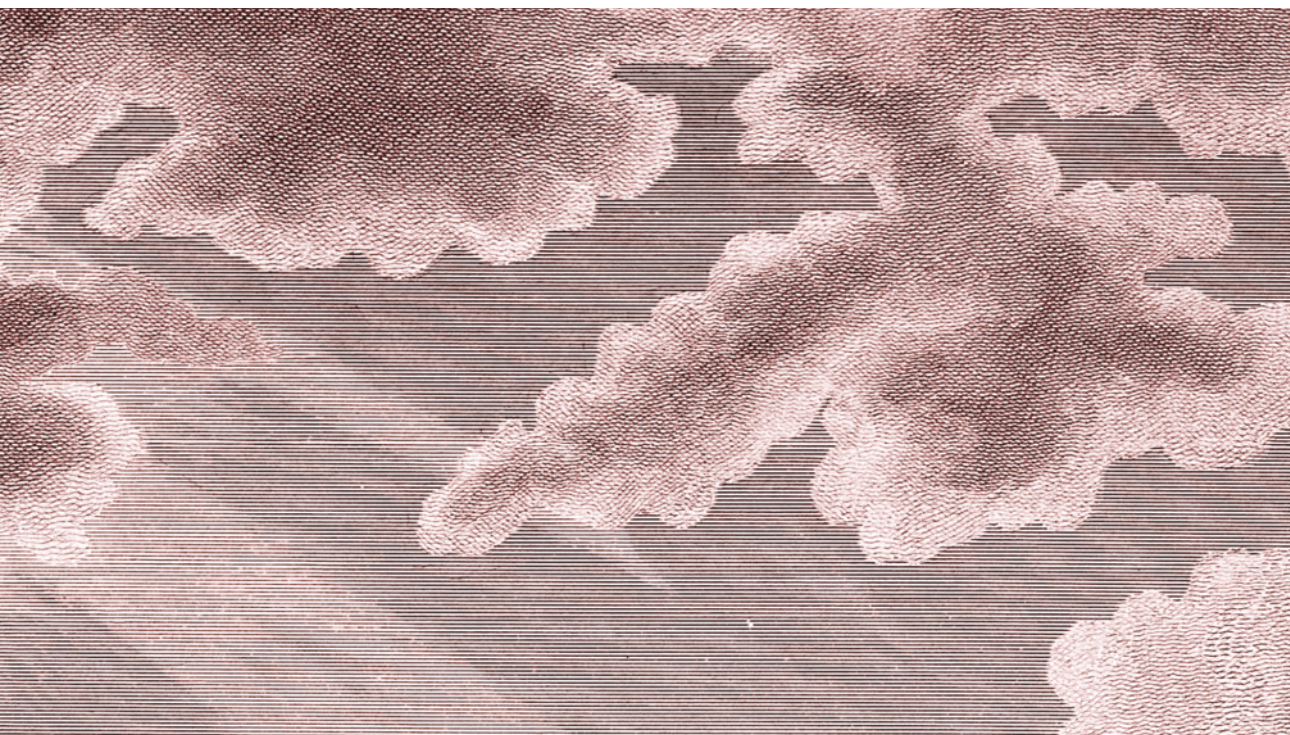


LESS HEGEL, MORE HISTORY! CHRISTIAN ETHICS & POLITICAL REALITIES

BY NIGEL BIGGAR

The good news is that the moral thinking of an educated Protestant Christian in 2015 is likely to be far more theologically and biblically literate than it was a quarter of a century ago. In the 1960s and '70s, at least here in the United Kingdom, Christian ethics was often represented by philosophers who championed metaphysics against fashionable logical positivism—for example, Peter Baelz and Basil Mitchell. Or else it found expression in the thought of Anglican churchmen like Gordon Dunstan, who used to begin his undergraduate courses in moral theology with Aristotle and Aquinas, and who is famously reported to have commented on one student's essay, "Best not to begin with the Bible"! ¹



Through the Night With the Light from Above: Transcendent wisdom symbolized by the light of Providence

