain ways, and he calls the principles of a community's law 'nurseries of virtue'. In a number of places, Aquinas speaks of the responsibility of law to make people virtuous and to curtail the exercise of vice (VanDrunen, 2003:102).

After developing these thoughts further by referencing Aquinas' *Treatise on Law*, VanDrunen goes on to say,

Aquinas qualifies these claims slightly. He argues that human law is not meant to repress every vice, nor to prescribe every act of virtue. The very attempt to do so is impossible, he reasons. Nevertheless, Aquinas consistently concludes that the development of virtue in individuals, which is necessary for them to act in morally proper ways, depends in great measure on the training provided by human law (2003:103).

Formal law re-enforces and promotes the core values of a society and encourages all members of that society to endorse those values not by 'forcing' them to adhere to set law, but by stating that some values are worth protecting through law. "It is easy to think of instances when the law has been changed in response to changes in 'popular morality'. But equally, law can influence the way people think in the moral sphere" (Cane, 2002:14). Consequently, according to Aquinas, changes in law should be made sparingly and only under the most select of circumstances

because they change the custom of people, which is key to social and moral stability. “Aquinas considers human law not as an isolated series of rules, but as a whole fabric that itself is to be an essential aspect of a community’s customs” (VanDrunen, 2003:116). When changes to law are made, some comment is also being made about the core values that those laws were meant to protect.

There are limitations to what is being said here that need to be addressed. As mentioned previously, one of the contentions raised against legislating morality is that you cannot make someone internally good through external law. And as we have noted, at many levels this statement is true. It is important to acknowledge that law can only do so much in the area of promoting moral values. And this acknowledgment has not always been as forth coming as it needs to be, especially by people of faith who seek moral reform through legal channels. For example, when discussing moral and legal issues surrounding the area of marriage, David Gushee suggests that

law cannot produce people of good character, of sound relational skills, of the stuff required to make a lifetime marriage work. Neither can the law force a couple to live out the meaning of the marriage covenant or, ultimately, to live as married persons. Law always has its limits, and those limits are most obvious here (2000:164).

In our suggestion that a fundamental purpose of law is the promotion and protection of deeper moral values, we must always be aware that it is always possible for individuals to ignore and reject those values no matter what the law might say. There is a fine line that needs to be acknowledged here and it is one that is not always easy to identify. We cannot always know what effect a law, or lack thereof, might have on the underlying values of a society.

6.5.1. Issue of Victimless Crimes

One issue and two historical examples illustrate some of the finer points of this discussion and give us a picture of some of the practical issues surrounding these two ways (namely; the provision of rules that allow us to live together and, the promotion and protection of core values that sustain the larger community) of how community legislates morality. The issue in question is the concept of victimless crimes. The general premise here is that there are certain actions that occur within society that have traditionally been deemed both immoral and illegal, but in essence are victimless in that they do no harm to anyone other than perhaps the individual involved. Therefore, social or communal good is not in question since the acts take place by or between, for instance, consenting adults. One of the primary issues behind these crimes is the difficulty in enforcing them, but there is also a significant concern expressed about enforcing a certain moral stance over and above another. Some examples of actions that are often put in this category are things like, homosexuality, prostitution, drug use, public drunkenness or drinking, gambling, and pornography. It is argued that for the most part these issues tend to be primarily moral concerns and that they, within certain parameters, should not be an area where formal governmental concern should be placed (Keister, 1972:13; see also pgs. 73-74). And since these issues are ones that are not properly an area of formal government control they should be legalized or, at least, decriminalized.

There are, of course, many sub-themes to this issue,¹⁹ but there are also some key difficulties and assumptions within it that illustrate the primary argument of this thesis. First is the assumption that these actions are truly 'victimless crimes'. Many would contest the idea that the people involved in many forms of the issues above are not victims. In fact, many of the agencies working with those individuals involved in these issues work very hard at dispelling this myth. For example, Keister echoes a common sentiment when he

describes a prostitute as “a willing seller” (Keister, 1972:34), but this is a highly dubious description. The abuses that both fuel and maintain prostitution are becoming more public.²⁰ Whether acknowledged or not, there are victims within these actions and they are often not the ones directly involved in them.

Second, is the assumption that any social impact these issues might have can be dealt with through non-governmental institutions like family and church. Keister suggests...

...[C]ontrolling crime and safeguarding morals are different things. Government, acting through legislation, the police and the courts, is the proper agent for the former, but not for the latter. The primary safeguards of morality are the family, the church, the community and the organs of public opinion. These institutions must be strengthened and given every aid to perform their function in the moral sphere, where government cannot effectively reach (1972:73).

While there is some obvious truth to this statement, one must ask exactly what would strengthen and aid these institutions? In addition to whatever other elements might be considered, would not formal moral support from government be vital? It seems odd to suggest that families and other social institutions would be able to adequately deal with all of the effects of the issues mentioned above in a context where the government officially says that these acts are legal, and therefore okay, for people to participate in. It is true that institutions like the family and church are the first place for morality to be taught and protected, and that there are some important boundaries that need to be maintained between these institutions and government, but formal law gives larger communal support for the positions taken by these institutions. Stackhouse emphasizes the mutual effort needed for this to happen when he writes,

¹⁹ Although somewhat dated, the material presented by Keister (1972) still provides a good summation of much of the rationale generally expressed about this area.

²⁰ www.prostitutionresearch.com and www.ecpat.net are just two examples of many websites that try to deal the concerns surrounding prostitution and related issues.

...[P]olitical institutions must continue to maintain law and order, and...they must also move toward policies that support the forming and sustaining of a wide variety of institutions that have substantial independence from governmental control, that nurture responsible associations at the grass roots...We shall want to see that public policy is supportive of families, a variety of educational institutions, the formation of wealth-creating corporations among disadvantaged people, as well as being open to the new international world in which we will encounter peoples of other cultures and religions (Stackhouse, 1995:69).

Moral values are supported by formal recognition in communal law. Without this kind of support it is difficult to see how a communal moral climate could be created.

6.5.2. Prohibition²¹ in The United States

We now proceed to look at two cases which serve as examples of communities legislating against social practices considered to be morally harmful. The first historical example of how law serves in this morally supportive role is the era of Prohibition in the United States during the 1920s and 30s. If any single issue is held as an example of why we cannot and should not legislate morality, however, it is Prohibition. Most people assume that Prohibition was a total failure because instead of eliminating the production, distribution, and consumption of alcohol it simply moved the industry underground where it was controlled by various illegal organizations.

There is no question that there were significant issues surrounding the era of Prohibition. Enforcement of the law was of particular concern and because of

²¹ Prohibition was an attempt by the United States government to eliminate the production, distribution and consumption of alcohol. "Amid the atmosphere created by World War I, support for national prohibition reached critical mass, and the country [the United States] ratified the 18th Amendment to the Constitution in January, 1919. Under this amendment and the Volstead Act, which provided for the enforcement of Prohibition, the manufacture, transportation, and sale of alcohol were prohibited by federal law. The Amendment was popular for many years, but beginning in the late 1920s support began to erode. In 1933 the 21st Amendment repealed the 18th, ending Prohibition" (<http://www.eh.net/encyclopedia/article/miron.prohibition.alcohol>).

these issues the law was eventually repealed. But again, there is more to be said about this example.

To appreciate the moral impact Prohibition had, it is important to understand the context in which the law was enacted.

The Eighteenth Amendment, which was ratified in 1919, came about only after a long process of activism against alcohol... This anti-alcohol movement wasn't as much motivated by a moral objection to drinking as it was by the immorality, family dysfunction, and criminal activity that drinking spawned (Geisler & Turek, 1998:28).²²

While there is much debate regarding the exact amount of alcohol consumed in the United States during the era surrounding Prohibition, there is good indication that it decreased. Norman Clark writes,

Although determining the extent of drinking by any group at that time is difficult, Prohibition was at least partly effective. Records show that annual per capita consumption stood at 2.60 gallons for the period 1906 to 1910, before state dry laws had much impact. In 1934, when accurate statistics were again available, the figure was less than a gallon, and even as late as 1945, it was only 2 gallons. Not until 1975 did per capita consumption rise again to what it had been before Prohibition (as in Geisler & Turek, 1998:29).²³

Although some significant social issues remained, the decreased amount of alcohol consumed seemed to have a beneficial affect on the social ills that were a concern. Along with the direct results of alcoholism (both physical and mental health concerns), "...welfare agencies reported significant declines in cases due to alcohol-related family problems..." (Geisler & Turek, 1998:29).

For all of the deficiencies we may find with Prohibition it still serves as an example of how even flawed moral legislation can have some positive influence

²² For a detailed examination of the historical context of Prohibition see Moore and Gerstein, eds., Alcohol and Public Policy: Beyond the Shadow of Prohibition. The National Academies Press, 1981; available online at www.nap.edu/books/0309031/html.

²³ The text from which this quote is taken is also available online at http://college.hmco.com/history/readerscomp/rcah/html/ah_071600_prohibitiona.htm

on the moral tone of a larger community. Rather than lead us to the conclusion that we cannot or should not legislate morality, the lessons learned through Prohibition should push us to work harder at building a moral-legal code that is more reasonable and just. Prohibition is a prime example of over-legislation and a warning about striking a proper balance in the legislation of morality. Striking this balance is not just a question of addressing the issues surrounding the era of Prohibition, but a positive agenda for all of our moral legislation.

We can admit that moral rules and legal regulations have limitations and exceptions, but still insist, nevertheless, that it is better not merely to have regulations but also to have more reasonable laws than it is to have few, none or completely arbitrary, irrational dictates...What we need to do is to make that practical wisdom explicit, to acknowledge its limitations and to seek incremental improvement. And to seek improvement, we have to articulate our standards of good as well as the reasons for them” (Boxx & Quinlivan, 2000:152).

As a final note, it is important to point out that while the extreme position of an absolute ban on alcohol is no longer in place, both the United States and Canada have laws regarding the production, distribution and use of it. There remains recognition that for the common good, laws, which include a moral emphasis, regulating alcoholic consumption are appropriate and acceptable.

6.5.3. Abolition Of Slavery

The second historical example we will consider is that of William Wilberforce and his abolitionist movement of the 18th and early 19th century Britain. For all of the negative connotations held about Prohibition, the work of Wilberforce stands out as a positive example of how morality can be influenced on a national scale. The main issue confronted by Wilberforce and the groups he was a part of was the slave trade. A great deal has been written about Wilberforce’s

long battle in the British Parliament to bring about the end of the slave trade that fueled Britain's economy.²⁴

To fully appreciate the work of Wilberforce as a politician, a brief historical context is necessary. The moral climate of Britain during the 18th and early 19th centuries was not very positive.

The tenor of lamentation by the churchmen who drafted the *Presentation of the Present State of Religion* in 1711 is illustrative: "We cannot without unspeakable grief reflect on that deluge of impiety and licentiousness which hath broken in upon us and overspread the face of this church and kingdom" (Charles, 2002:61).

There was a lack of moral commitment within the general populace and a large gap between rich and poor. Central to the society of the day was a social and economic structure that fed off the poor, especially children, and which resulted in a significant level of crime. "In short, London was a city where unchecked passions and desires ran their course. Few raised their voices in opposition" (Colson, 1987:97). The slave trade was a significant part of this moral climate.

Beginning in 1789 and continuing until 1805, Wilberforce made a total of 9 motions for the abolishment of slavery to the British Parliament, all of them being defeated. It was not until 1807 that the motion was finally accepted and not until 1833, shortly after Wilberforce's death, when the final abolishment of slavery was legislated throughout the British Empire.²⁵ What is generally now viewed as a grave moral evil, took over 44 years of contentious work to remove.

