The Bible and
Moral Theology
Pitfalls and Possibilities

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Of all the fields of Catholic theology none was more neglectful of the Bible than moral theology during our recent past. Today, the ferment and renewal of moral theology can be directly traced to the various efforts to incorporate biblical insights into ethical reflection. This essay reviews several of these efforts and the authors then examine a recent example of episcopal teaching for its use of the Bible.

The Protestant theologian James Gustafson has suggested that the major historical difference between Protestant and Roman Catholic ethical thought has been the place of Scripture (Gustafson, 1978, 29). Indeed, there has been a tendency in Roman Catholic moral theology for the past four hundred years, heavily influenced by a particular understanding of natural law, to use Scripture as proof text, where scriptural texts, often taken out of context, are used to corroborate arguments derived from other sources, especially natural law (see Schneider, 29). It is further illuminative of this period that the masterful work on the great themes in the history of Catholic moral theology, The Making of Moral Theology (Mahoney), has no chapter on the relationship between the Bible and moral theology (although two of six sections of the chapter on “Nature and Supernature” are devoted to revelation). Its index has no citations for “Bible,” “New Testament,” “Old Testament,” or “Scripture.”

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The Call for a Biblically Grounded Moral Theology

Also surprising is the fact that, in the documents of Vatican II, there is little explicit reference to moral theology or to the methods, assumptions, and principles of how to live the moral life. In The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes), for example, the council merely suggests that members of the Church consider the important issues of the day “in the light of the Gospel and of human experience” (n. 46). The Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (Dei Verbum) mentions “the study of Holy Scripture should be the soul of theology” (n. 24). More specifically, the council addresses the topic of moral theology within the decree On Priestly Formation (Optatam Totius): “Special care should be given to the perfecting of moral theology. Its scientific presentation should draw more fully on the teaching of Holy Scripture and should throw light upon the exalted vocation of the faithful in Christ and their obligation to bring forth fruit in charity for the life of the world” (n. 16).

With these words the council invited moral theologians and Scripture scholars to explore together the biblical foundations and groundings for a contemporary moral theology. But the essential question implicit in this invitation remains unanswered: precisely how shall the Scriptures inform our quest to live authentically and to articulate the principles of a Christian moral life?

Summary of Approaches

During the time immediately after the council, both Catholic moral theologians and the magisterium began making more explicit reference to Scripture in moral reflection. The two important pastoral letters that the U.S. bishops issued in the 1980s, on war and peace and on the economy, both begin with lengthy sections on the Scriptures. The bishops then attempt to integrate this scriptural vision with other resources as they try to articulate the bases for their moral conclusions in a way open not only to other Christians but to all people of good will.

Moralists have likewise attempted various articulations of what in Scripture ought to be morally normative for Christians and in what ways Scripture is in fact normative. William Spohn, for example, sees in this multiplicity of approaches “not . . . scholarly chaos but . . . the irreducible richness of Scripture itself” (Spohn, 1984, 3). Nevertheless, one cannot reconcile in any simple way these multiple Catholic answers to the question of how Scripture currently relates to moral theology.

Germain Grisez, for example, has suggested that although “the Gospels do not provide a complete and detailed moral code,” nevertheless “one can expect to find
in Jesus’ teaching and example the basic guidance needed for the Christian life” (Grisez, 628). Furthermore, he believes that this guidance can be formulated in specific norms (608). Similarly, Edouard Hamel, once professor of moral theology at the Gregorian University in Rome, has stated: “The light provided by Scripture will be added to the light of human reason, supporting it, guiding its reflections, keeping it out of impasses and indicating to it the sure paths to be followed. . . . Only revelation provides the full meaning of human moral rules, of all moral values” (Hamel, 110).

On the other hand, a moral theologian such as Charles Curran would suggest that one ought not to look to Scripture for specific content in the form of moral norms. Rather, he believes that Scripture helps one articulate a Christian horizon: “The horizon or ultimate way in which the Christian looks at reality is in my judgment in the light of the Christian mysteries of creation, sin, incarnation, redemption, and resurrection destiny. . . . This tries to give a formal intelligibility rather than a content intelligibility” to the Christian moral life (Curran, 81).