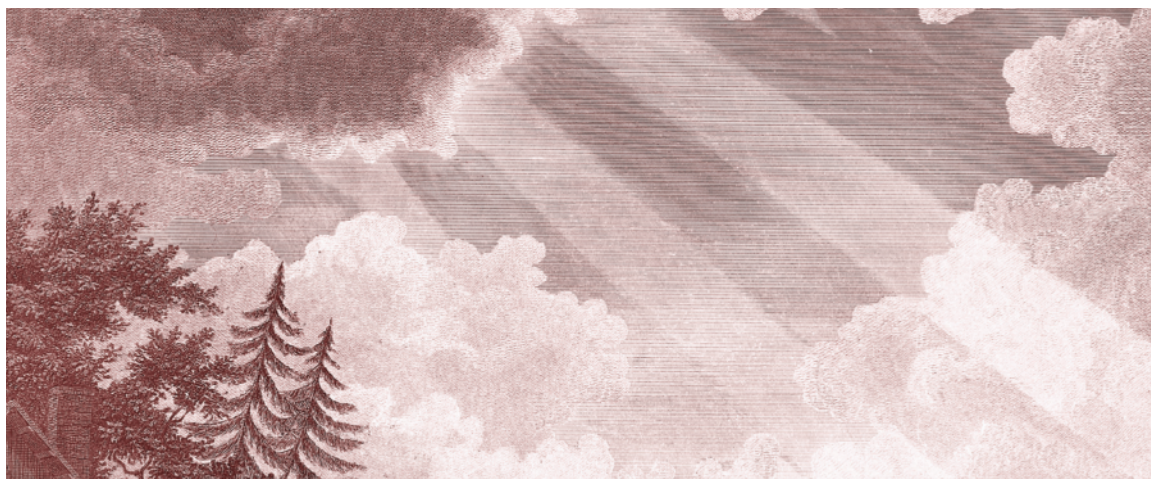
While this more philosophical approach to the discipline did have its merits—as I shall make clear shortly—its lack of immersion in biblical and theological traditions weakened its capacity to achieve critical distance from prevailing intellectual currents. I have in mind *Faith in the City*, the 1985 report of the Archbishop of Canterbury's Commission on Urban Priority Areas, and *Changing Britain*, the 1987 publication of the Church of England's Board for Social Responsibility.² Each of these dealt with pressing social problems in Britain—*Faith in the City* with urban deprivation, *Changing Britain* with cultural and moral pluralism. Neither of them did so, however, with moral concepts that had drunk at all deeply from the historic wells of Christian moral theology. The result was that their moral analysis and criticism was too mesmerised by current, liberal-left common sense. As I wrote in the wake of *Faith in the City*'s publication:

If we may take *Faith in the City* as symptomatic (and it is certainly not wholly eccentric), then we can say of social ethics in the Church of England

today what has recently been asserted of her current conception of her political role: that she has yet to take seriously the intellectual task of developing a fundamentally theological understanding of it.³

Likewise, on *Changing Britain* I commented that it permitted the church only “to proclaim more loudly the good that the world already knows; but not the good that comes to the world as news”.⁴

Twenty-five years later, Christian ethics in Britain (and in the United States) is much better educated in Christian ethical traditions, and its moral intelligence much more fully informed by the full range of theological premises. In part this is due to the remarkable surge of interest in the thought of Karl Barth during the 1980s, accentuated, if not generated, by the centenary of his birth in 1986. But it is also due to the influence of Stanley Hauerwas, whose work now dominates Protestant circles and not a few Roman Catholic ones. To these must be added Oliver O'Donovan's thorough mining of Christian biblical and historical traditions for the construction of a moral theology of



political life, whose effects have been felt on both sides of the Atlantic. Without doubt, all of this has served to make Christian ethics more theologically coherent and more self-consciously *Christian*, and that surely has to be welcomed.

