

# SCRIPTURE, ETHICS AND SPIRITUALITY

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## *Introduction: use and abuse of the Bible*

QUESTIONS OF THE RELATIONSHIP between Scripture, spirituality and ethics are important, if not critical, for Christian living. How are we to reflect ethically on our lives, and what role does Scripture play in that reflection? Further, if we are concerned to become whole persons, living our lives in a less fragmented way, what place does spirituality have in our ethics? Underlying these questions are more general theological issues; our understanding of revelation, the methodology we use in reading Scripture, and the relationship we presuppose (if any) between moral theology and spirituality. This article argues that biblical ethics belongs within the framework of an interior apprehension of spiritual and theological realities.

We need to begin with the acknowledgement that the Bible, on the matter of ethics, has been considerably abused. An obvious example of this is the fundamentalist use of 'proof-texts': the isolating of biblical sentences and their application to contemporary situations, regardless of their biblical context. This approach respects neither the text as a literary and theological whole nor the socio-historical milieu out of which it arises. Although it claims objectivity, based on the view that Scripture is the inerrant Word of God, the danger of subjectivity is greater than in other modes of reading the Bible: the reader presupposes an ethical system and then discovers it in the Bible, using isolated verses for verification.<sup>1</sup>

Linked to this is the assumption that the Bible presents a codified system of ethics for living. Scripture is abused when, in the name of the Bible, particular moral codes are imposed on others. Here the problem is the supposition that ethics is an external code imposed by external authority. Ethical transformation, in this view, follows a behaviourist pattern: what matters is changing external conduct. This approach can be linked to an individualistic reading of Scripture, which focuses on sexual ethics and ignores the kind of social ethics we find, for example, in the prophetic writings of the Old Testament and the Gospel of Luke (e.g. Amos 2:6-7, 5:10-24; Isai 1:12-17, 5:8-24; Mic 2:1-2, 3:1-12;

Lk 1:46–55, 4:16–21, 6:20–26).<sup>2</sup> In these and other ways, Christians fail to understand the nature of Scripture and are thus prevented from making vital connections between the text, spirituality and ethics.

### *Ethical diversity and the Bible*

Moral teachings in the Bible, in so far as they may be discerned as such, are characterized above all by diversity, in form as well as content. The Bible is not a code book of moral instruction. Even the word ‘Torah’ cannot be equated with what Christians understand by ‘law’.<sup>3</sup> The ten commandments and the cultic and moral codes of the Pentateuch belong in a wider narrative framework that tells of creation and God’s covenant with Noah, Abraham and Sarah, and the oppressed children of Israel – narratives that reveal the divine nature as merciful, faithful and involved in human life. Torah is likewise distinct from the prophetic writings in which moral denunciation against injustice is intertwined with concerns about monotheism and idolatry. These writings in turn, with their grounding in covenant and exodus, are distinguished from Wisdom literature, which is largely concerned with everyday living, arising from an affirmation of both creation and human experience.<sup>4</sup>

Such diversity need not imply that there are no underlying ethical principles uniting Scripture, such as the command to love. Nevertheless, even this universal commandment is interpreted in different ways. In the Torah, the *shema* affirms that love of God stands at the heart of the law (Deut 6:4–9), paralleled by the command to love one’s neighbour, including the alien, as oneself (Lev 19:14, 18). This double command is quoted in Jesus’ conversation with the scribe, who is friendly in Mark but hostile in Matthew (Mk 12:28–34/Mt 22:34–40; cf also Lk 10:25–28; Gal 5:14). Both Gospels quote the *shema* and its parallel, giving a classically Jewish response, yet with a distinctive Christian focus: the context, after all, is the impending passion. For Matthew, the command reaches its zenith in love of the enemy (Mt 5:43–48). In John’s Gospel the highest exemplar of love is loving ‘one’s own’ to the end: ‘love one another as I have loved you’ (Jn 13:1, 34; 15:12, 17). This love is symbolized in the footwashing (Jn 13:1–17), and later in the farewell discourse where the master–slave paradigm gives way to an obedience predicated on mutuality and friendship (Jn 15:13–15).