The moral foundation for Wilberforce's quest for the abolishment of slavery was thoroughly based in his Christian ethic. As a part of a larger

²⁴ For a more detailed account and commentary of Wilberforce and the abolitionist movement see Charles, *The Unformed Conscience of Evangelicalism* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2002) and Colson, *Kingdoms In Conflict* (William Morrow & Zondervan Publishing House, 1987). Mark Galli, in *Christian History* Issue 53, 1997 (available online at www.ctlibrary.com/ch/1997/53), outlines the financial influence that slavery had on the British economy.

²⁵ See www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/wilberforce_william.shtml for further details.

evangelical movement²⁶ Wilberforce argued for abolition based primarily on the convictions he believed were inherent in the Christian lifestyle. Charles Colson quotes Wilberforce as writing, ‘As soon as ever I had arrived thus far in my investigation of the slave trade, so enormous, so dreadful, so irremediable did its wickedness appear that my own mind was completely made up for the abolition. A trade founded in iniquity and carried on as this way must be abolished’ (Colson, 1997:100). Of particular importance to Wilberforce was the influence of John Wesley. Wesley was particularly vocal about the barbarity of the slave trade and condemned it as being contrary to the Christian concerns of justice and mercy (Charles, 2002:66-67). These views were passed on to Wilberforce throughout their association together and in a final deathbed letter from Wesley to Wilberforce in February of 1791 (Charles, 2002:67).

Along with the abolition of slavery, Wilberforce also set out on a moral agenda that he called a “reformation of manners” (Charles, 2002:67). Beginning with his fellow Christians, Wilberforce exhorted his country to return to a higher moral standard and established a number of groups that sought to address the social concerns of his day. His Society for the Reformation of Manners “set out to work ‘for the encouragement of piety and virtue’ and ‘for the preventing of vice, profaneness and immorality’” (Charles, 2002:69). Not all of what Wilberforce attempted to do in this regard was done through formal legislation. Much of the reformation of manners took place through the influence of his book, *A Practical View of the Prevailing Religious System of Professed Christians* (1797) and the lobbying of his Christian peers to more honestly live out the implications of the Christian gospel they adhered to. However, as a part of this reformation

²⁶ For a more detailed discussion surrounding the religious context for Wilberforce’s actions see Charles and Colson as listed above, as well as Dowley, Introduction To The History of Christianity (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995, particularly pgs 562-563), the entry on Wilberforce in The Oxford Dictionary of The Christian Church edited by Cross (London: Oxford University Press, 1957) and, Christian History, volume 53 (1997).

Wilberforce did seek to bring about changes in parliament (see Dowley, 1995:563).

While it may not be possible to determine the exact influence Wilberforce and his compatriots had on the moral climate of Britain, it is safe to suggest that it was significant. Through consistent moral persuasion Wilberforce convinced a nation to address both its social and moral concerns. And while we could never duplicate the social setting of Wilberforce, he provides an example of how a variety of methods, including the legislative process, can influence the morality of larger society.

6.6. Conclusion

The topic of this thesis is the role of community in ethics. Essentially, it has been asserted in this chapter that the legislation of morality is one of the key or fundamental roles the larger community plays in the area of ethics. In part, the larger community does this by providing the forum and structure to construct laws that will hopefully bring about and encourage a just society.

Far from accepting the idea that morality cannot or should not be legislated, we must strongly assert that it is the duty of the various communities we find ourselves in to provide moral structures within which individuals can lead peaceful and fulfilling lives. To suggest that we cannot or should not legislate morality is a serious position that can only come about with the gross privatization of ethics that we see in our current postmodern culture. But to reject all forms of external control is a self-destructive action.

Society, in any meaningful sense of the term, cannot survive without some kind of moral structure, supported by law.²⁷ It is the nature of the larger

²⁷ It must be noted that the legal system is not the only way this can and should happen. Informal structures, like positive peer pressure, are vitally important as well. The collective will of the people can provide a significant influence in bringing about a good and just society. For example, many (all?) schools in my city have a rule against bullying (in the face of public assertion that you cannot legislate

community to put into place structures, whether they be formal or informal, that guide and direct the moral lives of the individuals who make up those communities. Without this kind of structure it would be difficult to explain how any society could possibly survive for any length of time, let alone flourish.

...[t]here can be no moral framework, and therefore no true community, without a judicious public intolerance. In other words, there can be no public sense of virtue without a public sense of vice. In the end, what marks any civilization is a conscious and clear set of widely accepted “shalls” and “shall nots” that constitute an ideal way of life. A folk vision of the good. Without this, a civilization soon deforms and despiritualizes; it ceases being a home and becomes a motel to the extent that the people check out of any deep concern for the whole (Gairdner, 2001:4, emphasis author’s).

Without question, this is a difficult and demanding task. And given the changing moral foundation and the subsequent broader moral climate an increasingly pluralistic culture creates, it will only become more difficult. In order to carry out this difficult task within a pluralistic culture, there are concerns or limitations to be heeded, especially for Christians. We particularly need to heed the concern about over-legislation. If Prohibition taught us anything, it taught us that it is indeed possible to micromanage the moral lives of individuals. In a pluralistic society we need to see the legislation of morality in minimalist terms rather than *the* answer to all of our social concerns. “Legislation is one of God’s means of moral governance, but only one” (Holmes, 1984:106). The role of community in this regard is to provide a context in which individuals and the larger groups they form may flourish. Legislation of morality with this purpose in mind keeps both individual liberty and social justice in mind, recognizing the inherent tension that exists between the two.

morality, local schools say it is ‘immoral’ to bully). A student caught bullying will be dealt with through the formal channels of the local school. However, what many of the schools try to do is head off the problem of bullying by encouraging the children to create an environment in the class room and playground that a potential bully understands that the larger community of students will not stand for

It is vital to understand this tension and attempt to provide the necessary checks and balances. For some Christians, this will be an especially difficult task since it could appear to be a submission to a culture that does not hold to Christian values. To deal with this concern, we need to return to the discussion we had in chapter five. For the church to carry out its mission in a secular/pluralistic culture we must resist the temptation to over-simplify the issues. If the church is to serve as the moral and spiritual conscience of the cultures of which it is a part, then it must be prepared to live within those cultures in such a way that it recognizes the above tension. In the political arena this can prove to be a very difficult tension to live with. Charles Colson, a former U.S. politician, summarizes this tension in the following way.

As private citizens, Christians are free to advocate their Christian view in any and every form. In America that is a fundamental constitutional right. Christian citizens should be activists about their faith, striving by their witness to “Christianize” their culture – not by the force of the sword, but by the force of their ideas.

But Christians elected to public office acquire a different set of responsibilities. Now they hold the power of the sword, which God has placed with government to preserve order and maintain justice. Now they act not for themselves but for all whom they serve. For this reason they cannot use their office to evangelistically “Christianize” their culture. Their duty is to ensure justice and religious liberty for all citizens of all beliefs (Colson, 1987:305).

This distinction between a public and private role is key to this tension in which we find ourselves.²⁸ On some level all moral actions have a social impact and therefore are public concerns, but on another level we inherently recognize the private element of moral choices as well. The distinction and relationship between the two can be very difficult to make. Again, as Christians, we need to resist the

bullying to take place. This kind of influence takes the notorious bad side of peer pressure and turns it into a positive for moral influence and change.

²⁸ This tension was at the heart of the Wolfenden report that came out of England in the late 1950s. The subsequent responses to that report by Devlin, The Enforcement of Morals and Hart, Law, Liberty, and Morality are very helpful in laying down some of the foundation arguments in this discussion.

temptation to micromanage while holding on to a communal emphasis. To suggest that we need to legislate morality is not the same as saying that **all** morality is to be legislated. As already stated, there is a need to strike a balance between the social good and personal liberty.

...the twin principles of justice and love require respect for the equal rights of all persons and a positive concern for their good. A conflict of duties may thus arise. If we are convinced that homosexual behavior or hallucinogenic drugs or drunkenness is harmful to a person physically, psychologically or morally, then we will want to prevent his doing such things to himself. This is a paternalist direction. Should we legislate accordingly? Christian concern for justice will want to respect individual rights, even the right to be wrong and suffer the consequences (Holmes, 1984:101-102).

This position is not necessarily an easy one to take because it does not provide the clearly defined response that many would like.

The task before us is a significant one. We have asserted in this chapter that, without wanting to gloss over or ignore the many other significant questions still left to be discussed, we must begin with the fundamental assertion that the responsibility of any community is to provide some kind of moral governance for its people. In fact, we can go further and assert that not only is this a fundamental responsibility of the larger community, but that this task is best done within a larger community.

In the face of a complex society that nevertheless needs to be governed justly by finite minds, social custom provides necessary resources. Though no single person is able to understand the relationship of parts to the whole, the small, inscrutable, and mysterious contributions of each individual freely interacting with others can weave a beautiful tapestry that could be produced in no other way. Confronted with an overwhelming complicated task, the governors of society are not left solely to their own resources, nor to those of a handful of advisors, nor even to those of a body of legislators. The order of custom, in which all members of society have contributed, provides the necessary matrix within which all future legislating and judicial decision-making are to be done (VanDrunen, 2003:121).

As we have noted, moral governance will happen one way or another. The question is whether it will be done with thought and purpose, or simply by default.

CHAPTER SEVEN – TOWARD A MORE HOLISTIC COMMUNITY ETHIC

7.1. Introduction

In the preceding chapters we have sought to establish some foundational principles regarding the role of community in ethics, but on many occasions we have raised more questions than we have answered. The question before us at this point is where do we go from here? There are many potential answers to this question that take us beyond the scope of this thesis, but following are four significant areas that seek to tie up some of the loose ends created by our main discussion. These four areas are, Including A Communal Perspective in Ethical Thought, Church as a Moral Community, Individual Rights and Community Mores, and The Legislation of Morality. At some point, the consequences of what has been asserted in this thesis need to be developed further. The question of *how* to foster a strong communal emphasis in ethics lies before us and below we will consider some of those ‘hows’.

7.2. Including A Communal Perspective in Ethical Thought

To begin with, we must address the question of how do we move people to include a more communal perspective in the ethical thought process. The illustration to keep in mind here is the time and effort it takes to maneuver a large ship; it is done slowly. In this thesis we showed how over five centuries of time the dominant worldview changed in the West. It would seem safe to suggest that although these things are not predictable, it is likely to take a significant period of time to shift the thinking of larger culture back to include a more communal view.¹

¹ We should note that there is always an ebb and flow with this kind of movement. Previously in this thesis we used peanut butter in the lunchrooms of public schools as an illustration of how some cannot seem to understand how the needs of the larger community may not always allow individuals to do whatever they please. However, since that time it has become somewhat commonplace for public schools in Calgary to

A first step in the process is to re-affirm the need for developing worldview or philosophical thinking, and for thoughtful, open dialogue. This must happen not only in our educational institutions, but in informal settings as well. As we saw in a number of places in this thesis, particularly in chapters two and five, the assumption of neutrality by any particular worldview is a dangerous one to make. What is needed, if we are to address any of the practical concerns raised by this thesis, is a more formal recognition of the impact of worldview. *Everyone* has assumptions about the nature of reality and how the world operates. As we have tried to show at length, these assumptions are critical to understanding the moral actions that follow them; ideas precede action. If we are to begin to incorporate a more communal view in our ethical decision making process, then we are going to need to be ready and able to understand and critique our own core assumptions along with the core assumptions of others. For this to happen, more emphasis is needed on understanding the justification or warrant for our beliefs, not just on the content.

