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# The Relativity of Biblical Ethics

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## Joe Edward Barnhart

It is an axiom among fundamentalists and evangelicals that theology is the foundation of ethics and morality in North American culture. Without this foundation, they fear, ethics would fragment into total relativism or dissolve into whim, arbitrariness, and chaos. I would like to contest that view by showing how some organized religions are parasitical to the body of ethics and how the Bible itself exemplifies moral relativism.

Various theologians of the Middle Ages raised the interesting question of whether right and wrong are whatever God decrees them to be. For example, if God had commanded "Thou shall rape thrice daily," would it have been morally right to carry out the command and wrong to disobey it? If divine decree is not only the source but the *ultimate criterion* of right and wrong, is there any basis for trusting the Supreme Being who concocts the meaning of right and wrong? Indeed, were this putative Being to trick his creatures by scrambling the consequences of commands and prohibitions, it would be irrational to call Him evil: He is the Cosmic Existentialist who invents right and wrong *ex nihilo*. If He should lie, deceive, order Joshua to slaughter the Canaanites, or command rape, He could do all this and still label Himself as perfectly good.

Apparently having second thoughts about a Supreme Being unrestrained by moral principles, in the year of his death C. S. Lewis wrote: "The real danger is of coming to believe such dreadful things about Him. The conclusion I dread is not 'So there's no God after all,' but 'So this is what God is really like. Deceive yourself no longer.'"<sup>1</sup> Only four months before his death, Lewis wrote in a letter to an American philosopher that there were dangers in judging God by moral standards. However, he maintained that "believing in a God whom we cannot but regard as evil, and then, in mere terrified flattery calling Him 'good' and worshipping Him, is a still greater danger."<sup>2</sup> Lewis was responding specifically to the question of Joshua's slaughter of the Canaanites by divine decree and Peter's striking Ananias and Sapphira dead. Knowing that the evangelical doctrine of the Bible's infallibility required him to approve of "the atrocities (and treacheries) of Joshua," Lewis made this surprising concession: "The ultimate question is whether the

doctrine of the goodness of God or that of the inerrancy of Scripture is to prevail when they conflict. I think the doctrine of the goodness of God is the more certain of the two. Indeed, only that doctrine renders this worship of Him obligatory or even permissible."<sup>3</sup>

In short, Lewis came close to saying that the Supreme Might must live up to moral standards if he is to be regarded as God and not as some cosmic sadist unworthy of worship.

In his letter to the philosopher, Lewis expresses the realization that he could not wholly relativize and trivialize the concept of goodness for the Supreme Being he envisioned:

To this some will reply "ah, but we are fallen and don't recognize good when we see it." But God Himself does not say that we are as fallen as all that. He constantly, in Scripture, appeals to our conscience: "Why do ye not of yourselves judge what is right?"—"What fault hath my people found in Me?" And so on. Socrates' answer to Euthyphro is used in Christian form by Hooker. Things are not good because God commands them; God commands certain things because he sees them to be good. (In other words, the Divine Will is the obedient servant of the Divine Reason.) The opposite view (Ockham's, Paley's) leads to an absurdity. If "good" means "what God wills" then to say "God is good" can mean only "God wills what he wills." Which is equally true of you or me or Judas or Satan.<sup>4</sup>

Lewis was not always consistent in his attempt to find a foundation for morality. In some of his earlier books he suggests that God's goodness is compatible with whatever happens, which, instead of giving theism any advantage over atheism, does little more than make Cosmic Might the personification of moral randomness, of relativism gone out of control.

Recently, I asked a fundamentalist author and apologist who had labeled abortion as murder to tell me whether the killing of pregnant Canaanite women by putative divine decree and Joshua's sword was murder. He replied that the unborn babies killed by Joshua went straight to heaven—which of course does not answer the question of whether God commanded *murder* or whether God is above (or below) moral standards. The point here is not to determine whether the fetus is a person but to call attention to the fact that there is considerable moral and ethical relativism in theology and the Bible. Consider this passage from Deuteronomy:

He whose testicles are crushed or whose male member is cut off shall not enter the assembly of the Lord.

No bastard shall enter the assembly of the Lord: even to

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the tenth generation none of his descendants shall enter the assembly of the Lord.