Nevertheless, this upside has a major downside. The academic discipline of Christian ethics—and therefore the intelligence of those pastors and lay-people who have been trained in it—often seems to be locked into the tradition, engrossed in deferential conversation with the likes of Augustine and Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth, largely inattentive to the world and the difficult practical questions it raises and assuming that an appeal to an authoritative voice in the tradition will settle the case. Thus in Oxford last year during an interdisciplinary conference on my book, *In Defence of War*, an expert in international security was provoked to erupt, “What on earth is all this about *Augustine?!!*”, after two Christian ethicists had devoted much of their time comparing what I had written unfavourably to the Master. And when, this April, I presented a paper on human rights at Princeton, a theologian present contradicted me by expounding Aquinas. To which my (unspoken) response was, “Well, yes, I know that, but, with all due respect, I think Aquinas’s thinking on this matter is confused and so I prefer something else”.

Don’t mistake me: I think it’s enormously important for Christians to learn from the tradition before they presume to speak.

Most wheels were invented long ago by our predecessors in the faith, and it would be foolish to waste time trying to build them again from scratch. I myself spent most of the first ten years of my career sitting metaphorically at the feet of Karl Barth, and I have never regretted it. It’s vitally important to fit out the vehicle of one’s Christian intelligence with worthy wheels that will stay the course. But there nevertheless comes a time when one has to stop admiring the wheels, get in the car, and *drive* it somewhere.

Using the tradition as a refuge rather than a resource is one problem with contemporary Christian ethics. Another is a tendency to want theology to do too much, too quickly—a tendency unrestrained by the demands of philosophical rigour. For example, in its 2009 report, *The Ethics of Defence*, the Church of Scotland judged that the U.K. should abandon its nuclear deterrent on the ground that we should trust in God instead of placing other people “in a position of fear or threat” (2.10). By threatening others rather than seeking to be reconciled with them, it implied, a policy of nuclear deterrence is immoral. But, as I argued this May in the online *Scottish Review*, “this is facile”:

For sure, fear and mistrust are not symptoms of a happy, healthy relationship. Ideally, they wouldn’t exist. In the world as we have it, however, persons and states sometimes do unjust things that give others very good reasons to fear and mistrust them. In that case,

the road to reconciliation doesn't lie in pretending that nothing has happened and just holding out the hand of friendship anyway. It begins, rather, with signalling to the wrongdoer that he has done wrong by opposing it and pressing him to think again and change his ways in such a fashion that trust could be restored. It may be true—as I believe it is—that we should always trust God. But it really doesn't follow that we should always trust Vladimir Putin or Islamic State.⁵

The report had tried to move far too directly and quickly from the theological virtue of faith in God to the moral stance of indiscriminate trust in our enemies. It had no patience for the kind of careful ethical analysis that formation in the intellectual virtues of analytic moral philosophy would have imparted. That is now a major weakness.

A further vice that infects Christian ethics today is the habit of trying to grasp the world through abstractions, which, preserved from interrogation by the world's angular realities, function as substitutes for looking and critical reflection. For example, I've noticed that some young Christian ethicists now emerging from U.S. universities are much impressed by the republican philosophy of Philip Pettit, and are therefore wont to assume that domination is an intrinsically bad thing. In one sense, since Pettit stipulates that 'domination' means arbitrary rule and enslavement, they can't be faulted, for it is indeed wicked by definition—like 'torture' or 'rape'.

The problem arises, however, when Pettit's disciples proceed to assume that anything in the real world that involves hierarchy or coercion—that is, one person dominating another—is necessarily an instance of 'domination' as stipulated and therefore immoral. If one comes to this line of thinking, as I do, from intensive study of the ethics and history of both war and the British empire, then it seems obviously wrongheaded. Surely we *want* the police to *dominate* the mafia, don't we? And we *want* those fighting in a just cause to *dominate*

those fighting in an unjust one? And, no, although all actual empires involve the use and threat of coercion (just like nation-states and, indeed, republics), they haven't always been simply arbitrary or enslaving in their rule. The British empire, for example, granted Roman Catholics in Quebec freedom of religion in 1763 (much to the irritation of American colonists), suppressed the slave trade across the Atlantic and in Africa throughout the 19th century, granted black Africans in Cape Colony the vote (subject to a remarkably low property requirement) as early as 1853, and appointed native Indians as judges under the Raj decades before the American republic appointed African-American ones.