Jesus’ proclamation of the sovereign reign (*basileia*) of God – a major theme taken up in the Synoptic Gospels (Mk 1:14–15 and pars.) – is the beginning of what, strictly speaking, we call New Testament

ethics.<sup>5</sup> Jesus' moral teaching is a significant element in this proclamation, calling for a renewed community and a transformed life-style. Jesus' ministry consists in sharing the hospitality of the table with sinners and outcasts (e.g. Lk 15:1–2, 19:1–10), caring for the poor and healing the sick (Mt 11:2–6/Lk 7:18–23), casting out demons (Mk 1:21–28 and pars.), offering forgiveness (Mk 2:1–12 and pars.), drawing women and men into a 'discipleship of equals' (Mk 15:40–41/Mt 27: 55–56; Lk 8:1–3) and creating a new community beyond the family (Mk 3:31–35).<sup>6</sup> Jesus' eschatological ethics, summarized in the love command, are radicalized in the Synoptic Gospels by the evangelists' conviction that moral living begins and ends in following Jesus, a discipleship made possible, not so much through *imitatio* as through the transforming power of Jesus' death and resurrection.

The Fourth Gospel is very different from the Synoptics, both in its presentation of Jesus' teaching and its seeming lack of concern for ethics. While the concept of the *basileia* is marginal to this Gospel, John speaks instead of eternal life that engages believers radically in the present through God's gift of the Son (Jn 3:16–21). In the Johannine mystical vision, love becomes an eschatological reality in the community of faith. Through incarnation and passion, the divine glory that makes love possible is revealed. The community of believers is drawn into the love and intimacy that reside within the divine being (Jn 1:14, 12:32, 14:23, 17:1–5).

One example of biblical diversity on ethical matters is the varying treatment of the sabbath – a concept, we might note, that is both spiritual and ethical. The Priestly creation account understands the sabbath as the pinnacle of creation, the day of eschatological rest in which God meditates on creation (Gen 2:2–3). In the ten commandments, human beings also are given the sabbath, a command that extends to servants and even domestic animals, who share the same ethical rights. Whereas Exodus grounds the sabbath in creation, and the likeness of human beings to God (Exod 20:8–11), Deuteronomy anchors the sabbath to the Exodus event and the celebration of divine liberation (Deut 5:12–15). In the Gospels, Jesus' controversial freedom with respect to the sabbath is differently constructed. For Mark, it signifies that the law is life-giving and therefore must give way before human needs (Mk 2:23–3:6). The Markan saying, 'the sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath' (Mk 2:27 – not found, significantly, in its Matthaean or Lucan parallels), reflects Mark's Gentile Christianity and its ethical freedom from the requirements of the Jewish law.

In Matthew's Gospel, however, it is far less clear that Jesus actually breaks the sabbath (Mt 12:1–8); Matthew's view is that 'not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished' (Mt 5:18). Here and elsewhere, Matthew wants to hold together both the spirit and the letter, so that the heart of the law ('justice and mercy and faith') flows out into its details, such as the tithing of garden herbs (Mt 23:23). For Matthew, authenticity has to do with the integrity of inner and outer, being and doing, attitude and behaviour, spirituality and ethics.<sup>7</sup> Righteous living is grounded in a spirituality of prayer, trust in God's parental goodness, laying up spiritual treasure, and following Jesus in the ethical way of the 'better righteousness' (Mt 5:20).