Without question, there is a great deal of work and effort that needs to go into such an endeavour, but it is both a vital and necessary one. Charles Kammer quotes Thomas Merton as saying, “We cannot begin to know ourselves until we can see the real reasons why we do the things we do, and we cannot be ourselves until our actions correspond to our intentions, and our intentions are appropriate to our situation” (as in Kammer, 1988:15). After expounding on this idea further, Kammer goes on to remark,

It is clear,..., that we do have freedom to transcend a particular worldview and adopt another. Such “conversion” is usually the product of experiences that call into question our existing views, or is the result of reflection that shows the inadequacy or inconsistency of the original worldview. *What we cannot do, though, is live without some framework, for to be alive is to act. And we cannot act without first ascertaining the framework within which we are acting* (Kammer, 1988:20, emphasis mine).

have a ‘no nut’ policy in place and there seems to be little discussion surrounding it any longer. The point being, some recognition of the need of a communal voice is already being shown in some issues.

If we are going to challenge the individualism so prevalent in our culture today, we need to seek to better understand the narratives that have contributed to this over emphasis on the individual. If the foundational narrative has changed over the past number of centuries, then what has it changed to and why? And further, what narratives bring us back to including a more communal view and how can they be incorporated into our current story? Being able to articulate the details of our narrative to the point where we can see its strengths and weaknesses is fundamental to this process. Without this ability, we will not be able to move forward to any application of what we have said in this thesis. If we are not willing to abandon the idea of neutrality,² that somehow one particular narrative carries *no* philosophical or moral agenda, then we will have a difficult time confronting the hyper-individualism of our current culture. In short, if we are not convinced that hyper-individualism is a problem and that our current worldview needs to be challenged, then we will have a difficult time moving forward.³

There are a number of ways in which we might begin to better understand our assumptions and challenge the idea of neutrality. A place to start is our educational institutions. While not the only source, formal education has had, and still has, a tremendous influence on Western culture and serious discussion needs to take place regarding the purpose of education. Is it for personal development, including the character and the mind, or is it for job creation? Is the main purpose of education to train someone to *do* something or is it to *be* someone? Is it

² It is important to note that we used the word ‘neutrality’ here and not ‘objectivity’. Suggesting that we need to recognize that any worldview carries with it assumptions that have consequences is not the same as saying we cannot achieve some level of objectivity about those assumptions. Objectivity, in part, has to do with being able to identify our assumptions and critiquing them in light of the challenges of other worldviews. Despite what postmodern philosophy suggests, it needs to be asserted that although a demanding task, it is possible to articulate and critique one’s own narrative.

³ Charles Kammer, *Ethics and Liberation: An Introduction* (New York: Orbis Books, 1988), is helpful here in discussing the various elements involved in developing a worldview and understanding its ethical consequences.

possible for education to do both? In Canada we have seen a remarkable growth in educational institutions and programs that focus almost exclusively on skill development with the goal of preparing the student for the job market. While there is obviously value in this kind of training, it seems to be a mistake not to include components in the educational process that develop personal character and philosophy as well as ‘practical skills’. It is difficult to expect individuals to be able to articulate and discuss their own worldview or philosophy of life in a meaningful manner if they have never been formally challenged and equipped to do so. And, it should be added that even if education is partly concerned with job creation skills, would it not make some sense to have those individuals being trained to understand how their job skills fit into a larger view of life?

This more integrative view of education is not new by any means; it has strong historical roots. Referring back to Aristotle, Merold Westphal in his essay “Academic Excellence: Cliché or Humanizing Vision?”, contrasts the difference between classical liberal education and vocational education. Suggesting that rather than seeing the issue as character development **or** skills acquisition, education should be more integrative in nature. Westphal writes,

Learning how to make a living will be only part of the larger project of learning how to live. The acquisition of marketable skills will be integrated with serious reflection about what goals we ought to seek, including their relative priority, and about what means are legitimate in their pursuit. This will serve as a reminder that education is not only designed to make us marketable but also to contribute to our moral sensitivity. And in addition to all of this, there will be a sense of the development of our intellectual powers simply for the sake of better understanding the general scheme of things and our place in it (in Gill, 1997:36).⁴

⁴ The book this essay is found in, Should God Get Tenure? Essays on Religion and Higher Education (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1997) edited by David Gill, contains a number of essays that deal with, among other themes, a more holistic or integrative approach to education. Other books that seek to broaden the understanding of education, including a strong recognition of the impact and value of worldview on the entire process, are Finding God At Harvard (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996) edited by Kelly Monroe and Reclaiming Goodness – Education And The Spiritual Quest (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001) by Hanan Alexander. Another source to consider regarding the transformational power of education and how it can challenge the status quo is Paulo Freire’s Pedagogy Of The Oppressed (New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group, 1993).

If the educational system, as a whole, is truly concerned with developing the entire person then it must re-think how its programs, and the various components of them, can incorporate more opportunities for philosophical reflection.⁵

It is also important to point out that worldview questions, like the ones raised in this thesis, are not strictly for the ivory tower of professional philosophers, theologians, and ethicists. Worldview questions should be open for discussion on a popular level for they deal with the fundamental questions of all of human life and activity. While the educational system is a vital component in getting people to think more about their worldview assumptions, it would be a mistake to minimize the role that the family or other social structures play as well. The practical way in which this can happen is, again, the encouraging of open, honest, and civil debate that allows for the interaction between ideas.⁶ Many areas of life must be involved to develop to this kind of worldview thinking, but if it is not encouraged by the formal structures within society, education being the most obvious medium, then one wonders how effective it will be done on a larger scale. And the content of this kind of discussion is not just found in philosophy, but in all disciplines. It must be understood that all areas of human experience, including

⁵ One personal anecdote that illustrates this concern is the ethics seminars that I occasionally lead for the Canadian Association of Petroleum Landmen (CAPL). This is a professional organization that deals with negotiating contracts that allow companies to explore and drill for oil, gas, minerals, etc on both private and crown land. To their credit, to be a member of this association you need to take, and repeat once every five years to maintain membership, a seminar or course on ethics. In the courses that I led, I have asked how many of the participants have ever taken a course in ethics before as a part of their training. If you remove the courses that were done specifically to meet CAPL requirements, you are left with very few individuals (I would estimate as few as 5%) who took any kind of ethics or philosophy course as a part of the educational program. And if they did take a course from these fields they were almost always done as electives, meaning they were not required to take them, but chose to do so out of interest. This situation may not be indicative of all professions, but it is far more common than not.

⁶ A current lament heard in North America is the increasing level of incivility found in our culture. The ability to deal with others in an appropriate and courteous way seems to be on the decline, which has a direct effect on worldview dialogue. (See Richard Mouw, *Uncommon Decency*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1992, and Stephen Carter, *Civility: Manners, Morals, and the Etiquette of Democracy*. New York: Basic Books, 1998.) Instead of focusing on the issues and the strengths or weaknesses of the argument, focus it put on stereotypes or characterizations. One only has to consider the banter leading up to a political election to see that personal attacks are often more common than honest discussion of the issues.

theology, contribute to the answers of life's most fundamental questions and without these answers our corporate moral life suffers. David Wells quotes William Kilpatrick, an education specialist, as saying, "without the sense that life makes sense, all other motives for virtuous behavior lose their voice" (as in Wells, 1998:13-14).

7.3. Church As Moral Community

The second area to be discussed is how the church functions as a moral community. It is not necessary to repeat the entire discussion found in chapter five, but there are some things to be reiterated here. We asserted that the church played a significant moral role in culture, but the question at this point is how. To some degree this question was answered in our evaluation of the various models for cultural engagement discussed. The answer to 'how' depends greatly on which model of interaction is chosen. However, there are some additional aspects of church life that deserve particular attention.

The prophetic role of the church cannot be underestimated in impacting larger culture with the moral claims of the gospel. As mentioned in the conclusion of chapter five, while there has been a significant critique of this particular aspect of church life in recent times, it still remains at the core of the church's life. For example, it is often heard that people, especially those outside of the church, no longer wish to be "preached at". Having their shortcomings expounded to them, whether publicly or privately, is not something most people enjoy or appreciate in today's society. The authority of the church and preaching has diminished greatly in recent years and in some circles this has led to a smaller and quieter prophetic voice. There are, of course, lessons to be learned in this. At some point in North American church history it may have been acceptable and expected to hear sermons that fervently lamented the evils of the day and exhorted righteous living. The assumption often being made however was that all of society respected

Biblical authority and the values ascribed to God. That assumption is no longer valid, if it ever was. The stereotypical ‘hellfire and brimstone’ sermon essentially falls on deaf ears in our current culture. In the larger culture, the authority of scripture is no longer assumed or accepted and any moral claims simply pronounced as true because “the Bible says so” are quickly dismissed.

Rather than wishing for the return of a previous era, perhaps it is the duty of the church to re-visit its prophetic role and how it fulfills it. In our section on Praxis of Community in chapter five we suggested that the church needed to take seriously it’s public role, but perhaps the pulpit is not the primary place for that to happen. That is not to say that timely sermons on key issues are no longer necessary, but they need to be delivered in such a way as to invite dialogue as well as personal response.

Connected to this prophetic role is the political involvement of the church. Again, there is much discussion over the place of faith in the public arena. Central to that discussion in North America is the concept of the separation of church and state. Generally the idea of church and state is appealed to whenever it appears that one entity or the other is seen to be encroaching too closely upon the domain of the other. Employed this way, the concept of separation of church and state is understood to mean that the church, or any faith based perspective for that matter, should not be involved in public (ie. political) affairs; or vice versa. And further, if a person of faith happens to hold public office, then that person should not allow their religious views to impact public policy.⁷ An illustration of this can be seen in the comments of a Canadian federal politician who lamented the fact that the Roman Catholic Church had voiced opposition to his government’s position on same-sex marriage. Commenting on the Church’s opposition, the politician responded by saying that government and churches should not get into each other’s business and that he finds that the separation of the church and the state to

⁷ A critique of this specific idea has already been partially critiqued in chapter six.

be “one of the most beautiful inventions of modern times” (Calgary Herald, “Church Has Right to Express Views”, January 29, 2005). As the editorial article went on to expound, there is a fundamental error made when the concept of separation of church and state is understood in this way. The problem with this politician’s view is that the separation of church and state historically was not intended to remove religious views from public life, but had to do with the government establishing an official church for the entire country. Nevertheless, the common perception remains that the church, and by extension individual persons of faith, should keep their religious views out of public discussions. This represents a significant issue for any person who takes their religious convictions seriously for in essence it suggests that positions of faith do not matter. This kind of segregation however is unhealthy and unnecessary. As David Gill points out, “A distinction must be made between avoiding the establishment of official churchly authority where it should not occur and preventing the free exercise or expression of religious conviction by the people” (Gill, 1997:133). If the values of the church are of value to the common good, then persons of faith must find appropriate forums to share and promote those values.

The sum of the matter is that while there may not be a consensus view of what role Christians should play in the political arena, we would assert that, based on the conclusions we came to in chapters five and six, there is a role in politics for the church.⁸ The North American political climate allows, in theory at least, for the involvement of all voices. In such a climate the church needs to speak. We have the opportunity to vote, have our voice heard through our elected representatives, can lobby the government on any number of issues, and we can voice our views to the press and other media. The Church has at its disposal many

⁸ We would add that precisely what that role is or can be depends on the cultural context the church finds itself in. For further development of this theme see David Gushee, ed. Christians & Politics – Beyond the Culture Wars. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000; Stephen Mott, A Christian Perspective on Political Thought. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993; and Alan Storkey, Jesus and Politics – Confronting the Powers. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005.

more opportunities to formally influence the cultural climate around us than the first century Church did. The opportunity to promote a more communal voice in ethics is there if we are willing to engage it and engage thoughtfully.