Without bracing contact with empirical and historical reality, abstract concepts too easily become the vehicles of fashionable prejudice.

A variation on this problem can be found in the writing of Hauerwas himself. In one of his most mature works, for example, he sets the 'church' over and against the 'world', and proceeds to describe the latter in terms of broad-brush abstractions, all of them pejorative: 'Constantinianism', 'liberalism', 'modernity', 'democracy', and 'technocracy'.⁶ Let's take just one of these: 'liberalism'. As I have complained elsewhere, Hauerwas's engagement with political liberalism is ad hoc, underdeveloped, and indiscriminate.⁷ Liberal political thought is not all of a single kind. Indeed, some of it is not merely compatible with Christian belief but actually required by it. Hauerwas doesn't actually deny this, but he ignores it nonetheless.⁸ He continues to essentialise liberalism (negatively) as he continues to essentialise the world (negatively).

At one point Hauerwas objects that 'Constantinianism' holds that the validity of the church or Jesus Christ or the New Testament "is to be judged by standards derived from the world".⁹ To which I say, "Never mind the provenance, pay attention to the data". Or, to echo Wittgenstein, "Don't assume, look! And then discriminate".¹⁰ The



The country enjoys the prosperity, signaled by the horn of plenty, at the feet of America

Spirit of the One God is Lord of the whole world and not just of the church. So we cannot assume that everything in the world is alien to the kingdom of God. We have to discern the spirits, not rubbish them by labelling them with dismissive abstractions.

One remedy for this ailment is for Christian ethicists to read less moral theology and political philosophy and more history. Suppose a Christian ethicist is thinking about the ethics of the use of violent force in terms of the doctrine of just war. From his general theological education, he will know that love is a Christian virtue, and in the light of the example of Jesus, he might assume that love should always take the form of compassion. From his reading of Augustine and Paul Ramsey, he will know that love must always motivate and discipline war, if it is to be just. And from his wider reading of the 'just war' literature, he will know that one of the standard features of a justified decision to go to war is that there is a reasonable prospect of success.

Suppose, then, that one evening our ethicist lays down his copy of Augustine or Vitoria and takes up Barrie Pitt's history of the battle of El Alamein, when the British Commonwealth scored its first major victory on land over the Germans in the Second World War. He comes to page 396, where he reads of a briefing conference held in the middle of the battle, in which Major General Freyberg communicates General

Montgomery's orders to Brigadier Currie, commander of the 9th Armoured Brigade:

The task for 9th Armoured Brigade—to advance past the infantry objective, break through the enemy defences and immediately beyond the Rahman Track and then hold open the gap against enemy counter-attacks until the heavy brigades of the 1st Armoured Division had gone through—was so obviously one of difficulty and danger that when Currie's time came to make comment, he rather diffidently suggested that by the end of the day his brigade might well have suffered 50 per cent casualties. To this Freyberg had replied with studied nonchalance, "Perhaps more than that. The Army Commander [Montgomery] says that he is prepared to accept a hundred per cent".¹¹

This account of a particular moment in North Africa in October 1942 reminds our ethicist of other reading he has done in military history, and it gives birth to the unsettling thought that one of the conditions of military success is a commander's possession of a certain kind of 'callousness'. A successful commander has to be willing to order soldiers, who may be close personal friends, to fight to the death. And in order to do this, he has to be able to distance himself from the human consequences of his decision, to callous himself against them. This is what Winston Churchill observed of General Douglas Haig, who commanded the British Army on the Western Front

during the First World War. “He presents to me in those red years”, wrote Churchill, “the same mental picture as a great surgeon before the days of anaesthetics: ... intent upon the operation, entirely removed in his professional capacity from the agony of the patient.... He would operate without excitement ... and if the patient died, he would not reproach himself”. But then Churchill adds: “It must be understood that I speak only of his professional actions. Once out of the theatre, his heart was as warm as any man’s”.¹² History, then, teaches that a kind of certain professional callousness is a condition of military success. Just war doctrine requires that military success be possible. The logic of just war doctrine, therefore, appears to make callousness a necessary military virtue.