In distinction to Matthew, Paul speaks of a new righteousness revealed 'apart from the law' (Rom 3:21). For Paul, the law functions only negatively in Christian living. It belongs to the old age, revealing human bondage to sin and death, yet of itself it is unable to bring about moral and spiritual metamorphosis (Rom 5:12–21). Writing from within a Christian apocalyptic framework, Paul asserts that only the Spirit of the new age has transforming power (Rom 8:1–11; 2 Cor 3:1–11; Gal 4:21–5:1). The pattern of Christian living is baptismal: dying and rising with Christ, leaving behind the old identity and finding the new in the community of the baptized (Rom 6:1–11). In this community, baptism signals the end of racial, class and gender dualism: the ethical implications of Paul's understanding of baptism for the Church are radical and far-reaching (Gal 3:27–29). Here we see how the ethical injunctions of Paul's letters are grounded in what the apostle sees as the core of the gospel: the cross and resurrection, righteousness, grace, love, the body of Christ.<sup>8</sup> Thus ethical conduct on matters of food and sexuality, for example, is important because it affects the community and because the body is destined for resurrection (1 Cor 6—10, 15).

*Paraenesis* – ethical exhortation – is found throughout the New Testament epistles, often at the end, but sometimes, as in Hebrews, alternating with theological teaching. Whereas most epistles conclude with paraenetical teaching, directed at the community and its eschatological life (e.g. Eph 4:1–6:20), the Letter of James consists solely of moral exhortation; it is reacting probably against a solipsistic Paulinism that downplays sanctification. James has a corrective concern for social justice and the plight of the poor (Jas 1:9–11, 2:1–7, 5:1–6). Similarly 1 John, though with stronger theological basis, is concerned that love become a reality within the community

(1 Jn 2:3–11, 3:11–24, 4:7–21). Here and elsewhere in later New Testament writings, there is emphasis upon forgiveness and the challenge to grow in love, despite sinful failure. These epistles, often bearing Paul's name, arise out of a later context where good Christian citizenship and social conformity have tended to replace the earlier and more radical Pauline ethic.<sup>9</sup>

Yet *paraenesis* in the New Testament rarely exists in a vacuum. The last section of Galatians, for example, extols the fruits of life in the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Gal 5:22). These qualities are, at one and the same time, ethical and spiritual; they stand in opposition to life in the 'flesh', life that is self-destructive and harmful to community (Gal 5:19–21); they arise from an authentic freedom that can never be the product of external law. Ethical behaviour is the result of inner conversion; hence spirituality lies at the centre of ethics. Note that this is reflected in the Sermon on the Mount, where the Lord's Prayer and the sayings on prayer lie structurally, as well as theologically, at the centre of Matthew's first discourse (Mt 6:5–15). Even James, that most ethical of all New Testament epistles, speaks paradoxically of 'the perfect law, the law of liberty' (Jas 1:25).

New Testament *paraenesis*, moreover, is concerned with Christian communities rather than individuals. The letters to the Seven Churches in the Apocalypse (Apoc 2:1–3:22) are addressed to church communities in Asia Minor, each having a single angel and lampstand (Apoc 1:20), symbols of a corporate identity. Ethical and spiritual commendation in these chapters (for love, faithfulness and patient endurance) and criticism (against spiritual apathy, cultural accommodation and idolatry) are directed to each church as a body, even where individual leaders are named. As elsewhere in Scripture, biblical writers are as much concerned with the growth and upbuilding of the community as of the individual (e.g. 1 Cor 3:1–23).

It is impossible to chart the course of biblical ethics in an article such as this. Nevertheless, two points can be made in summary about the Bible's moral teaching. First, although Scripture reveals abiding theological truths – such as the goodness of creation, the fallenness of human nature, the covenant mercy of God, and the vision of a just world – the specifications of these truths are never transported unchanged from one generation to another in the biblical world; nor should they be applied uncritically today. On the contrary, biblical morals are as diverse in content and presentation as the contexts from which they arise. Second, moral teaching in the Bible is rarely given as

independent material. It is generally embedded either in narrative (as with the Torah or Matthew's Gospel<sup>10</sup>) or in wider discussion of theological and spiritual themes. Indeed, in many cases – such as New Testament *paraenesis* – moral exhortation flows directly from theological discourse. In this sense, biblical ethics is ultimately inseparable from its wider narrative, theological and spiritual frame.