No Ammorite or Moabite shall enter the assembly of the Lord: even to the tenth generation none belonging to them shall enter the assembly of the Lord for ever. [Deut. 23:1-2 (RSV)]

Whatever the circumstances prompting these prohibitions, it is noteworthy that fundamentalist and evangelical apologists find it necessary to call upon their own version of situation ethics in order to make it clear that not all moral injunctions in the Scriptures are moral absolutes. Evangelical scholar G. T. Manley, in *The New Bible Commentary*, tries to justify the morally inferior outlook found in Deuteronomy by noting that it belongs to "the Mosaic age, and [is] quite different from that of the later monarchy."<sup>5</sup>

Unfortunately, to cast the biblical material in historical context (as doubtless it should be) serves only to emphasize the historical relativism of so-called biblical morality. Indeed, the very notion of a complete and self-consistent biblical morality is problematic. The attempt by some evangelicals to borrow the "progressive revelation" principle in order to make the claim that the later revelation (i.e., the New Testament) stands on a higher plane than the earlier revelation (the Old Testament) collapses when one considers the rage against, and hatred of, most of the human race exemplified in the Book of Revelation. And certainly the threat found in Hebrews 6:4-6—which proclaims that God will never forgive a repentant apostate—is more, not less, vicious than anything found in the Old Testament. When theologians try to justify the vendetta that the Book of Revelation describes in lurid detail, they demonstrate just how perverse the human mind can sometimes become.

Those who believe that the Bible presents its readers moral absolutes have failed to acknowledge the staggering diversity of its moral perspectives. These differing perspectives are often grounded in the political and evangelical experiences of the early Christian church. Professor Daniel Fuller, noted evangelical scholar and former president of Fuller Seminary, pointed out to me, for example, that the apostle Paul had three major problems to face in the early Christian churches: (1) the wall separating Jew and Gentile, (2) the wall separating male and female, and (3) the wall separating slave from free citizen. According to Fuller, Paul, whose theological interpretation of Christ's teachings formed the foundation of the church, felt that he had to make a practical decision to concentrate on the problem of the ethnic and religious relationship between Judaism and Christianity to the exclusion of the other two problems. Fuller's point is that, while racism and sexism are *in principle* undermined by the Christian gospel ("Love thy neighbor as thyself"), Paul was forced to leave to later generations the application of this subversive Christian insight to the problems of racism and sexism. For Paul, getting the church off the ground was the key thing; to try to implement total Christian justice would have scared most potential converts away. I take this to be an example of situation ethics. Whether Paul utilized situation ethics in order to advance the *agape* principle of 1 Corinthians 13 more effectively is a question open for debate. As Morton Smith ably demonstrated in *FREE INQUIRY* (Spring



1987) there is much in the Bible that contributed to the institution of slavery and little that in actual practice moved against it. Even the Golden Rule of the New Testament, because of its abstractness and adaptability, has throughout history often failed to override the deep-seated racial bigotry of the Book of Genesis.

The doctrine of election accepted by the Puritans did not incline them to gentleness in their dealing with inferior races. The savage Negroes and the savage Indians were accursed peoples whom it was quite proper to destroy or enslave. "We know not when or how these Indians first became the inhabitants of this mighty continent," says Cotton Mather, "yet we may guess that probably the Devil decoyed these miserable savages hither, in hope that the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ would never come to destroy or disturb this absolute empire over them."<sup>6</sup>

To be sure, the Bible gives conflicting messages regarding the assimilation of strange peoples. Compare, for example, the books of Ruth and Ezra. The moving and humanistic story of Ruth in the Old Testament is viewed by some scholars as a moral challenge to the Deuteronomic injunction to bar Moabites from the Lord's assembly. The book tells the story of an Israelite man who, because of famine in Israel, chose to move to Moab, taking his wife Naomi with him. The man died, leaving Naomi with two sons, one of whom married Ruth, a Moabite. In time, the two Israelite sons living in Moab died, leaving Naomi with two widowed daughters-in-law. According to this tightly woven story, when the famine in Israel passed and Naomi returned to her homeland, Ruth the Moabite moved with her, asserting, "Your people shall be my people, and your God my God" (Ruth 1:16 RSV).

The author of the Book of Ruth remarks again and again that Ruth was the Moabite; she even calls herself "a for-

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