But can callousness really be a *Christian* virtue? Our ethicist reflects on his conversation the previous evening with an actual surgeon, and on his own experience of heading a university department in the wake of severe cuts in funding, and he realises that all sorts of social roles require well-intentioned human beings to make decisions and perform acts that will foreseeably hurt others; and that in order to make and do them, they have to grow thick skin—they have to callous themselves. Thus, observing that callousness need not involve a culpable lack of care or a failure to love, our ethicist finds himself brought to the novel conclusion that it can be a Christian virtue.

Had he not picked up a history book, however, this would never have occurred to him. So: less Hegel and more history, please—if Christian ethics is going to do justice to political and military reality and so deserve a hearing from policy-makers and decision-takers.

A second remedy is for Christian ethicists to get out more. One reason that Christian ethics so often manages to evade the challenges posed by empirical reality is that social contact between academics (not least those in departments of religion and theology) and those whom Reinhold Niebuhr nicely called “the burden-bearers

of the world”¹³ is so often lacking.

At one point in his critique of *In Defence of War*, the scholar of international relations, Cian O’Driscoll, writes that just war theorists like me are inevitably part of “the war-machine” that we are trying to constrain, and that we therefore stand in danger of coming so close to the flame of power that we get burnt by it.¹⁴ I understand what he means: institutions do acquire a momentum of their own—sometimes perverse—that is hard to stop, and well-meaning individuals need to take care lest they get carried away. Nevertheless, it struck me that where Cian sees a machine, I see faces—the faces of friends in public office, who are, I think, more morally reflective and sensitive than the average citizen, humbler, less sanctimonious, and who have shouldered responsibilities and taken risks that academics like me have chosen careers to avoid.

It is well known that remoteness from the exercise of political power yields the important advantage of critical distance. What is less well known is that it also occasions a grave temptation—a temptation to relish too much the self-flattering role of righteous prophet, to indulge in wishful thinking, to day-dream among the ‘what-ifs’, and never to grasp the necessary nettle.

Christian ethicists need to get to know those in public office, get acquainted with the burdens they bear, appreciate the constraints under which they must operate, and enter with them imaginatively into the tragic dilemmas they must face. Then, having taken the trouble to exercise their love in playing pastor, they will have earned the right to play prophet.

Augustine would approve. In AD 408 he wrote to Paulinus of Nola:

On the subject of punishing or refraining from punishment, what am I to say? It is our desire that when we decide whether or not to punish people, in either case it should contribute wholly to their security. These are indeed deep and obscure matters: what limit ought

to be set to punishment with regard to both the nature and extent of guilt, and also the strength of spirit the wrongdoers possess? What ought each one to suffer?... What do we do when, as often happens, punishing someone will lead to his destruction, but leaving him unpunished will lead to someone else being destroyed?... What trembling, what darkness!... ‘Trembling and fear have come upon me and darkness has covered me, and I said, Who will give me wings like a dove’s? Then I will fly away and be at rest’.... [Psalm 55 (54).5-8].¹⁵

But Augustine didn’t flee. He didn’t run away. He stayed. He continued to shoulder the responsibilities of bishop, which, as the Roman Empire crumbled around him, were increasingly those of government. He kept up pastoral correspondence with military tribunes like Boniface and Marcellinus, whose Christian consciences were troubled by what they had to do. With them he

lamented the tragic dilemmas of political life, but he didn’t flinch from facing them.

And note: none of this prevented Augustine from developing the prophetic critique of the Roman Empire that became *The City of God*. He stands, therefore, as shining example of one who took the risk of coming close to the flame of power and yet was not consumed by it—of one who risked playing pastor and yet could still play prophet. Christian ethicists should follow Augustine, and not merely read him. ■

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