*Biblical spirituality and ethical reflection*

If we are to respect the diversity of biblical ethics, and take seriously the form in which it is cast, a number of implications follow. In the first place, it is imperative that Christians become familiar with modern, critical ways of reading the Bible. Although historical-critical methodology gives no direct answer to questions about Scripture and ethics, it does help modern readers understand the text in a sensitive and nuanced way. On the one hand, it enables us to read individual passages within their literary context, whether that be narrative (like the Gospels), poetry (such as Canticles or Psalms) or rhetorical discourse (like the prophetic books or epistles). On the other hand, the historical-critical method teaches us to read with awareness of the socio-historical contexts out of which the text arises. We begin to realize that we cannot simply transfer moral teaching unprocessed from the ancient world to the modern.

Take, for example, the divorce logion in Mark's Gospel (Mk 10:1–12). The historical-critical method certainly cannot tell us how we are to interpret this saying for today, but it does uncover dimensions of the text that we need to take into account. We discover that this text forms part of a wider unit dealing with Jesus' journey to Jerusalem (Mk 8:27–10:52); that Mark's theme is discipleship, using the image of taking up the cross; that Mark is concerned to show that the radical call to discipleship affects all aspects of our lives, including marriage, children and wealth (Mk 10:1–31); that Mark understands 'self-denial' as essentially life-giving rather than ascetic and death-dealing (Mk 8:34–35); that it is likely that the historical Jesus – and possibly also Mark himself – was disturbed by a culture that permitted divorce on the flimsiest of grounds and by the damage this caused to women, including social disgrace and loss of their children; that the present form of this text reveals the practice of Mark's Roman-Hellenistic world which, unlike Judaism, permitted women to initiate divorce; that the Torah both extols the intimacy of marriage and yet permits divorce where intimacy fails (Gen 2:23–25; Deut 24:1–4); that, in a different context, Matthew's Gospel permits divorce in exceptional

circumstances (Mt 5:32); and that Mark's Gospel elsewhere presents Jesus' proclamation of the reign of God as addressed precisely to those who are broken, offering new life and hope (Mk 2:13–17).<sup>11</sup> All these aspects, and others, need to be included in contemporary ethical reflection on the meaning of marriage. Such an approach provides an alternative to literal readings that interpret dominical sayings in isolation from their context, ignore canonical diversity, and disregard the reality of the modern nuclear family and the changing status of women.

Secondly, we need to discover a new way of understanding biblical revelation. Paul Ricoeur, using a term of Tillich, speaks of the undesirability of 'heteronomy' as a model of revelation.<sup>12</sup> By heteronomy, Ricoeur means an authoritative structure or influence outside the self that imposes itself on the self – or, for that matter, the community – as the basis and norm of obedience. At the same time, Ricoeur sees the notion of autonomy as little better: a self that relates only to itself and sees itself as the locus of authority. Ricoeur argues for a life-giving dependence on the Word of God that is neither heteronomous nor autonomous. Rather than submission to an authoritative divine word that demands obedience, Ricoeur prefers to speak of the imagination being transformed in the living encounter with God through Scripture. This ties in with Ricoeur's conviction that humankind is an *animal symbolicum* and that symbol, myth, metaphor and image have greater priority in human self-expression than does abstract, analytical discourse.<sup>13</sup>

There are two helpful images that can operate here as models for our reading of Scripture in the light of this view. The first is that of an icon. Just as an icon gives the viewer a profound insight into the eternal through the human medium of images inscribed on wood, so Scripture is a material icon through which we glimpse a vision of God and of human life. To see Scripture in an iconic way is not to reject the human material out of which it is made; indeed the latter, with all its imperfections, is necessary.<sup>14</sup> The second image is that of dialogue. If our dependence on Scripture is to be that of mature adults – grounded in freedom rather than servility or childish conformity – our approach to the text is best seen as one of intimate and vigorous dialogue. In dialogue, we bring our true selves and the reality of our own context, already formed yet open to more radical formation; we come before the divine Word neither as empty vessels nor as all-knowing, self-satisfied beings. In this dialogue, culture speaks to culture, community to community, experience to experience; in the encounter, horizons merge in ways we can never chart or predict. We remain, and yet also become, our true selves.