Liberation theologians have used Scripture as a source for their critique of ideology. Furthermore, Scripture itself must be read from the perspective of the poor. Gustavo Gutiérrez, for example, has suggested that “participation in the process of liberation is an obligatory and privileged locus for Christian life and reflection. In this participation will be heard nuances of the word of God which are imperceptible in other existential situations and without which there can be no authentic and fruitful faithfulness to the Lord” (Gutiérrez, 49).

Contemporary moralists have also suggested that the Bible is a “school for the affections.” William Spohn claims that contemporary Christians experience God’s love in ways analogous to the experience of the first disciples. This being the case, “the biblical images are not testifying primarily to long-past events; the audacious claim of faith is that they disclose the same Lord to our own lives. . . . The memory of that One present in our past empowers confidence that he continues to walk with us” (Spohn, 1984, 119).

On the one hand, each of these contemporary moral positions attempts to be faithful to the call by the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World to use the gospel and human experience to articulate answers to the important questions facing the modern world. On the other hand, the sheer diversity of these answers raises questions about both moral and biblical methodologies.
**Problems of Method**

It is true to say that prior to Vatican II “Catholic moral theology was largely based on the natural law tradition, with Scripture being used primarily as a quarry for proof-texts to bolster positions arrived at on other grounds” (Harrington, 13). Today, for the most part however, biblical scholars and moral theologians have rejected this “proof-text” approach, but they differ considerably about what the acceptable alternative methods should be.

Three factors especially make more difficult the use of the Bible in shaping contemporary moral theology. These include: (1) the diverse and multifaceted character of the biblical text as an anthology of different literary forms and opposing or contradictory traditions and theologies, (2) the multiple cultural and historical (dare we say ideological?) contexts that gave rise to the individual texts themselves, and (3) the differing views concerning the canonical authority of any given text within the context of the canon as a whole.

One example of diverse traditions evident within a single gospel will suffice here to illustrate the point. How does one reconcile, for example, the differing moral imperatives to teach, baptize, and preach in the name of Jesus’ own authority (Matt 10:7; 28:19-20) on the one hand, with the explicit command of Jesus on the other, *not* to teach or to claim superior authority, “As for you, do not be called ‘Rabbi.’ You have but one teacher. . . . Do not be called ‘Master’: you have but one master, the Messiah” (Matt 23:8, 10) ? Which biblical injunction holds the greater force? Which should undergird and inform the Christian moral life? Which supports or challenges the claims to authority and status among Christian ministers today? This example, and a hundred others like it, highlights the persistent problem of how to adjudicate the competing claims, differing assumptions, contrasting moral imperatives, and explicitly contradictory injunctions within the canon of Scripture. There is no easy answer here, but one must at least acknowledge the differences and strive to hear the various voices in conversation and mutual critique.

The second characteristic of the Scriptures posing serious challenge for interpreters concerns the diverse historical and cultural contexts that gave rise to the texts themselves, beginning with the thirteenth century B.C.E. and continuing to the early second second C.E. The Scriptures are not disinterested reports of
purely factual data about the covenant community of ancient Israel and the life of Jesus and his earliest followers from which we can distill unambiguous moral precepts. Instead, we find stories told by diverse communities of faith, set within the cultural contexts of their own time and place. The Bible contains narratives and poetry committed to writing by the literate, higher status members of those communities whose perspectives and (sometimes biased) interests have shaped the nature of the texts themselves. Discerning universally valid moral principles within these texts, therefore, is often impossible. Lisa Cahill summarizes the dilemma well:

If diverse biblical witnesses cannot be reconciled, or even brought into a pattern of mutual toleration, then is the conclusion unavoidable that only some parts are normative? If so, are there any uniform, persuasive criteria for distinguishing such parts? Is our selection of privileged texts and themes arbitrary or itself relative to biases furnished by our own culture? (Cahill, 18)

For example, what should be the moral force for the conduct of war today in light of the following explicit command in Deuteronomy: “When you are at war with a city and have to lay siege to it, you shall not destroy its trees by putting an ax to them. You may eat their fruit, but you must not cut down the trees” (20:19). Should not this strict biblical prohibition apply equally to ancient Israel, to the use of Agent Orange as a defoliant in the Vietnam War, and to the current Israeli practice of destroying the olive groves of its enemies? If we answer “Yes” to this question, what are our reasons for doing so? If we say “No,” why do we reject such an application?