However, we must also recognize that this opportunity needs to be approached differently than it was in the past. As mentioned previously, the Church is no longer viewed as it once was in North American culture. It no longer necessarily has the same authority or respect that it once had and subsequently its views are more easily dismissed. Commenting on the difference between the age of the Reformation when the Protestant church was born and the current climate in America, David Wells remarks,

In America, not only has the Church been disestablished, but our modern secularization has stripped the public square of religious reality. Our public discussions and calculations are devoid of the kind of religious considerations that dominated public life in the Reformation era...[secularization] has restricted the supernatural to what is private and internal and has forced it out of the public square (Wells, 1998:22).

If we assume that we are still living in the shadow of the Reformation era then we will believe that our moral voice carries the same moral weight as any competing voice. But this is not necessarily the case in current North American culture. As we noted in chapter one, the development of the ‘modern’ mind marked by Enlightenment philosophy and the rise of science, has significantly challenged traditional religious foundations. With these developments as a background, Kammer suggests that

...science and the technology it has generated have proved much more effective in combating disease and hunger, and improving the human condition, than have prayer and sacrifice to gods. We are so convinced of the truth and power of our scientific knowledge and technology that stories about a “superhuman” being who sometimes sets aside the laws of nature to work miracles seem more and more like stories left over from some mythological past than accurate descriptions of the human situation (Kammer, 1988:39).

Kammer goes on to suggest that the elevation of human freedom and power, the involvement of the church historically in moral atrocities like the Crusades, and the continual, and sometimes overwhelming presence of evil, have led many to question the value of a traditionally religious foundation to ethics (Kammer, 1988:39-41).

While not everyone has come fully to the position Kammer has suggested, the church must realize that coming from a religious perspective, in many ways, places its moral voice outside of regularly accepted channels of wisdom and authority. For any number of significant reasons, there is an air of skepticism or reticence about the Church's moral stance. With all of this in mind we must continue to use the opportunities presented to us. The moral voice of the Church may not always be heard over competing voices and it may not always be respected or accepted, but at the very least we must offer it.

If, as we suggested in chapter four, the moral vision of the Church contributes greatly to the moral issues that face us today, then remaining silent on them is irresponsible. The Church can be confident in making its contribution to the moral landscape of our culture, including an emphasis on communal concerns, but must be prepared for rejection. It is a slow process, but if the message of the gospel is true, then eventually the wisdom of its moral impact will be seen. As we saw in chapter three, the Biblical message regarding poverty, the value and meaning of work, the definition and value of a person, among many other values, have the potential to radically change the moral climate of North America. Finding new ways to have this moral voice heard in the public square is the challenge the Church must take on.

And finally, if the church is truly going to function as a moral community, it must re-focus its attention on its prophetic role within its walls. We also included this idea in the conclusion of chapter four. The prophetic message of the Church needs to begin on the inside. The moral discipleship of its adherents can no longer be taken for granted by the Church. The influence

of secularization has been far reaching, and if the Church is truly going to function as a moral community, then it must begin with its own people. Again, our previous discussion regarding worldview development is threaded through this suggestion as well. Throughout this thesis we have contended that there is an intimate link between the theology of the Church and its ethic. This connection needs to be reiterated and emphasized. Subsequently, more attention needs to be devoted to the theological development of believers and there are many ways of doing this. Those in the pulpit need to be challenged to sharpen their theological and hermeneutical skills in order to bring theology into their sermons in a way that it can be heard in our modern/postmodern culture. Other opportunities for theological reflection and education within the Church or related organizations also need to be developed and fostered. There are any number of ways that this task can be approached, but a primary one in the context of this thesis is a re-engagement with scripture from a communal rather than purely individual perspective.

The individualism of our society is especially destructive because believers are trained by culture (and sometimes even churches) to read the Bible – the major source of our faith tradition – in singular terms, rather than as pluralized instruction to a community. Consequently, commands such as those to feed the hungry are taken to be only personal requirements instead of work we each undertake as part of an entire community together (Dawn, 2003:84).

Fundamental to this is the idea of putting into practice within the Church the communal values and emphasis inherent in the Biblical message. In many ways there has been a loss of understanding within the Church of how the Biblical message and its vision for humanity can impact moral life. The two issues used in chapter four illustrate this point here as well. If we believe that a more communal voice is necessary for the survival and flourishing of society, then we need to demonstrate the validity of that viewpoint within our own communities. The Church should model what it means to honour the human being in the dying process. Rather than fearing and shunning the dying process we should exemplify what it means to be cared for in a community, even when suffering. If, as we have asserted, suffering and death are not intended to be endured in isolation, then the

Church needs to model how it can be done in a community.⁹ And, if we believe that the best way to deal with the issue of poverty and the multitude of other concerns connected with that problem, is restoring the poor to full standing in the community, then the Church needs to model this to larger culture. We need to take more seriously what it means to meet the needs of those who are poor, as well as what it means to hold them accountable for their participation in community life. If the Church wants its ethical message to be taken seriously outside of its walls then it must first be taken seriously within its walls.

In order for this to happen, we must regain some sense of moral authority and vision, both within and without the Church. Given the skeptical nature of our current culture regarding Church authority this is not a simple task, but an essential one. Marva Dawn expresses this concern in the following statement:

In keeping with society's rightful rejection of empty authoritarianism, some churches have developed a false fear of authority...The results for churches and their members have been a loss of rooting in traditions of care, the failure to pass the faith's wisdom on from generation to generation or from experienced believer to new believer, and even a fear on the part of church leaders to teach "with authority."

I am certainly not proposing here the kind of religious authority that is centered in the self or in an idolatrous biblicism, but I seek to recover the authority that is rooted in an entire community – a community of people who, by eagerly living the traditions of faith that have existed for thousands of years, pass them on. This is an authority much larger than we are, much larger than our local congregation or denomination (Dawn, 2003:84).

⁹ Many examples of how this can happen can be given. When a colleague of mine lost his mother he and his siblings were very involved in the funeral. Contrary to common practice his sisters dressed and prepared the body, he built his mother's coffin. When he reflected upon his experience he remarked at how therapeutic it was to be involved in this way. While he was not advocating that everyone had to do what he and his sisters did, he remarked at how being so closely involved in these details gave them a chance to appreciate all the more their family and the values they stood for. On a personal note I can say much of the same. My mother passed away in my sister's home where she spent the last years of her life. The days leading up to her death were filled with visits from family and friends that allowed all of us to reminisce and celebrate mom's life.

7.4. Individual Rights And Community Mores

The third area to be considered is another thread that runs through everything we have discussed to this point. Keeping what we have already asserted in mind, how do we, in practical terms, balance the right of expression of the individual with the needs of the larger community? In all that we have said, we have tried to walk a fine line. It could easily be countered that an overemphasis on community could end up eclipsing the needs and rights of the individual.¹⁰ However, we have suggested that rather than viewing a renewed emphasis on the role of community in ethics as taking away from individuality, it should be viewed as providing a context in which individuals can truly flourish.

Key to this position is understanding the nature of individual, or human, rights. In discussing these rights Arthur Holmes offers the following, “In asserting any human [or individual] right, the underlying claim is that all persons have an equal right to be treated as persons – regardless of differences in race, religion, sex, politics, or social and economic status” (Holmes, 1984:79-80). These rights are applied to all persons simply because they are persons. This basic concept spawns a great deal of further discussion, but most important to our discussion is that in order to balance individual rights or expression with community concerns we must always keep in mind the basic requirement of individual or human rights. As Holmes suggests, there are basic conditions of existence that are granted to all persons simply because they are persons. Any emphasis to bring a more communal voice to the ethical process is done with these basic conditions of existence in mind.¹¹ In other words, as we try to bring a more communal view into moral decision making, we must always give the individual a basic respect.

¹⁰ Anyone who has grown up and lived in a small town, where everyone knows everyone else’s business, can appreciate easily this can happen.

¹¹ As one can imagine, the exact content of these basic conditions of existence is up for debate. Each country or nation will have its own list of items that fall into this category and their own sources for those items. Holmes suggests that John Locke’s three natural rights are a good place to start; life, liberty and property to which the American Declaration of Independence adds pursuit of happiness (Holmes, 1984:86).

Even if a tension between the individual rights and communal concerns is inherently there, these two elements are not necessarily mutually exclusive. In fact, it can be suggested that individual rights only have force or impact within a communal context. Holmes suggests this when he writes, "...human relations are rights-granting activities, too, and human rights are logical corollaries of belonging to the human community. They are *inherent* in life together" (Holmes, 1984:84, emphasis authors). Schultze also emphasizes this relationship in a broader context when he remarks, "More than anything else, community is the chief means by which we undertake the public responsibilities that emanate from shared habits of the heart. *Communities should be places where we seek the common good even while respecting our individual and tribal differences*" (Schultze, 2002:23-24, emphasis mine). The issue is not choosing between two apparently opposing ideas, individual *versus* community, but to show how a blending of the two gives us the resources we need to deal with the significant ethical issues we face as individuals *in* community. What needs to be affirmed and recognized is that moral life is, by fundamental nature, social. Again, Kammer is helpful here when he writes;

Our moral lives, then, are all of a piece. Although there are some areas of our lives where we have more freedom to act unilaterally than in others, still, all morality is social morality, largely determined by the communities of which we are a part, and all our acts are social acts affecting the communities to which we belong (Kammer, 1988:9).

And further,

...it should be clear that the question of morals and morality concerns much more than simply what I should do in a particular circumstance or in relation to a particular context. Each individual response is related to the broader process of self- and community-formation. The fundamental moral questions are the questions of what we ought to be as persons and what we ought to be as communities. The specific questions of how to respond to

As a part of re-introducing a stronger communal perspective into the moral decision making process, a society would need to also re-affirm which rights are considered basic conditions of existence for the individual.

particular issues are always asked in the context of these two broader questions (Kammer, 1988:9).

The impact of statements such as these is the belief we have been asserting throughout this thesis; that ethical decision-making is best done in a larger communal setting in which the individual is given the resources to flourish. Attached to this is the idea that as individuals we find meaning and ethical maturity when we understand the larger communal context of human existence. As we express our individuality, and the rights that go with that, we do so within a community. Rather than viewing ethical maturity in terms of personal independence, ethical maturity should be understood as interdependence with appropriate respect given to individual expression and need.

It should also be stated that this idea is deeply imbedded in the larger Biblical narrative that we have used as a foundation for this thesis.

If we listen to the Hebrew and Christian traditions, we hear primarily two messages that point us to virtuous living: *gratitude* for creation and *responsibility* to care for this inheritance. These traditions locate us in a meaningful cosmic story, or “metanarrative,” that transcends informational noise and technological change. They also foster virtue by nurturing wisdom of *shared memory*, *caring practices*, and *mutual accountability* (Schultze, 2002:22, emphasis author’s).

The Biblical narrative provides a context in which we can both emphasize the value of the individual and the overarching needs and structure of the larger community. In fact, rather than being viewed as devaluing the individual, it could be suggested that the Biblical view of sin, as discussed in chapter three, provides the best foundation for understanding individual rights and the accountability that goes with them. Cornelius Plantinga Jr., is correct when he says, “...in general, we ought to pay evildoers, including ourselves, the “intolerable compliment” of taking them seriously as moral agents, of holding them accountable for their

wrongdoing. This is a mark of our respect for their dignity and weight as human beings” (1995:66). And further,

Human rights and prerogatives depend on human responsibility, on citizenship in a *community* of responsibility. People in this community properly hold each other accountable. People who respect each other’s full humanity and responsibility refuse to explain moral evil with reference to psychological or social “root cause” or with appeals to the authority of some party official or professor of victimology. In other words, until they are moved by evidence to the contrary, respectful people assume that evildoers are responsible citizens like themselves and they are answerable for their evil (1995:67, emphasis author’s).