Thirdly, if Ricoeur is right in understanding revelation as the encounter with the imagination – the symbolic and myth-making part of the self – it means that spirituality plays an important role in ethical reflection. Spirituality is essentially concerned with the role and domain of spirit (*pneuma*): that realm which is infinitely close to us yet always beyond our grasp. An embodied spirituality is one that recognizes the significance of matter and bodily existence in self-understanding. Symbol and imagination are the ways by which we touch the untouchable, the concrete images which, like a ladder, lead us to the eternal.

Spirituality, in this sense, lies at the core of our lives; it is not one dimension of our existence, but the living heart. Transformation and growth in holiness are not external compulsions, nor is Christian obedience concerned with external constraints. For many biblical writers, as we have seen, such a notion of moral living is forced and dangerously hypocritical (e.g. Mt 23:4–5). Jeremiah speaks eschatologically of a covenant inscribed not on tablets of stone (external authority, heteronomy) but on the human heart – that is, through an interior spirituality (Jer 31:31–34; cf Heb 8:8–13). This notion of interiority as the basis of ethical action need not be interpreted in an autonomous way (where I am the sole master or mistress of my destiny), nor as a passive quietism that disdains the external world and its structures.

Thus an embodied spirituality is the true place from which moral reflection and moral living spring. Most ethical questions have to do with bodies or property, but they are resolved in the realm of the spirit. Without symbol and imagination, without spirituality, moral theology degenerates into legalism and authoritarianism, which in turn gives rise to its opposite in the individualism and self-authenticating ethos of modern western culture. In either event, what the Church produces is not mature, self-motivated and loving adults, but rather submissive and/or rebellious children, lacking in centre and selfhood, who have little to offer the community of faith or wider secular society. It need hardly be noted that it lies in the interests of some, even in the Church, to cultivate credulity rather than faith, heteronomy (whether as submission or rebellion) rather than mature selfhood, childish servitude rather than responsible freedom. The imposition of an external moral code is the antithesis of a truly moral theology that arises from an interior spirituality and embraces all things in love.

Fourthly, an ethics grounded in Scripture needs to recognize that human beings are by nature persons-in-community, not psychologically isolated individuals struggling alone to live the ethical life. A

social and relational approach to ethics arises from a spirituality that sees relationship as lying at the core of what it means to be human. More than that, it is anchored in a renewed understanding of God as a communion of persons, in which relationality has primacy over ontology.<sup>15</sup> Such an approach, which is biblically based, challenges the kind of ethics that is fixated on sexual morality and compiling lists of biological do's and don'ts. A relational morality focuses on the quality of relationships between persons: on integrity, love, commitment, self-fulfilment and self-giving.<sup>16</sup>

At the same time, such an ethic is concerned with relationship in its wider political context: trade relations between rich and poor nations, social justice for those deprived of the means to support themselves, gender and racial equality within Church and society, ecological responsibility for our endangered planet, cultivation of peaceful resolution of conflict. If we are to avoid the individualism of western capitalism and its counterpart in material consumerism, we need an ethic that arises from a spirituality of relationship, in which we see ourselves, both politically and individually, as belonging to one another in covenant: our Church, our world, our earth. Yet again, this cannot be an imposition *ab extra*, but needs rather to arise from an interior spirituality nurtured by Scripture. On the other hand, lest this seem like a rejection of the Church's role in moral discernment, a true spirituality will transcend our own time and place, and reach both backwards and forwards into the traditions and hopes of the Church as the communion of saints.

