

Developing a Liberal-Protestant Ethics in a Dynamic and Pluralist World

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Western European societies such as the Netherlands are secular, pluralistic, individualizing, and highly dynamic. These characteristics must have implications for the way we do ethics. In this article I will explore these implications. By philosophical analysis I hope to show that we need an approach such as that found in the liberal-Protestant tradition.¹ What are these characteristics and their implications?

- *Individualization.* The individualization process – even if by far not as radical as suggested by some postmodernists² – has important consequences for ethics. Morality cannot be proclaimed by moral authorities or based on tradition. We expect every person to be autonomous and – although in interaction with others – to develop her own ethical views. This implies high requirements for individual moral competence.

- *Dynamics.* These societies are in continuous processes of change. Modern technology, globalization, and informatization confront us with new moral challenges. Our ethics has to change in response to these challenges, just like the ethical views of the generations before us have undergone major changes – think of sexual ethics. Ethics is rather becoming a lifelong learning process than a set of timeless precepts. Therefore, eth

¹ I will not attempt to articulate this approach in a theological or religious way – I will leave this to the theologians. I am a philosopher as well as a Christian, but I am not a theologian. Therefore I will try to avoid explicit religious and theological notions and literature.

² For empirical studies of both the individualization tendency and the quite broad consensus on the most important issues in Western societies, cf. the publications based on the European Value Survey, e.g., Peter Ester, Loek Halman and Ruud de Moor (eds.), *The Individualizing Society: Value Change in Europe and North America*, Tilburg 1994.

³ Cf. R. John Elford, *The Ethics of Uncertainty: A New Christian Approach to Moral Decision Making*, Oxford 2000, and my Dynamic Ethics, in: *Journal of Value Inquiry*, 37, 2003, 1, 13-34.

cs itself has to be dynamic and responsive to change and to contextual needs.

Pluralism and secularization. For my purposes, the most important characteristic of Dutch society is its secular and pluralist character. Morality is not embedded in one common religion; there is a plurality of religious and non-religious traditions. In a pluralist society, there is an in-built tendency to try to avoid appeals to controversial religious ideas whenever possible. As a result, there is a tendency to reconstruct ethics without reference to controversial religious ideas.

Let me elaborate this last point. Religious people in a secular world are faced with two contradictory tendencies. On the one hand, as religious people they believe that their religion is in some way connected with their ethics. On the other hand, as citizens, they have to discuss ethical issues with their secularized neighbours. If they always refer to their religion, dialogue will be difficult.⁴ Therefore, they will try to avoid appeals to controversial religious tenets, and try to explain and justify their moral positions in secular terms. In other words, they will put religion in the margin of their moral views, but only when and in so far as necessary to justify their views to others. This is not a principled exclusion (as some Rawlsians might defend⁵) but a pragmatic marginalization, forced upon them by the demands of communication in a pluralist and secular world.⁶ I believe such a full exclusion to be impossible – morality and religion are too much connected, perhaps not for everyone, but certainly for a large group of Christians.⁷

This has implications for the way people in a secular society see the relationship between morality and religion. They get used to arguing in public in a secular way. When thinking about ethical issues, they internalize this secularized ethics and marginalize their religion in thinking about ethical issues. Appeals to secular ideas on human rights or toler-

Cf. Jos Kole, *Moral Autonomy and Christian Faith: a discussion with William K. Frankena* (oct. diss. Kampen University), Delft 2002, 246. Kole's idea of conversational contextualism suggests that it depends on the discussion partner whether and, if so, in what ways appeals to religion can be made to justify one's moral views.

Cf. John Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, New York 1993, 97; and id., *The Idea of Public Reason* (revisited, in: id., *Collected Papers*, Cambridge (Mass.) 1999, 573-615; Norman Daniels, *Justice and Justification: Reflective Equilibrium in Theory and Practice*, Cambridge (UK) 1996, 144-15.

Note that this mechanism only holds for pluralist and secular societies. In the United States, where pluralism is combined with a dominance of Christian religion, the situation may be different.

⁷For a criticism of political reflective equilibrium, cf. my *Dynamic Ethics*, 29-31. For a criticism of a strong autonomy of ethics as regards religion in general, cf. Kole, *Moral Autonomy*.

ance replace direct appeals to religious convictions. As a result, perhaps with an exception for some fundamentalists, religious people also tend to be partly secularized in their moral thinking. This means that our ethical views largely become secular in character – even for many devout Christians.