Respect for the individual as a member of community is a vital component to what has been said to this point. An emphasis on the communal role in ethics should not lead to a devaluation of the individual, but should give the individual a better context for their ethical choices. Likewise, this understanding should provide a good foundation for addressing the issue regarding minority rights and the respect of all persons.¹²

7.5. Legislation of Morality

The final area in which we need to discuss some of the practicalities or ‘how tos’ is the legislation of morality. If any chapter in this thesis opens the door for further questions it is chapter six. The legislation of morality raises a number of subsequent concerns that go well beyond what was specifically set out for this thesis. As indicated, chapter six is potentially the most contentious. Our specific purpose for including chapter six in this thesis was to show that morality has been legislated in the past, can in fact be legislated currently, and will be legislated in the future. It was also included to show that this task was one of the primary roles

¹² The issue of minority rights is obviously an important, but lengthy discussion. Within a democratic system there is an inherent tension between the voice of the majority and the potential abuse or neglect of the minority. To further complicate the discussion is also the concern regarding the ‘tyranny of the minority’. The concern here is that in an attempt to address the multitude of claims and concerns being expressed by the sub-cultures that make up Canadian society, the government is neglecting the will of the majority.

that the larger community fulfilled in the discipline of ethics. Beyond that premise however there are a significant number of questions to be addressed in order understand the practicalities involved in such a suggestion. For instance, questions specifically dealing with how morality in general can be legislated are raised. Also, what steps should be taken in doing so and/or what issues need to be taken into account? And, how can this legislation of general morals be promulgated to the public? Again, the purpose of this chapter is not to address these issues exhaustively, but at the very least we must recognize some of these subsequent concerns and suggest some possible ways to begin to address them.

Before we begin, there are some limitations to our discussion that need to be mentioned. Part of what makes the discussion surrounding the legislation of morality such a potentially contentious issue is the number of variables within the issue. This thesis dealt with some foundational principles and concerns, but there are other aspects to be considered at some point as well. The main issue here is similar to what was mentioned in our previous discussion regarding the role of the Church as a moral community.

The variety of political and ideological environments that exist within a nation, let alone throughout the world, make a detailed discussion of exactly *how* to legislate morality, even in a general way, an involved and somewhat complicated task. As mentioned in chapter six, within the context of a predominantly homogeneous ethical environment, moral legislation would not present nearly as many issues. In a pluralistic, secular democracy, however, we are faced with a myriad of competing voices. Each voice brings with it a different worldview and value system. If we expect a legal system that can account for and support or agree with all of these competing value systems then we will be disappointed. In many ways, this concern is the primary one that faces any government of a country that specifically endorses a pluralistic view of social life. For example, Canada is expressly multicultural. This means that we have

deliberately set out to build our society using many different ethnic and cultural influences. We do not simply wish to be multicultural in the sense that many different cultures make up the Canadian population; we wish to be multicultural in the sense that larger social structures, including the legal system, formally recognize and represent all ethnic and cultural groups. While there is a richness and diversity that can come with such an emphasis, the inherent problem with this desire comes to the surface when we try to enact law. The following example illustrates this concern. Given its multicultural philosophy, the Canadian government wants to allow Sikh's to express their traditional culture as citizens of Canada. This caused a significant controversy when many Sikh parents wanted to send their children to public schools wearing their ceremonial daggers, a requirement in the Sikh religion. A number of non-Sikh parents were rather concerned about the idea of children openly carrying knives to school, ceremonial or not. The point is this, for law and any form of corporate life to happen, at some point one view or position must take precedence over another. As the old adage warns, "you can't make everyone happy".

Therefore, what follows is a discussion regarding *some* of the possible practical issues in the legislation of morality within a Canadian, and perhaps North American, context. This is not to suggest that the ideas presented below could not be applied to other settings, but simply that the context for the discussion has been deliberately limited.

7.5.1. Articulation of Assumptions

The first practical component in attempting any form of moral legislation comes from an area already discussed in this chapter. Our previous comments regarding the articulation of our assumptions are key to understanding the process

by which morality is enacted into law.¹³ By openly and honestly discussing foundational issues we can understand better our core values. When we understand our core values we can better understand and choose the actions we take, based on those core values. In the area of law, articulating our core values, and their subsequent consequences, can remove the illusion of absolute neutrality from our position. In other words, this kind of worldview assessment allows us to more easily recognize and admit that we have been, and are, promoting a moral agenda of some kind.¹⁴ While this kind of self-assessment can be lengthy and difficult, it helps us to understand the inherent moral nature of all law-making and what our assumptions about that moral nature are. In his book, Civility – Manners, Morals, and the Etiquette of Democracy, Stephen Carter suggests that

The mythology of modern liberalism has been that it merely establishes a set of background rules that are themselves somehow devoid of moral content – and morality is the decisions that we make about how to live our own lives against those rules. But philosophers on both the left and the right have successfully exploded the myth. The proposition is an ancient one, but bears repeating nevertheless: practically all laws, whether they forbid me to take your car, outlaw racial discrimination, or coerce the payment of taxes, impose somebody’s morality on somebody else. Every law either prevents me from doing something or forces me to do something. The understandable American [we would add, Canadian] tendency is to pretend otherwise, as though laws against car theft are without moral content, whereas laws on abortion are dripping in moral judgment. This tendency assists us in evading moral argument but is, of course, deeply uncivil. *As we have already seen, moral conversation is vital to the survival and progress of a democratic people* (Carter, 1998:208-09, emphasis mine).

¹³ The assumption being made here is that formal government, in a variety of forms, is the lawgiver for any particular nation. What any particular government bases its authority on to enact law and how it goes about enacting law is a much larger discussion.

¹⁴ There is a further clarification that is important to make here. While our description of this task is predominately rational, we must acknowledge that worldview formation and discussion are not always based on reason. James Sire in Naming The Elephant (Downers Grove: IVP, 2004), is helpful in pointing out how non-rational the process of articulating and holding core values can be. All this is to say that we must recognize that the process is a complicated one.

The value in being able to do this is that it brings much of what was presented in chapter six to the surface of the discussion. In any legislation it is important not only to discuss the *content* of the law, but also the *reasoning* behind it. In other words, by making clear the moral assumptions behind the laws we are proposing we bring the legislation of any morality out into public view. At that point the public discussion of ideas can take place which will, hopefully, be characterized by honest and respectful debate.¹⁵ Far from being simply an abstract philosophical process, this kind of discussion yields a very practical first step into being able to question and defend any proposed law. As Carter has stated, moral conversation is vital and he goes on to add that “there is always risk in genuine conversation, but that very riskiness is precisely what makes it genuine” (Carter, 1998:215).

7.5.2. Moral Leadership

A second key element in dealing with the legislation of morality is an incremental, but significant, addition to the element just addressed. It focuses on a deeper discussion regarding leadership, particularly its role in moral life. If moral conversation on a larger scale, particularly in the context of the legislation of morality, is going to happen, then it must also happen at the leadership level. In many ways, this element is key to addressing many of the concerns about how legislation of morality in general can practically occur. A number of facets could be considered here, but we will focus on just a few.

If, as we have asserted in chapter six, all legislation is based on moral assumptions and it not only tells us specifically what we can and cannot do, but also sets the overall moral climate for society, then the worldview and moral values of those writing, enacting, and enforcing the laws factor greatly into the entire process. Even in a democratic society, where we emphasize the role of the

¹⁵ As mentioned before, many complain that the art of basic civility is dying in North American culture which makes this process all the more difficult although no less necessary.

people, we rely significantly on our leaders for a great deal and this reliance is seen in the legal system. Once again, much of what we have said previously applies here as well.¹⁶ While our leaders may work very hard at being objective and seeking to understand and honour the views of the people they represent, their own personal moral agenda must also be considered. The influence a leader has cannot and should not be underestimated. The open legislation of morality in plain view of the public will have a difficult time taking place in a system where the moral character, vision, and conversation of leaders is not made a priority. If leaders are not willing to understand and critique their own moral assumptions then it would be hard to understand why the general populace would. In many ways this role of leadership is key to understanding how moral legislation is promulgated to the general public. If those charged with the responsibility of ‘running the nation’ are more open about their moral agendas and the legislation they are seeking, perhaps there would be greater understanding of the relationship between the two in the general population. This kind of moral conversation reveals that the source of much moral legislation will come from the convictions of those in leadership and how they interact with the will of the people they are leading. In part, this is what we sought to establish in chapter six. Not only is moral legislation inevitable, but it is proper and should be expected. The issue is whether or not it will occur in plain view, as much as possible, or whether we will continue to hide behind the guise of autonomous neutrality. William Gairdner emphasizes this point when he writes:

Christian^[17] says it is not the role of the state to make moral judgments on behalf of its citizens, though he knows it implicitly does so all the time (the criminal code, for example, is sternly moral and backed by the state). All law is by nature inescapably preferential and discriminatory. Indeed, the modern so-called liberal state that Christian so admires is itself the furthest thing from the neutrality he seeks. Like all other political systems, it is

¹⁶ See quote by Howard Zinn on page 167 of this thesis.

¹⁷ In the context of this quote ‘Christian’ refers to a William Christian, a professor of political studies in Ontario.

aggressively ideological and shapes its laws accordingly. This is simply to say again that civil societies cannot be true communities unless they are more or less unified in their moral function. You may not like that. I may not like that. But if we want to preserve community, the worst idea of all is that we each be given the freedom to make the rules as we please. It is the state that imposes the laws, of course, but they must in the end reflect the moral community or they will be disobeyed (Gairdner, 2001:348-49).

Without question Gairdner makes a bold statement that raises a number of issues. But the primary point for our discussion is the appropriateness of moral leadership; meaning, leadership that actively and openly accepts its role in enacting moral legislation that in turn seeks the best interests of society and the individuals who comprise it.

This is not to imply that this is a simple task. As we have discussed in chapter six¹⁸ regarding the role of the person of faith in the political process, there is a tension between the public and private life of the political leader or lawmaker. Perhaps this tension is not just present for the person of faith alone, but for anyone who is in a position to influence the laws of the land. As a part of the legislation of morality, the lawmaker must wrestle with the relationship between his or her own moral assumptions and agenda, the views of the larger community, and what is in the best interests of society.

7.5.3. Private and Public Morality

A third key element in our discussion of practicalities has to do with a sharpened understanding of the relationship between private and public morality. As already indicated in chapter six, this issue lies at the heart of any discussion regarding moral legislation and the concerns surrounding it. If we are going to promulgate moral legislation in a public sphere then we need to differentiate

¹⁸ See pages 185-86.

between those moral issues that are considered primarily private and those that are considered primarily public. A word of caution is needed here. We have contended throughout this thesis that a significant part of the problem facing us today is a crass distinction between private and public morality. It has been suggested, in a variety of ways, that all moral acts have some public influence, even if that influence is minimal. All moral acts condoned within a society contribute, in one way or another, to the moral conscience of that society. But while we maintain the general truth of this statement, it must also be recognized that there is a scale between these two points of view. In other words, it is not just a question of whether a moral act is private or public, but to what degree is a moral act private or public. Some acts may be more private than others; some acts more public. Again, distinguishing where any particular act might fall would be a difficult task, but there are some initial comments that can be made.¹⁹

Arthur Holmes is helpful in summarizing the core issues of this discussion. To begin with, it is important to understand what is meant by a private moral action. Holmes remarks, "...*private* does not simply mean 'out of sight.' Nor does it mean matters left to private judgment. It is rather that which tends to harm neither social order and stability nor other individuals" (Holmes, 1984:103-104). On this basic understanding, Holmes, referring partially to Devlin, offers the following proposal which serves as a very good starting point for how we might, in a general sense, legislate morality.