### *Conclusion*

If the Bible is not in the first place a book of rules for righteous living, it is nonetheless a critical resource for ethical reflection. Scripture cannot be used in a simplistic way. Its injunctions cannot be isolated from their literary and socio-historical contexts. The Bible does not exist apart from the Christian community and its narrative, or from contemporary theological interpretation, both in word and deed. Finally, in its recognized diversity, biblical morality cannot be imposed from above nor separated from experience. In this sense, Scripture, ethics and spirituality converge only in the ongoing process of conversion (*metanoia*) which, like a spring of living water, wells up from within and overflows into heart-felt action for love and justice.

### NOTES

1 Further on the problems of biblical fundamentalism, see James Barr, *Fundamentalism* (2nd edn, London: SCM, 1981).

<sup>2</sup> Reading English translations rather than original biblical languages exacerbates the problem, since English no longer differentiates between second and third personal pronouns; we read 'you' in the singular, when the original language may well be plural (see, for example, Paul's image of the temple of the Holy Spirit which is addressed to the community as a whole, 1 Cor 3:16–17).

<sup>3</sup> See T. Mafico, 'Ethics (Old Testament)', *Anchor Bible dictionary* vol 2 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), p 645.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 645–665.

<sup>5</sup> See W. Schrage, *The ethics of the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), especially pp 13–115, and E. Lohse, *Theological ethics of the New Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress, pp 39–60).

<sup>6</sup> E. Schüssler Fiorenza, *In memory of her: a feminist theological reconstruction of Christian origins*, 2nd edn (New York: Crossroad, 1995), pp 118–159.

<sup>7</sup> See especially the antitheses in the Sermon on the Mount concerning murder and adultery (Mt 5:21–30).

<sup>8</sup> J. C. Beker, *Paul the apostle: the triumph of God in life and thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), pp 23–36, speaks helpfully of the Pauline gospel as possessing two complementary dimensions: coherence (the unnegotiable core) and contingency (the contextualization within specific cultures).

<sup>9</sup> The 'household codes' are an example of this kind of weakening of early Christian eschatological ethics; the structures of the Roman-Hellenistic patriarchal household are adopted, with some modification (cf Col 3:18–4:1; Eph 5:22–6:9; 1 Pet 2:13–3:7; 1 Tim 2:8–15; Tit 2:2–10). Cf Schüssler Fiorenza, *op. cit.*, pp 251–284.

<sup>10</sup> Matthew's Gospel is constructed around an alternating pattern of narrative and discourse. The five major discourses, or teaching blocks, are embedded within the story of Jesus' life, death and resurrection. In this way, Matthew tries to hold together word and deed, being and doing.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, M. D. Hooker, *The Gospel according to Mark* (London: A & C Black, 1991), pp 234–237.

<sup>12</sup> P. Ricoeur, 'Toward a hermeneutic of the idea of revelation', *Harvard Theological Review* 70 (1977), pp 1–37.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, P. Ricoeur, *The symbolism of evil* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), pp 3–24, and *Interpretation theory: discourse and the surplus of meaning* (Texas: Texas Christian University Press, 1975), pp 45–87.

<sup>14</sup> Cf S. Schneiders' description of the Bible as the *symbol* of the Word of God in *The revelatory text: interpreting the New Testament as sacred Scripture* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), pp 27–63.

<sup>15</sup> Cf C. M. LaCugna, *God for us: the Trinity and Christian life* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), especially pp 243–317.

<sup>16</sup> Feminist theologians have pointed out the importance of both dimensions in ethical discourse, particularly for women whose vocation has been one of sacrificial service at the cost of developing their own sense of self. See the now classic article of Valerie Saiving, written in 1960, arguing that women's sinfulness consists of self-negation rather than self-promotion: 'The human situation: a feminine view' in C. P. Christ and J. Plaskow (eds), *Womanspirit rising: a feminist reader in religion* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979), pp 25–42.