To give another example: we might pose the question—whose interests are at play in the oft-quoted, and much challenged, biblical command: “Women should keep silent in the churches, for they are not allowed to speak, but should be subordinate, even as the law says” (1 Cor 14:34)? In both these examples, attention to the historical and cultural contexts of the text in question is an essential step in weighing its moral impact for contemporary Christian practice.

A final issue to be addressed concerns the character of canonical authority itself. For the faith community of the Church, the Bible is a privileged “revelatory text,” one that claims “inspired” status and normative force. But the Bible is not the only, nor the exclusive source of revelatory authority. Scripture stands in dialogue with the ongoing traditions and Tradition within the community. Therefore, the authoritative status of any given biblical text must be tested over time within the community of the Church, with its magisterium, its ministerial leaders at every level, and above all among its diverse peoples. This principle means that the Bible is only one source of moral wisdom in the community, a source that is admittedly privileged, but also limited in its application and multivalent in its interpretive possibilities. For that reason Scripture stands together with
reason, tradition, and experience in mutual and critical correlation as sources of revelation and of moral direction for the Christian life.

_Biblical Ethics and the Ethics of Biblical Interpretation_

When the council called for a moral theology that would draw “more fully on the teaching of Holy Scripture” it gave rise among Catholic exegetes to numerous exegetical studies of the ethical teachings contained, both explicitly and implicitly, within the particular biblical books and traditions. Hebrew Bible scholars studied the universalist ethics of the Creator God, the God who was seen as guardian and protector of all creation, and who had entered into covenant with the Israelite people. Others emphasized the Covenant (Exod 20:22–23:33) and Holiness Codes (Lev 17–26) as expressions of the proper response to God’s gracious actions in their midst. These traditions specify right action in response to God and to neighbor. They stress justice to the powerless: the poor, widows, orphans, slaves, and the resident aliens (Deut 24:19-22). The prophets of ancient Israel often reiterated this moral vision of a people living in covenant fidelity with a God who saves. They castigated those who abused the powerless in their midst (e.g., Amos 2:6-8). Much of the specific case law in the Torah is particular to the culture and practices of a tribal society grounded in the principles of kinship, honor and shame, and retribution—factors appropriate to their social historical context.

Nevertheless, despite the particularity of these texts, there is, within these Covenant traditions, a social vision of harmony and justice among peoples and the earth that claims enduring validity into the twenty-first century. The study of ethics in the New Testament texts centers especially on the person of Jesus and his teaching and on the moral exhortation found throughout the body of the Pauline writings. But, as Pheme Perkins argues, these texts do not provide a handbook of moral principles any more than the Old Testament texts. “Diversity in its sources, lack of systematization in its argument, and ambiguity about the weight attached to the warrants for concrete ethical recommendations make the New Testament difficult to use as a basis for a synthesis for Christian moral [teaching]” (Perkins, 656).
Nevertheless, Jesus’ life and teaching inaugurated a new horizon within which to view the world. This worldview was radically shaped by God’s definitive in-breaking with power to overcome the evil forces and to offer life, salvation, for all who would believe. The Spirit of this powerful God was at work in the world, drawing all people to imitate the love and mercy, the compassion and forgiveness of a loving God revealed in Jesus. These general exhortations, however, leave to Christians of every age the responsibility to discern how, in their particular time and situation, the ethics of the Kingdom must be lived.

A final aspect of the quest for a biblically informed moral theology concerns what scholars today describe as “the ethics of interpretation.” This phrase highlights the moral responsibility inherent in any act of interpreting a biblical text and of calling the community to obedience based on this interpretive word. To engage in a biblically informed ethics today is not merely a descriptive task by which we might summarize the various ethical components of any given biblical text. It entails a serious obligation and commitment to the liberating potential of the biblical word and, at the same time, a recognition that the Bible has in fact been used to legitimate the opposite: racial enslavement, gender subordination, violation of the “outsider,” and the stranger in our midst.

Test Case:
“Columbia River Watershed: Caring for Creation and the Common Good”

An Ethicist’s View

In 1970, James Gustafson wrote what has become a classic article on the use of the Bible in Christian ethics, “The Place of Scripture in Christian Ethics: A Methodological Study.” In that study, Gustafson raised the question regarding how a biblically-informed Christian ethics could evaluate the U.S. invasion of Cambodia. Having first articulated certain understandings of the use of the Bible in ways that he considered to be problematic, he then articulated his own understanding, suggesting that “Scripture provides data and concepts for understanding the human situation, both in terms of its limits and its possibilities” (Gustafson, 1974, 139). Gustafson suggested that the Bible provides “clues” regarding the sorts of actions that God enables and requires, and thus provides assistance for Christians both in identifying actions consistent with this biblical witness and in judging those events that are not consistent with what God enables and requires.