The law should:

1. preserve the maximum individual freedom consonant with the integrity of social order;
2. be slow to act, for other restraints are available;

¹⁹ See Devlin, The Enforcement of Morals (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), Hart, Law, Liberty, and Morality (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), and Mitchell, Law, Morality, and Religion in a Secular Society (London: Oxford University Press, 1967) for a fuller discussion of this issue. These works are somewhat inter-related and are, in some fashion, a response to The Wolfenden Report (New York: Stein and Day, 1963), which dealt with the private morality vs. public morality issue extensively.

3. respect privacy as far as possible;
4. legislate a minimal morality only.

To these we might add four further rules:

5. To be enforceable, a law must have widespread public support and represent a consensual morality.²⁰
6. A law must be equitably enforceable.
7. Legislation should not be changed with every changing moral mood, since this undermines respect for the law and public order.
8. A law should avoid harmful side effects (like the invasion of privacy or blackmail) (Holmes, 1984:105).

Holmes's proposal raises a number of additional issues to what we are discussing here, but it does focus our initial discussion on two primary principles in moral legislation; protection of the larger social good or conscience and, protection from the abuse of power. And far from being a purely utilitarian approach to the legislation of morality, Holmes suggests that these concerns fall in line with New Testament teaching. "On a New Testament basis in a pluralistic society, . . . , governmental authority seems not to extend to legislation on private moral conduct. Rather, it applies to maintaining public order and the equitable treatment of all parties" (Holmes, 1984:103).

Understanding the relationship between private and public morality in this way, and how it might be recognized in the legislative process, does three things for us. First, it acknowledges the primary contention of chapter six: that morality can be legislated; it has been done before, is being done now, and will be done in

²⁰ The idea of a 'consensual morality' can be problematic. The question is how to adequately define the concept. Holmes does not significantly elaborate, but does point to examples like God's covenant with Israel (a covenant to which they agreed to). The concept suggests the idea that the large majority of a given population, country, culture, readily agree on the general moral precepts found within that population. In other words, there is enough of a homogeneous culture present that provides a shared common morality. In Holmes' argument the impression seems to be that even if a culture is not sociologically or demographically homogeneous, it at least has certain moral principles to which the vast majority of citizens agree. See Forster, *Functionalism and the Devlin-Hart Controversy* (The British Journal of Sociology, Vol. 37, No. 1) for another example of how the idea of consensual morality and the legislation of morality relate.

the future. Second, it shows, in practical terms, how the larger social moral good can be protected through a better understanding of what private morality is. And third, it can protect us against over-legislation by showing that within a pluralistic society, government should be concerned more with minimal moral standards rather than all moral standards.

7.5.4. Natural Law

There is one final component that needs to be considered. This final component comes from a particularly Judeo-Christian viewpoint, although it is not necessarily exclusively Judeo-Christian. It is the concept of natural law.

Even if agreement can be reached on all of what has been previously said, (that all law has a moral foundation, that we need to articulate that moral foundation, that we need to have moral leadership aware of its worldview assumptions, and that we need to be minimalist in our approach) the question begging to be answered is *whose* morality do we legislate? If, as we assert, all law is built on some kind of moral code, then whose moral code ought it to be built upon? This question lies beneath all of our discussion to this point.

The difficulty in answering this question is found in the fact that there is a multitude of answers. We cannot begin to discuss all of the options available, but we can consider one that has been a significant Christian option. Historically it was contended that there existed in the world a natural law that all of human life depended and acted upon whether we were conscious of it or not. Christians such as Thomas Aquinas,²¹ to give a historical example, and J. Budziszewski,²² to give a contemporary example, among many others, have suggested that this law is part of the created order and is known to all humanity through some form of general

²¹ See *Treatise on Natural Law* in *Summa Theologica*.

²² See *Written On The Heart*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1997.

revelation. In other words, one need not believe in God to operate within His created moral universe. Traditionally, this position has provided a strong foundation for the recognition of the moral foundation of all law.²³ As pointed out in chapter six, the founding documents of both Canada and the United States emphasized this element.²⁴ “What profoundly unified Canada and America [morally] at their respective foundings, and for long afterwards, was precisely the fact that they were thoroughly Christian societies” (Gairdner, 2001:348).

In the Canadian context, this moral foundation has served for most of our history. By and large the Canadian legal code was founded upon the Judeo-Christian ethic. This foundation was somewhat of an inheritance from our British Commonwealth roots and somewhat adopted to our own through the Charter of Rights. The idea behind the use of natural law as a moral foundation for civil law is that one need not necessarily be a believer in the Judeo-Christian God to live within His moral universe. In other words, the idea of an inherent moral code in the universe can be apprehended and appreciated even by those who do not believe in a Creator. Examples of this moral code can be found in the basic universal presence of certain moral precepts, such as laws against murder, etc.²⁵ Because of the presence of this natural law, larger society has an inherent moral foundation for its law, one that is applicable to all persons. Therefore, the moral basis for any law proposed in a pluralistic society is not the government in power, nor directly the desires of any particular human influence, but rather, a fundamental recognition of a natural law that morally binds us all. Further, it is argued that because this natural law is foundational to all of us, disregarding it

²³ See Geisler & Turek’s book, Legislating Morality (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1998) where they argue that in a sense no one person’s or group’s morality is legislated, but a common human morality, found in natural law, is the legislated.

²⁴ The online reference for the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms is <http://laws.justic.gc.ca/en/charter> and the U.S. Declaration of Independence can be found at <http://www.ushistory.org/declaration/>.

²⁵ For a more detailed discussion see C.S. Lewis, The Abolition of Man. New York: MacMillan Pub. Co., 1947 and Chamberlain, Can We Be Good Without God? Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996, specifically chapter six.

leads to significant consequences. “[T]here are natural *moral* limits to what one can and cannot do. Human beings have natural limits that, if ignored, lead to injury, disease, or death” (Geisler & Turek, 1998:114, emphasis author’s).

It must, once again, be pointed out that this final element is firmly entrenched in the Judeo-Christian worldview. Not to be repetitive, but chapters one and two of this thesis provide an important context for this discussion. If one were truly secular then one would most likely reject the concept of natural law because of its connection with a Creator.²⁶ But as we have already discussed, a purely secular foundation raises some significant questions for the foundation of ethics. Our general contention in chapters one and two is that the removal of God from our foundation has led to a weakened foundation for a communal voice in ethics, but more than that, without God one is pressed to establish any kind of socially binding morality at all. In a sense, in our discussion regarding the practicalities of legislating morality, we have come full circle to where our larger discussion began. If we replace the traditional theocentric foundation for morality with a purely anthropocentric foundation, then it would seem to follow that the foundation of law must also be purely anthropocentric. If that is the case, then the legislation of morality becomes a far more difficult concept because all we are left with are competing human voices with no divine or, at the very least an external, anchor. And, if all we have are competing human voices, then when it comes to deciding whose morality will be legislated, it will most likely be the morality that is backed by the loudest, most influential, or most powerful voice.

As we established in chapter six, in the broadest terms the legislation of morality is concerned with the overall welfare of society. Law is enacted to both govern specific actions that are deemed a matter of public concern as well as those larger issues that affect the general moral climate of a given society. The exact

²⁶ Charles Kammer does suggest that there are examples of “naturalistic understandings of natural law which attempted to find eternal laws to govern human conduct” (Kammer, 1988:190, footnote 13).

content of either of those areas will be determined by the respective societies, but the purpose of them remains the same.

7.5.5. Another Approach To Legislating A Morally Significant Issue²⁷

The preceding material provides a context in which to discuss some of the practicalities of the legislation of morality. There are, however, some more specific things to state regarding *how* exactly this might happen. The following issue provides one example²⁸ of how legislation has been legislated and serves as an opportunity to more fully develop the material discussed above.

Canada has recently passed legislation that legalizes same-sex marriage.²⁹ Needless to say, there was a great amount of attention given to this issue in the formal press and on the public streets. Approximately six years ago the sitting government declared that it would never redefine the institution of marriage to include same-sex couples, appealing to the general view of the Canadian population. Same-sex relationships were acknowledged under common-law relationships, but not formally defined as a 'marriage'. In the twenty four months, the government changed its formal stance and has enacted legislation to redefine marriage to include same-sex couples, exactly what it said it would never do.

A detailed discussion of all of the details and issues surrounding this situation is well beyond this thesis, including the broader discussion of the

²⁷ This section differs from what was discussed in section 6.5 in that its main focus is on how legislation is effected instead of naming a historical instance of existing legislation.

²⁸ It should be pointed out that this is simply one example from many and that each separate issue, whether it be same-sex marriage, abortion, euthanasia, public financial assistance, the nuances or specific details of the discussion would change. This example is simply chosen to provide a more concrete framework in which to discuss the material put forth in this thesis.

²⁹ There are a variety of sources to consult for a more detailed timeline and commentary on the development of this issue. www.cbc.ca/news/background/samesexrights/ and www.ctv.ca are the two national television news agencies where a significant amount of information can be found. www.theglobeandmail.com and www.canada.com/national/nationalpost/index.html are two electronic newspaper sources.

morality of homosexuality.³⁰ However, in the immediate context of discussing some of the practicalities of the legislation of morality, the four elements just discussed can be used to comment on this issue.

As indicated in chapter two in the material used from Margaret Sommerville, Kai Nielsen, and Hendrik Hart, Canadian society is trying to understand its moral and social foundation.³¹ A consequence of this is that Canadians have struggled significantly with defining what it means to be Canadian and what values and principles they should publicly hold. A significant part of this struggle has been with its Judeo-Christian heritage. While Canada has never formally declared itself a “Christian nation”, the foundation is certainly there and the Judeo-Christian ethic still holds a dominant place in many Canadian lives. With its growing multicultural, pluralistic, secular philosophy however, that foundation is becoming more and more unacceptable in public life. This struggle is apparent in the legislation of same-sex marriage. As the discussion surrounding this law took place it became apparent that Canadians had a difficult time articulating exactly why they were, or were not, in favour of re-defining marriage. Obviously, a great amount of attention was given to the fact that most religious traditions, Christian or not, were against this legislation on the basis of their religious teachings. Likewise, there was, and is, much discussion about the reasons why Canadians should allow this re-definition of marriage. In many ways, this is one of the primary points to consider. The formal justification of the sitting government for moving ahead with legislating same-sex marriage, was that this issue had to do with minority rights and that the majority view should not be

³⁰ For a good discussion of this issue see Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*. San Francisco: HarperCollins Publishers, 1996.

³¹ These are not the only individuals asking these questions of course. For the past number of years there have been all kinds of attempts made to answer the question, “exactly what is a Canadian?” or something similar. The answers vary greatly and often contain some measure of humour. See Michael Adams’ *Sex In The Snow*. Toronto: Viking, 1997, for example. One suggestion made by many is that part of what defines us as Canadians is that, on the whole, we do not take ourselves very seriously; that we laugh at our idiosyncrasies and ourselves easily.

allowed to discriminate against those rights. Unfortunately, there was little discussion about issues like, what is the foundation for these rights³², is being formally recognized as married a *right* that can be granted by the government, or on how to reconcile the will of the majority with the will of the minority.³³ Little discussion about foundational issues such as these took place, at least publicly. And, as will be considered next, this lack of worldview interaction was highlighted by other actions taken by the sitting government.