This is a challenge for Protestantism. Protestantism is characterized by an individualist tendency, and should thus be able to deal with individualization and pluralism. It must, however, also deal with secularization, as a characteristic partly internal to our ethical views.

1. Two Models of Religion and Ethics⁸

I want to begin my analysis by introducing two ideal-typical distinctions. Dynamic phenomena can always be described in two ways that are not completely compatible. A well-known example is that of the electron, which we can regard as a particle or as a wave, but not as both at the same time. The former model of the electron gives us insights that are less easily seen in the latter model, and vice versa.

This general idea also holds for social phenomena such as ethics. We may conceive of ethics as a collection of propositions – as an ethical code, such as the Ten Commandments. However, we may also conceive of ethics as the good life and the right action themselves, as the 'lived morality'. In this case, we address both the daily practices in which we try to act morally rightly and the more reflective practices in which we reflect on what might be a morally right action and a good life.

The former, static, model may be called a *product model* or a *doctrinal model*, because ethics is conceived of as a coherent collection or doctrine of norms and values formulated in propositions. This collection is the product of our minds, of our traditions. The latter, dynamic, model may be called a *practice model* or a *process model*, because it deals with the practice of our daily life and its often implicit ethical dimension. This practice is a continuous process of action and thought. Both models focus on particular aspects of ethics; both models are required to understand ethics adequately. Both models are, of course, not completely distinct; they refer to each other. We may understand the ethics as we live it only in light of attempts to formulate it and, conversely, we may only understand the morality as we formulate it in light of attempts to realize it.

⁸ The next two sections are partly based on my: Leer en leven. Een vrijzinnige visie, in: Theo Boer (ed.), *Schepper naast God? Theologie, bio-ethiek en pluralisme. Essays aangeboden aan Egbert Schrotten*, Assen 2004, 120-133. I elaborated the idea of the two models in my: *Two Models of Law and Morality*, in: *Associations*, 3, 1999, 61-82.

The same distinction between a doctrinal model and a practice model holds with regard to religion. In that context it is better known as the distinction between doctrine and life. We may regard a religion as a grand narrative, as a coherent theory about the world (an ontology), about the future (an eschatology), or about how we should live and act (an ethics). Doing so, we focus on doctrine.

We may also regard religion as a set of practices and as a dimension of daily life. Then we talk about recognizable religious activities such as liturgy, pastoral care, and social work and about the way in which believers in their daily life practice their belief.

Like in ethics, the two models cannot stand alone. If the doctrine is not practiced in any way, religion is mere lip service. For a vital religious practice to be passed on to the next generation it is essential to formulate at least partly what inspires people. Most religions and theological theories try to do justice to both views on religion. However, because these models are essentially partly incompatible, usually the emphasis is on one of the two. Therefore, the two models are usually not present to the same extent in the religious practices of individuals and groups. For example, in the Calvinist tradition, the right belief is often pivotal, whereas in the Mennonite tradition the emphasis is on the righteous life.

In the Netherlands, strongly influenced by Calvinism, religion was traditionally perceived primarily in terms of doctrine. However, in the actual religious experience of many Dutch, doctrine has receded into the background. Practice has come more to the forefront, both in the sense of liturgical practice, rituals, and mystical experience and in the sense of living a good life. Empirical studies indicate that large groups of people believe in 'something' like a higher power; their religious notions, however, are not very precise. They are completely indifferent to conflicts between theologians and churches on themes such as the meaning of the Lord's Supper and who is welcome at it. Their emphasis is on religious experience and on a morally good life.

2. Deductivism or Pragmatism

A second ideal-typical distinction focuses on doctrine. How should a religious doctrine be developed and how should we justify religious beliefs? According to a deductivist approach, such a doctrine and such beliefs are based on an authoritative religious text (e.g. the Bible), on basic concepts and dogmas, and perhaps on a number of authoritative creeds and confessions. These authoritative texts and dogmas are the basis of a comprehensive religious doctrine and of separate statements of belief. An

ethical doctrine is developed in a similar way in a top-down process of deduction from some general principles or values.⁹

Such a deductivist approach is problematic.¹⁰ First, there is the problem of the under-determination of dogmas and authoritative texts. Neither the Bible nor the classical creeds and confessions offer much guidance with regard to biotechnology or contraceptives. Attempts to deduce positions on such issues are often quite unconvincing and arbitrary. Second, it is too static and universalistic. Believing in an agricultural society of 2000 years ago is not the same as believing in 2004. However, if a deduction from a sacred text was valid then, it is logically still valid. Third, it leaves little room for pluralism. If concrete moral and religious norms are the result of strict deduction from indubitable starting points, then someone with a different opinion must be a heretic who must be converted to the true belief. Religious doctrines and moral views then become immune to criticism.