Gustafson further suggested that such judgments are never made on the basis of Scripture alone but rather are the result of a “dialectical process” that appeals not only to the Bible but also to a variety of non-scriptural resources, with Scripture used not as a proof-text but as “corroborating evidence for judgments made.
in the light of more general theological and ethical principles” and values (1974, 140). In many ways, Gustafson’s dialectic can be compared to what David Tracy describes as a method of mutually critical correlation (Tracy, 131).

These elements of Gustafson’s methodology—his understanding of Scripture as providing clues to what God is enabling and requiring of contemporary persons, his dialectical approach, and his understanding of Scripture as corroborative—are also present in a pastoral letter written by the bishops of northwestern U.S. and southwestern Canada critically reflecting on the current state of the Columbia River watershed (Catholic Bishops). It may be illuminating to look at this letter as one contemporary way of allowing the Bible and biblical ethics to inform an issue addressed by contemporary ethics in general and Christian ethics in particular, that of ecology.

When reading the letter, especially its early sections, one is struck by the sheer number of quotations from both testaments of Scripture. Yet it is not simply these quotations that distinguish the document. There is a general tone that sets the letter solidly in a biblical and Catholic vision, especially its allusion to the medieval teaching of the “two books,” understanding the “book” of nature and the book of the Bible as related and complementary (Catholic Bishops, n. 2). Using the language of Gustafson, the bishops raise the question of what God is enabling and requiring of the people of the Columbia River area. The bishops suggest, for example, that the “preservation of the Columbia Watershed’s beauty and benefits requires us to enter into a gradual process of conversion and change” (n. 3). They further acknowledge that a full answer to the ecological challenge posed by the situation of the Columbia River watershed demands a spiritual as well as an ecological vision, a vision that can transform the future of the region (n. 11). Their articulation of this eschatological vision is based explicitly on the prophetic books of the Bible as well as on the book of Revelation (n. 11). It becomes the articulation of an eschatological ideal, of a “place of our hopes and dreams [where] people will manifest a fidelity to their calling to be images of God and caretakers of God’s creation” (n. 12). The biblical materials thus help convey this faith conviction regarding what God is enabling and requiring of humanity, not in a fundamentalist way of deriving concrete rules from particular passages of Scripture but by putting into words a biblically inspired vision of the possibilities offered to humanity.

The bishops place this biblical vision in relationship with other sources of wisdom. First of all, they juxtapose biblical materials with the social teaching of

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the Catholic Church, themselves derived from both biblical images and natural law. Furthermore, as has been typical of pastoral letters by the North American bishops at least from the 1980s, the letter is addressed not only to the Catholic community but also “to all people of good will” (n. 2). It is offered as part of a larger conversation needed for “the resolution of the complex issues of the Columbia River Watershed” (n. 3). This typically America Catholic understanding of the purpose of such pastoral letters demands the dialectic suggested by Gustafson. It also occasions a possible critique regarding the question whether secular sources of wisdom are as prominent in the document as those of the Church.

Gustafson’s third concern was that the Bible not be used in a fundamentalist way or as proof-text, but nevertheless be used as corroborative evidence for more general theological and ethical arguments. Again, this also seems to be a concern of the authors of the pastoral letter. The letter uses the term “religious memory” to talk about the Church’s teaching about people’s responsibilities (n. 7). This memory, based on Scripture, reinforces what the bishops had already discussed using other sources. The document’s “spiritual vision” is supplemented by a “social vision” and an “ecological vision” (n. 12).

Gustafson sees this biblical understanding of what God is enabling and requiring as the foundation not only for the articulation of a vision of human possibility but also as a basis for a critique of those parts of the human situation that are not consistent with what God requires. This may be where the bishops’ letter falls short of Gustafson’s conception of a biblically inspired ethic. It is true that the letter names the sin of those who are part of the watershed: “people have become more absorbed by material things and less conscious of spiritual and social relationships, consumerism has replaced compassion, and exploitation of the earth has replaced stewardship” (n. 10). Nevertheless this naming of sin appears as a very small part of a pastoral letter that seems to spend most of its space articulating a more positive vision regarding the possibilities of what God is enabling than the rejection of sin that God is requiring.