In regards to the issue of moral leadership, the legislation of same-sex marriage in Canada brought many questions to the surface. Again, many of these questions could be addressed, but the following is most central to our discussion. What was most disturbing about the actions of the government on this issue was the deliberate exclusion of meaningful public dialogue and input on the process. In essence, the Prime Minister of Canada indicated that his government was going to change the definition of marriage without letting Canadians truly weigh in on the discussion and, apparently in spite of what the majority of Canadians wanted. He did this in three primary ways. First, he petitioned the Supreme Court of Canada to determine whether or not parliament, according to the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, had the right to re-define marriage. It agreed that it did although it was not required to do so.³⁴ Consequently, the Prime Minister was able to proceed with the support of the highest court in the land. Second, he decided not to take this issue to a national referendum. In other words, he would not let individual

³² In an odd twist of irony, if there ever was a mention of these foundational issues, the response generally had something to do that the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms was the basis for this change. Of course, that is the same document that mentions that the rights listed within are on the basis of “the supremacy of God and the rule of law” (<http://laws.justice.gc.ca/en/charter/>). It seemed to pass by most commentators that the very document they were using to support same-sex marriage clearly came from a source that traditionally had opposed homosexuality.

³³ It should be pointed out that the majority of Canadians, it would seem, have little difficulty with the concept of protecting minority rights. However, it was expressed that basic human rights for all Canadians are already in place, including for homosexuals, and that the issue of re-defining marriage went beyond those basic rights. It can be asked, when does protecting minority rights become the tyranny of the minority over the majority? Also, the idea that one form of morality should not be forced upon another form of morality, detailed in chapter six, is key to this position.

Canadians specifically say whether or not they wanted their country to re-define marriage. And third, he would not allow a completely free vote in the House of Commons on the subject.³⁵ What this meant was that any cabinet member of his party had to vote along the party line or face censure. So, even if the constituents of a particular riding did not agree with the formal position of the government, and voiced that concern to their duly elected representative, that representative, if a cabinet member of the Prime Minister's party, could not vote as his or her constituents requested, but had to vote as the Prime Minister dictated.³⁶ To their credit, a few representatives went against the party line and voted with their constituents, but most did not.³⁷

Although not speaking directly about this issue, William Gairdner, in somewhat of a prophetic voice, warned that the Charter of Rights and Freedoms was just such a document that would allow this kind of judicial power.

Plato was waiting in the wings. He made his entrance via Trudeau's Charter of Rights and Freedoms of 1982, one of those documents filled with abstract first principles so dear to the hearts of all radicals...It was the sort of document rightly feared by Canada's founders because charters and constitutions *are not self-interpreting*. They always end up being interpreted by those who have won the struggle for political power. Sure enough, from the moment this document hit the floor, Canada's founding tradition of parliamentary sovereignty, the highest law and authority in the land, was supplanted by judicial sovereignty.⁷⁰ The voice of the elected people in Parliament was now subordinated to the opinions of unelected judges, for the abstract Charter was declared the "supreme law of the land," and no law passed by Parliament could infringe its promised abstract rights. However, only a judge could decide if there had *actually* been infringement of any abstract principle. Thus Canada's Supreme Court justices, educated in law schools with a generally modern liberal bent, became supreme

³⁴ See http://www.cbc.ca/news/background/samesexrights/timeline_canada.html, December 9, 2004.

³⁵ The Prime Minister indicated that Members of Parliament would be able to vote freely, but Cabinet Members had to vote along party lines (see <http://www.cbc.ca/story/canada/national/2004/12/09/martin-samesex041209.html>).

³⁶ In a sense we will never know how Canadians, as a nation, truly feel about such a critical moral issue because we were never given the opportunity to voice our opinion or even enter the debate. Although, there have been some polls conducted. See <http://www.cbc.ca/story/canada/national/2005/04/10/gay-marriage-050410.html> for one example.

³⁷ See <http://www.cbc.ca/story/canada/national/2005/06/28/samesex050628.html>.

philosopher kings and queens, or gatekeepers of the nation's laws. Some judges welcomed this, and some did not. But all were aware they had moved beyond *interpreting* the law, and were now in a position to make law by dressing abstract principles in clothes of their own choosing. Canada's new Charter had converted its judges into legislators⁷¹ (Gairdner, 2001:37-38, emphasis author's).

The key point is this, if the basis of a truly pluralistic culture is the voice of the people heard through open and honest dialogue, then why was it not allowed to speak on such a key issue? The summation of the matter for our purposes is this: the moral agenda of those supporting same-sex marriage was enacted into the legal code of Canada without any real public input or dialogue. That moral agenda officially became part of the Canadian moral conscience through legislation. The sitting government, based on the authority of a judicial, non-elected, body, changed the definition of a foundational social institution without ever really listening to the people.³⁸ Because of this, the moral leadership displayed on *this* issue was suspect.³⁹

As was suggested in chapter six, part of the purpose of moral legislation is the setting of a moral climate. The moral climate of all of Canada will ultimately be changed because of the decision of a relatively small number of people. Exactly what that change will look like one can only guess, but it will change. The expectation and intention of those supporting the legalization of same-sex

³⁸ It was somewhat disconcerting how little attention this element of the issue received. The popular press was far more interested in other concerns regarding other issues rather than the fundamental one of how moral issues and moral legislation should take place. Occasionally someone would voice concern over the process. And, it should be noted that those who did voice concern regarding the process were not necessarily against the legalization of same-sex marriage. In fact, one caller into a local radio talk-show, who was a homosexual, indicated that while he was obviously happy with the proposed legislation, he was concerned about how it came about. If the government was willing to push its moral agenda upon the majority with this issue, with what other issues would it do it again?

³⁹ The moral leadership of the Prime Minister was not just critique for these issues, but on a more personal basis as well. Paul Martin, the current Prime Minister, is Catholic and there was much discussion regarding how he could go against his own faith on this issue. At one point there were comments being made about not allowing any Catholic politician who supported this legislation to receive communion. We also see in this issue the political tension for the person of faith between their own faith and how they believe they should best represent his or her constituents. We can give the Prime Minister the benefit of the doubt in that he was trying to deal with this tension in the best way he thought he could, but nevertheless, it was commented upon.

marriage is that it will contribute to a more tolerant and accepting Canada. Those opposed, are concerned about the erosion of the family unit, the rights and freedoms of religious expression, among other things. Either way, both sides expect that this legislation will somehow change the moral climate of Canada. Only time will tell what the influence of such a dramatic change will be.

In regards to the sharpening of the relationship between private and public morality, it is easy to see some of the connections with the legalization of same-sex marriage. At this point it would be easy to move into the larger discussion regarding the legislation of sexual mores, specifically homosexuality, but that would take this discussion well beyond the task at hand. What is needed, however, is to state that one of the main historical justifications for the decriminalization of homosexual relationships is that they belong to the arena of private morality and therefore should not be legislated against.⁴⁰ Somewhat ironically, the quest to formally acknowledge same-sex relationships with the designation of ‘marriage’ makes that private issue very public. In other words, initially it was contended that homosexual acts should be decriminalized⁴¹ because it was a matter between consenting adults. Now, that private relationship has been granted public sanction.

Again, the point for this specific discussion is the contribution of such legislation to the overall moral climate of society. Those supporting the legislation of same-sex marriage are quick to point out that the legislation does not force anyone to marry another of the same sex, nor is it forcing religious

⁴⁰ The debate over the private nature of sex has a famous (or infamous depending on who you talk to) past in Canada. One of the most famous quotes, within Canada, ever to be uttered was by Pierre Trudeau (Prime Minister from 1968-1979 and from 1980-1984) when he said in reference to abortion, homosexuality and divorce, “the state has no place in the bedrooms of the nation” (<http://canadaonline.about.com/od/trudeaudeath/a/trudeaudies.htm>).

⁴¹ This was official done in Canada in 1969 by the Minister of Justice, Pierre Elliot-Trudeau (see http://www.cbc.ca/news/background/samesexrights/timeline_canada.html).

institutions to perform or recognize same-sex marriage.⁴² This is true, but it is somewhat of a misleading statement. As we have seen, the argument for legislation of same-sex marriage is usually given under the guise that one moral position should not be imposed over another. In other words, those who want marriage to remain as it has been defined for millennia should not be allowed to push their moral agenda on those who wish to change the definition.

The application regarding the fourth element of natural law echoes much of what has already been discussed.⁴³ Once again it should be noted that there are numerous related issues that could be discussed, but the core of this issue goes back to the discussion on articulating a particular worldview and the components that comprise it.⁴⁴ Again the question can be asked, if some sort of divine foundation for morality has been rejected, what has replaced it? And, does that new foundation provide an adequate foundation for the rights and freedoms being claimed in this issue? And further, on the basis of this new foundation, what keeps the legislation of morality from simply being an act of political power? In other words, why should it be assumed with confidence that what the Canadian government has done is truly an act of foundational moral good and not just simply political expediency? If a purely anthropocentric foundation and justification is being given for the re-definition of marriage, then what is to say other foundational issues will not also be changed or challenged when the human element (i.e. the government) changes. Aquinas' position that changes in law should be infrequent

since they damage the overall credibility of law can be recalled at this point. If the

⁴² At the heart of much of the debate that led up to the decision to re-define marriage was the impact such legislation might have on freedom of religious expression in Canada. Clauses were written into the legislation that protected a religion's right to marry whom they wanted, etc., but there is still a significant amount of concern being expressed over possible future clashes between those who oppose homosexuality and those who promote it.

⁴³ Once again we should note the language of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms that talks about "the supremacy of God and the rule of law". A larger discussion is needed, but it is possible to interpret "the rule of law" as a reference to the natural law we have been referring to here.

foundation of moral legislation is simply human with no greater anchor, then what keeps law from arbitrary change? On the basis of what has been asserted in chapter three, without a divine reference the answers to these questions are not promising. One of the most practical issues to consider then in this discussion of how to legislate morality, is a renewed interest in “first things”; those principles that build a moral foundation.

7.6 Conclusion

This chapter has addressed some of the practical consequences of the issues put forth in this thesis. It is acknowledged that there are a great many of them and that only a few have been dealt with. Again, the purpose of this thesis was to consider some foundational concerns regarding the role of community in ethics. By their nature, foundational concerns spawn numerous related issues and consequences. The ones addressed in this chapter focused on some of the core issues raised, recognizing along the way that they, in turn, raised even further questions. Such is the nature of moral and philosophical thought. The specific issues dealt within this chapter, and the concerns that they represent, provide yet another platform from which to consider the implications of a communal emphasis in moral decision making. In the end, this should be expected. It shows that trying to bring a more communal voice into ethics will result in questioning and challenging some established foundational views. And in that process we discover that the implication of questioning and challenging such views is that we raise a great many other issues.

⁴⁴ The entire discussion of whether or not homosexuality is ‘natural’ immediately comes to mind.

CONCLUSIONS

1. Summation

In the book, Shaping A Christian Worldview, David Gushee briefly recounts four historical stories: the Epic of Gilgamesh, and those of Epicurus, Karl Marx, and Adolf Hitler. At the end of his summation of these people and events he makes the following comment, “What do all these stories have in common? Simply this: they show that worldviews are the ultimate foundation of moral norms. *Human beings live their lives on the basis of the stories that they tell and the convictions that they hold about ultimate reality*” (see Dockery & Thornbury, 2002:112, emphasis authors’). In essence, this is at the core of everything that has been written in this thesis and the thread that runs throughout each chapter.

The foundation of our discussion regarding the role of community in ethics is built around the narratives that shape our lives. In chapter one, we showed how our story has significantly changed over the past few generations and is continuing to change now. Concisely put, ideas matter. We are often biased towards action, and action is important. But what we often miss is that any action or choice is, somewhere along the line, motivated by a thought or idea. The following quote comes from a very different discipline than the one focused on in this thesis, economic theory, but it captures much of what we wanted to say. “Practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influences, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist...It is ideas, not vested interests, which are dangerous for good or evil” (Keynes, 1997:383-384). The ideas that have shaped North American society over the past couple of centuries have moved us to the point of questioning whether any story exists that can bind us all together. This is the problem that relativism and hyper-individualism bring with them. The modern story, based on Enlightenment philosophy, questioned and

eventually displaced the Judeo-Christian foundation that western thought had been built upon. But eventually, the modern story began to show cracks and a shift to the postmodern was made.