The most important objection is a more fundamental one. Why should we presume that the Bible, the creeds and confessions are correct and indubitable? Are they not merely man-made – even if perhaps inspired by God? But if the starting points in a deductive system are not indubitable, the complete building of religious doctrine is undermined. It is especially this problem that makes the deductivist approach unattractive to the modern mind.

A different approach is a pragmatist one. John Rawls introduced his famous idea of reflective equilibrium as a method for theory construction.¹¹ This idea can also be used to describe the construction of a religious conviction, of a religious doctrine. In a religious reflective equilibrium process, a variety of elements can be included in order to critically test and correct each other, in an attempt to achieve a more coherent formulation of one's religious views. Elements such as personal religious experiences – including those of others – moral experiences, tradition, the dogmas and stories from that tradition, and authoritative religious texts can all be brought into a process of mutual adjustment and refinement.

⁹ Elford, *Ethics of Uncertainty*, 47-70, argues that such a deductivist approach is dominant both in the Protestant tradition (esp. in Barthianism) and in the Roman-Catholic tradition (e.g. in *Veritatis Splendor*).

¹⁰ For a more elaborate presentation of several of these criticisms, cf. Kole, *Moral Autonomy*; Elford, *Ethics of Uncertainty*; Richard Holloway, *Godless Morality: Keeping Religion out of Ethics*, Edinburgh 1999.

¹¹ Cf. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, Oxford 1971; Daniels, *Justice and Justification*.

The elements that are central in the process will vary from person to person. Some persons develop their religious views primarily on the basis of religious experiences, such as the feeling of community in a church service or a mystical experience of contact with God. Others start from practical social activities and experience God in the face of the other, or they follow a more intellectual path of reflection. Usually, each of these religious paths will play a role in someone's religious development, with different emphases on different moments in life.

Such a learning process is not purely individual; it is a process of interaction with others, making it possible to test and enrich one's own views. A process of reflective equilibrium is never finished. New experiences, new contexts will continuously be brought into the process and lead to refinement – sometimes to radical revision – of religious and moral views.

Of course, these two approaches, like the two models, are ideal-typical and my sketch is much too brief. However, I hope it shows that, apart from the deductivist approach, which is dominant in orthodox Protestantism, there is a legitimate alternative. In this pragmatist approach, a believer tries to reach a coherent formulation of her religious views – without ever succeeding – on the basis of both general ideas and concrete experiences, of both religious beliefs and moral intuitions.

This pragmatist approach has important advantages over the deductivist approach. It is contextual, as concrete experiences and contexts are incorporated into the reflective equilibrium process. As a consequence, the religious doctrines that flow from it can be more practically helpful in guiding believers in concrete problems. It is dynamic, because the personal system of belief evolves with a person's development during her life. And it is pluralistic for two reasons: because it acknowledges that every attempt to formulate a religious and moral doctrine is always provisional and imperfect, and because it acknowledges that people may legitimately arrive at different doctrines, depending on their personal biographies, experiences, and contexts.

3. A Pragmatist-Practical Approach

By combining the two distinctions, we get two ideal-typical approaches. On the one hand, a deductivist-doctrinal approach, in which doctrine is central to the identification of religion and in which morality is deduced from fundamental religious tenets and texts. On the other hand, a pragmatist-practical approach, in which practices take primacy and in which

religious and moral views are always formulated provisionally in a continuous process of reflection.

The relationship between religion and ethics differs in the two approaches. In the former approach, ethics is – or is not – derived from religion. Most contemporary discussions about the relation between morality and religion presuppose this approach. The discussion focuses then, e.g. on whether a morality needs a religious foundation or not.

However, this is only part of the story. As soon as we switch to the latter approach, we understand that things are not that easy. When a person develops her own moral and religious views, there is no neat separation between the two. Her moral and religious views are intertwined and interdependent. In a non-foundationalist, coherent approach, moral rules and principles do not rest on one or more singular foundations, but on the whole network of views a person is committed to. That network includes someone's religious views.