This positive vision of what God is enabling may arise from a larger Christian vision. Following David Tracy, William Spohn has suggested that Catholic ethics often exemplifies an analogical approach to the relationship between the situ-

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*Catholic ethics often exemplifies an analogical approach to the relationship between the situations described in the Bible and those of our own day.*
ations described in the Bible and those of our own day rather than a dialectical one as suggested by Gustafson. The former allows “the biblical text to mediate between original generations of Christians and subsequent ones . . . [enabling them to] discover the same power of the Spirit working in them that inspired the apostolic communities” (Spohn, 1999, 60). In contrast, the dialectical imagination is concerned with unmasking the illusions of this generation and deflating its presumptions. Though both forms of imagination are important in any contemporary retrieval of Scripture, traditionally Catholicism has seen the analogical imagination as primary while mainstream Protestantism has more often articulated a dialectical approach.

**A Biblical Scholar’s View**

A close analysis of the use of Scripture in the pastoral letter reveals a strategy that combines both citation of specific texts and frequent implicit reference to the biblical vision of creation and the purposes of human existence. The letter incorporates thirty direct biblical citations, seventeen from the Old Testament and thirteen from the New Testament. Prominent among these citations, not surprisingly, are multiple references to the creation texts of Genesis in so far as these establish a core biblical vision of God’s creation as fundamentally good, as revelatory of God’s own being. They celebrate creation as God’s gift of sustenance for human creatures. And they remind human creatures to exercise careful stewardship and protection over all creation. These Genesis texts are supplemented with several others from the Wisdom tradition which celebrate creation’s revelatory capacity, such as Wisdom 13:5 which is quoted in full: “From the greatness and the beauty of created things their original author, by analogy, is seen.”

The principal function of these citations in the document is not to propose specific laws and ordinances that could provide a blueprint for action, but to establish and to reinforce an ecological vision and a spirituality that is biblically grounded. This vision, the bishops claim, is at once spiritual, social, and ecological. Reference to prophetic texts, and to the final chapters of the book of Revelation, articulate a glimpse of God’s promised future yet to be realized. Texts like Isaiah’s vision of harmony in the animal kingdom between “wolf and lamb, panther and kid, calf and lion, with a little child leading” (Isa 11:6) offer a paradigm for what the Bible claims as God’s intent for all creation. It is a profound vision of harmony, contentment, abundance, justice, and protection for all forms of life.

The biblical tradition linking abuse of creation with human sin also appears in the bishops’ reflections. But, as noted above, the letter refers to human sinfulness only in passing with citations of biblical passages from Leviticus (26:16-22), Hosea (4:3), and Romans (8:22). A stronger critique in this section might have included, for example, the prophetic and passionate question of Jeremiah (12:4): “How long must the earth mourn, the green of the whole countryside wither? For
the wickedness of those who dwell in it beasts and birds disappear . . . ". In short, the letter chooses to emphasize the positive vision of creation with its biblical grounding, but in so doing it has downplayed the equally forceful prophetic critique linking human sin and the devastation of creation.

The least effective use of Scripture appears, perhaps, in the section subtitled “Living Water.” Here, the intent is to draw on the rich biblical symbolism of “living water” as a symbol of life, cleansing, ritual purity, spiritual sustenance and to link this biblical symbolism with the living water of the Columbia River. The texts noted signal well the multifaceted character of the biblical symbol, but citing a string of otherwise disconnected biblical references related to water seems to detract from, rather than support, the carefully argued statement in the rest of the letter.

**Conclusion**

As an example of the council’s call for a moral theology that would “draw more fully on the teaching of Holy Scripture,” the pastoral letter on the Columbia River watershed serves as an exemplary model for all future Church pronouncements. It draws carefully from Scripture a vision of creation and human stewardship of the earth that serves as the solid foundation for its message regarding the protection of creation in the Columbia River watershed. At the same time, this letter reflects both the strengths and the weaknesses, the pitfalls and possibilities, of the dialogue between moral theology and Scripture. Finally, it reminds ethicist and Scripture scholar alike that this dialogue has only just begun.

**References**