It could be suggested that the more “fluid” postmodern mindset is simply a response to the cold rationalism of the modern mindset, but there is more to it than that. As we saw in chapter two, postmodernism is a product of a number of philosophies, particularly romanticism and existentialism, which tried to bring about some sense of meaning to human life. The modern era questioned the Judeo-Christian narrative, but the strictly anthropocentric approach and rationalism of the modern era did little to answer the ultimate questions of life. More was needed and the philosophical roots of postmodernism offered some suggestions of how to meet that need. Rather than abandoning the anthropocentric approach of modernism, postmodernism has taken the emphasis on individuality to new levels.¹ Enlightenment philosophy convinced moderns that humans were inherently good and rational, able to construct a system of meaning from within the human experience. Postmodern philosophy questions these assumptions. While trying to maintain the authority and autonomy of the individual, postmodernism questions whether we can construct anything at all. Or, more accurately, postmodernism suggests that perhaps all that we can construct is our own personal realities rather than a meta-narrative that orders and explains all of life. In many respects, the postmodern emphasis on relativism and personal construction of reality is simply the outcome of the existentialist philosophy that gave it life. While existentialism abstractly questioned the absurdity of life and encouraged the individual to express themselves in some kind of meaningful way, postmodernism gives the individual a more practical way of doing so. Consequently, as we noted previously, what we are left with is a relativism that

¹ It can be suggested that the postmodern era could also be called hypermodernism in that rather than offering new answers or a new direction in philosophy it simply takes the premises of modernism to its natural conclusion.

has, among other things, led a significant element of North American culture to the point of accepting the individual as the final authority in all matters ethical.

We concluded in this second chapter that the result of this shift in thought is that we have little or no resources to deal with the communal aspect of human nature. While we have not moved entirely away from the communal element, postmodern philosophy has left us with a significant hole to fill. With the lack of a meta-narrative to ground our morality, North America is struggling to find the communal voice required to address the core ethical issues that it faces.

In chapter three we outlined a Biblical response to this situation. It was asserted that while not the only one to do so, the Biblical worldview strongly emphasizes a strong communal voice in the ethical decision-making process. Inherent to the Christian story is the idea of God working through a community of faith that seeks to embody His values and purpose. And further to that, it is those values and that purpose that ultimately give meaning to humanity and the communities in which it exists. We suggested that an emphasis on the Biblical message focused around God's redemptive story, which meant taking sin seriously; God's redemptive work, which meant understanding that God sought to address the problem of sin and its effects on His creation; and God's faithful community, His choice to work through groups of people who adopt His values and purpose.² We concluded in this chapter that understanding human existence in this way led to some significant implications for the role of community in ethics. We emphasized that understanding the 'why' and not just the 'what' or specific content of Christian ethics was very important since it kept the purpose of the Christian ethic at the forefront of the discussion. We also emphasized that this foundation allows us to deal with issues never mentioned in scripture, but yet still very much a part of the human condition. Understanding this foundation of the Christian ethic allows the church to have a more developed moral voice.

Chapter four showed that when we address ethical issues with a more communal voice in mind rather than just from an individual perspective, we often see, in North America, the perspective changes significantly. The emphasis of this chapter was not just to show the difference a communal emphasis makes, but also to show that these issues are best dealt with when a strong communal voice is heard. Especially when dealing with life and death moral issues that face us, we saw how putting those issues into a larger communal context helped us to recognize the larger impact of them. Using the issues of euthanasia and poverty, we saw that the impact of these issues went well beyond the specific individual(s) involved, but had significant social consequences as well. Further, we concluded that for both issues, it was only with a more communal focus that we could actually deal with them. A strictly individual approach did not provide adequate resources to answer the complexity of the issues, nor did it provide a meaningful answer to these issues. To illustrate this point further, using another significant moral issue, we can consider a comment made by Lucinda Peach, whom we encountered in chapter five. In summarizing her position regarding religious lawmaking and abortion she makes the following comment:

...the present-day reality is that many pregnant women lack any community of support, especially a husband or partner willing to share responsibility for the woman's unwanted pregnancy. Because our society, for better or worse, places a premium on individual freedom and autonomy, most pregnant women, like other citizens, have a reasonable expectation that they are primarily responsible for making the fundamental decisions about their lives, including whether to bear and/or raise a child. Given the realities of the ethos of individualism in our society, it is especially unjustly discriminatory to impose the model of communitarian citizenship on a woman with an unwanted pregnancy, especially when her community has not demonstrated its commitment to her flourishing (Peach, 2002:133).

² We also noted that while individuals have played a significant role in biblical history, the emphasis was always on these individuals as members of a particular faith community.

Much could be said regarding Peach's comment. Once again, some significant assumptions are being made that need to be considered further, but the one most pertinent to this thesis is her apparent assumption that we are helpless to do anything about the hyper-individualism of our culture. It may very well be true that women facing unwanted pregnancies, along with other individuals facing significant moral decisions, may not have the communal support they need. But rather than suggesting that our response to that situation should be "let the individual decide whatever they want", perhaps a better response would include addressing the lack of community. Perhaps the issue we are faced with is not just what decision needs to be made in the immediate context. As suggested in chapter three, a better approach to the issue would be finding a way to build stronger communal resources that allow key ethical issues, like euthanasia, poverty, and abortion, to be dealt with on a larger and more adequate scale. Subsequently, instead of lamenting the fact that the weight of so many of these key issues currently falls on the shoulders of the individual directly involved, we should work to provide these individuals with the communal context that would significantly help them with these issues.

In chapter five we considered how the church might play a role as a moral community in a secular society. If, as we have suggested, the church, as God's faithful community, has a significant role to play in larger culture, then serious consideration needs to be given as to how that is to happen. In what ways does the church and its values influence larger culture? In chapter five we outlined a variety of responses given to this issue. We quickly saw that the discussion was far from a simple one. Beliefs about how the church is supposed to relate, or not to relate as the case may be, to secular culture vary a great deal and carry with them a significant emotional element as well. Understanding how the gospel is meant to morally impact those who are not adherents of it is a matter of much debate.

With this fact in mind we concluded in our fifth chapter that we needed to avoid a simplistic approach to the problem. We affirmed that even though the issue might be a complex and thorny one, there were, nonetheless, things to be said about how the church ought to function as a moral community. In this discussion we reiterated the connection between ideas and action and that the moral action of the church needed to be, and was, closely connected to the theology of the church. We emphasized how the theological *identity* of the church was vital to understanding its *function* as a moral voice in secular context. Further, we suggested that certain approaches suggested were not adequate in defining the social-moral task of the church. Approaches that advocated a significant withdrawal from or a significant assimilation with culture were not truly representative of the Biblical witness. We also concluded, however, that we needed to take a flexible approach to the issue. Rather than seeing one model or one approach as the only way in which the church can interact with culture, we suggested that it was important to understand the variety of cultural contexts the church finds itself in and set the social-moral agenda of the church accordingly. Rather than seeing this as a lack of a moral standard, this kind of approach allowed the church to identify its core values and do the difficult work of thinking about how those values could be most effectively communicated to its surrounding culture.

In chapter six we dealt with one of the most difficult topics within our discussion. In this chapter we asserted that one of the key roles the larger community plays in ethics is the legislating of morality. We suggested that far from being something we cannot or ought not to do, the legislation of morality was something that the larger community must openly affirm the need for. In short, we concluded in this chapter that morality could be legislated. That this has been done before, is still being done currently, and therefore should continue to be done but in a more open manner. As controversial as this idea may be in our

pluralistic, secular culture, it is one that sits at the foundation of social stability. We concluded that without a strong communal moral voice society could not function nor ultimately survive.

As a part of this discussion we also considered two historical examples in which the larger community is involved in legislation of morality and the purpose the legislation of morality serves. Understanding that formal law not only serves the purpose of informing people what they can and cannot do, but that it also protects the fundamental values of a society, is important to clarify the issues surrounding this chapter. While there may be some important boundaries to acknowledge in the legislation of morality, we concluded that part of the role of the larger community was to provide a moral context in which justice and social stability could flourish.

In chapter seven we discussed some of the practical consequences, or ‘how-tos’ of some of the ideas presented in this thesis. In that chapter we considered four significant areas in which some of the practical application of this thesis could be explored. Those four areas were, Including A Communal Perspective in Ethical Thought, Church as a Moral Community, Individual Rights and Community Mores and, The Legislation of Morality.

It was suggested that to include a more communal perspective in ethical thought it was important to emphasize the necessity of understanding and articulating the worldview assumptions that influence culture. It was suggested that this could be done in the formal structures of society, for example educational and political institutions, as well as the less formal structures like the family.

In the discussion regarding the church as a moral community it was suggested that a renewed interest in the prophetic role of the Church was necessary. It was suggested that if the message of the Church was true, then its emphasis on a more communal approach to ethics could impact larger culture in a positive way. This could be done through formal proclamation by the church, but

also through an emphasis on the theological and character formation of believers that can happen within the church. It was concluded that if the Church wants its ethical message to be taken seriously outside of its walls then it must first be taken seriously within its walls.

In the discussion regarding the relationship between individual rights and community mores it was suggested that a stronger emphasis on the role of the community in ethics did not necessarily lead to a devaluation of the individual. In fact, it was noted how there were significant components to the Christian worldview that promoted the inherent value of the individual person. The tension here was to find ways in which the communal voice and overall welfare of society could be encouraged while holding to a basic respect of the individual. It was suggested that rather than seeing these two components as mutually exclusive, individual *versus* community, it was necessary to understand how the two aspects together provide the resources needed to deal with the significant ethical issues that confront us.

In the final area, the legislation of morality, a number of elements were discussed. Building on much of what had been previously mentioned, it was concluded that moral legislation happens when moral assumptions are enacted into law by the government or other recognized lawmakers. Two basic views were suggested in how, specifically, this could happen. First, it was summarized that there were those who were in favour of certain laws because they prohibited actions thought to be immoral. In this instance, a direct connection between morality and law is maintained. Second, there are those who are against such laws because the emphasis was placed on the private nature of morality and the sharp break between morality and law. In the end, it was concluded that underlying both of these positions was a moral worldview that strongly influenced the final views taken.

2. Concluding Statement

Much has been made in recent years about the rate of change in our postmodern world. Michael Adams comments, “The fact is, there has been change or transition in every era of human history. What distinguishes the last quarter century is the pace and scope of change. Identify a ‘cutting edge’ trend and, within months, it can be mainstream, or even passé” (Adams, 1997:2). Is it any wonder that, living in that kind of quickly and ever-changing environment, we seek to reduce life to the lowest common denominator of the individual? Sometimes it just seems easier if all we have to do is worry about ourselves, and perhaps those closest to us.

But we were not created to live this way.

Modernity, with its market-driven individualism, managed to obscure the fundamental significance of human relationality until the modern world itself began showing its own signs of strain. But now we see what the ancients knew all along – that solitary human existence was inconceivable. We exist in community. We now understand that a key aspect of human moral responsibility as God has revealed it is to do all we can to enhance the experience of human community for all persons (Dockery and Thornbury, eds., 2002:119).

At the centre of this thesis was a desire to deal with first things, fundamental principles and issues that lie at the heart of the human experience. The purpose was not just to deal with issues of philosophy that never touched our day-to-day reality, but to deal with those things necessary to human well-being. Even if we have accomplished this task only modestly, it was worth the effort. To begin the discussion about how we can re-build our moral communal voice is an important first step. Far from being merely an academic discussion, the role of community in ethics is vital to human flourishing. As our discussion of the Biblical context emphasized, this life is not everything that God intended it to be. In order to appreciate best the intent and desire of the Creator, we need to live life together.

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