Following the pragmatist-practical approach, we would find it absurd if a believer said her ethics and religion were completely independent. From an external, neutral perspective, of course, it is possible to say there can be morality without religion; we see proof of that around us.¹² And from a political perspective, we may also hold that social morality can stand on its own.¹³ But from the internal point of view, religious beliefs and moral beliefs are intertwined and mutually correct and support each other. A strict separation of the two is impossible.

This does not imply that whenever I discuss moral issues I always need to refer to my religious views. My moral views are based on an entire network of supporting considerations, and normally it will do to refer to secular arguments. Thus, in a conversation with a secular audience, I will usually only refer to secular arguments. In an ethical discussion within my church, however, I will also refer explicitly to arguments with a religious nature. It depends on the context, on the discussion partners, which type of argument is best brought forward.

A pragmatist-practical approach is a more adequate response to the challenges of the twenty-first century than a deductivist-doctrinal one. In the introduction, I have suggested that a contemporary ethics should be contextual, pluralist, and dynamic, and that it should avoid a direct ap-

¹² For a persuasive argument that it need not, cf. Richard Holloway, *Godless Morality*.

¹³ Cf. Kole, *Moral Autonomy*, 14. The thesis of a weak autonomy of morality should be accepted: morality can do without religion. But a strong autonomy thesis should be rejected: for many believers, morality is connected with religion and partly dependent on it (as, vice versa, religion is partly dependent on morality).

peal to religious dogma as much as possible. On each of these criteria, the pragmatist-practical approach fares better.

4. Dutch Liberal Protestantism

Now let me turn more explicitly to Protestantism. My starting point is that of the Dutch liberal-Protestant tradition, and more in particular that of the Remonstrants. The Remonstrant Church, founded in 1619 by the followers of Arminius, which followers had been expelled from the Dutch Reformed Church during the Synod of Dordt, is a small church with a consistently liberal character.

A central characteristic of the Remonstrant tradition is its emphasis on individuality, personal freedom, and responsibility. This implies the recognition that there can be different legitimate ways to formulate religious beliefs. Such formulations can never be more than provisional and imperfect attempts. Therefore, religious beliefs should be open to critical testing, also in the light of modern science, critical scholarship, and contemporary culture. The Remonstrants are strongly committed to the ecumenical movement, among other things because ecumenical dialogue and practice are considered to be enriching (even if frustrating as well). The ecumenical openness of the Remonstrants is reflected in the fact that they invite everyone to the Lord's Supper who sincerely wishes to take part in it, whether or not they belong to the Remonstrant or any other church.

The Remonstrants have always been responsive to society and culture. Even if the word orthopraxis does not fit the Remonstrants (as there are various legitimate ways to put a religion into practice), there is a strong orientation toward spiritual and ethical praxis. Both in society at large and within the church, Remonstrants stand for equality, freedom and tolerance, a democratic culture, and human rights. This is, for example, apparent in the relatively early acceptance of women ministers (1915) and in the decision in 1986, as the first church in Europe, to allow blessing ceremonies for homosexual and lesbian couples.

What does this imply for ethics? In various respects, this liberal-Protestant tradition offers interesting starting points. Its individualism and openness to pluralism and variation suit the characteristics of contemporary society. Its openness to criticism and its responsiveness to developments in culture and society match the need for a dynamic ethics. Its opposition to religious fundamentalism and its openness to dialogue and mutual enrichment show a possible approach to incorporating pluralism and secularism into a religious perspective. Finally, its strong orientation toward religious and ethical praxis provides a perspective that fits

well into the way many modern men and women actually experience their religion.

The pragmatist-practical approach fits well into this liberal-Protestant tradition. Liberal Protestantism accepts that, although we cannot do without formulations of our beliefs, these are always provisional and open to criticism. There is a legitimate plurality of religious paths and of doctrinal formulations, and a religious way of life is a life-long process in which someone's moral and religious views evolve.

5. Conclusion

Let me conclude. There has been a tendency among liberal theologians and philosophers to adopt a strategy in which religion and ethics are separated. I believe such an artificial separation has a negative influence both on the vitality of liberal ethics and on the vitality of liberal Protestantism. I have tried to sketch a pragmatist-practical approach to the relation between religion and ethics that does more justice to the pluralist, secular, individualizing, and dynamic character of western European societies.

It does not offer easy distinctions or simple answers; it does not offer certainty. However, should we deplore that, or is it merely an adequate reflection of the complexity of life in the twenty-first century?¹⁴

¹⁴ I want to thank Jos Kole, Hildegard Penn and Heine Siebrand for their helpful comments on a draft of this paper.