

INTRODUCTION TO some themes in CHRISTIANITY

Putting faith into practice: living a moral life

1. “God is Love”

- The overarching principle; the defining characteristic
- Love within the Trinity
- Co-heirs within the “community of love”
- *Kenosis*: the spirit of self-emptying love as shown by Christ
- Love defined as self-giving, self-sacrifice, selflessness, meekness
- Overcoming evil with abundant good: “turn the other cheek”
- Positive statement of the Golden Rule: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you”
- Love of neighbour, love of enemy: Good Samaritan, arational love “Love your enemies and do good to those who hate you”
- Not reciprocity but “going the second mile”
- Situation Ethics: “Doing the most loving thing”

2. What is the purpose of human life?

- To establish communities of love and justice; the implementation of God’s plan for humankind
- God’s will summarised in “love and justice”
- Worship of God requires obedience to the divine will
- Called to do, live by and establish the Rule of God on earth
- Therefore fundamental ethical principle: “love and justice”

3. “Law of the heart”

- Jesus and disciples were Torah observant
- Within the first generation, fundamental shift from “outer observance of the Law” to “inner observance of the Law of the heart” based on a combination of the teaching of Jesus, biblical norms, natural law and “the promptings of the Holy Spirit”

4. Morality based on the Bible

- The Law of Moses was to “set apart” the Hebrew People from other communities, therefore taught that Jews must be “Torah observant” (613 Commandments) but not others (Seven Commandments of the Sons of Noah). Dietary laws and laws of ritual purity were to set Jews apart.
- Temple sacrificial system is ended with the sacrifice of Christ.
- “Law and Prophets” summed up in the Great Command to “Love God above all things and love one’s neighbour as oneself”
- “Moral commands” of the Jews become “moral guidance” of the Christians

- Two overarching ethical priorities: love of God and respect for all human life:
 - Eventual abolition of slavery
 - Establish hospitals, care for sick, dying, destitute, orphans, widows etc.
 - No specific biblical teaching on abortion and euthanasia but general opposition on the basis of preserving human life but:
 - What about the dilemma of the mother's life or the baby's life?
 - What about prolonging the life of someone dying in agony?
- Are New Testament teachings moral absolutes or temporally/culturally specific?
 - Ephesians 5:22 "Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord." Is this culturally specific, like slavery" which should be abolished as it contradicts universal equality?
 - 1 Corinthians 7:10-11 "To the married I give this command—not I but the Lord—that the wife should not separate from her husband ¹¹(but if she does separate, let her remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and that the husband should not divorce his wife." Is divorce and remarriage thus ruled out for all time?
 - 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 "Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, ¹⁰thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers—none of these will inherit the kingdom of God." "Sodomites" here may refer to male homosexual acts; is this open to interpretation as times and knowledge change or is it a moral absolute?
- How are Christians to deal with the world?
 - James 4:4 "Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God." Does this lead to a life of renunciation, poverty, being apolitical, avoiding violence or power?
 - But Moses established a law, the Hebrew Bible saw wealth as God's blessing and the Hebrews were told to take the land of Canaan by force.
 - But the early Christian community was an oppressed, persecuted, powerless minority; what about when they become a powerful elite or majority?
 - But what of the radical prophetic voice of freedom from oppression, opposing all injustice, revolution, liberation etc.? Can one use violence towards these good ends?
 - How does one see Jesus in this regards?
 - As one who allowed himself to be killed by unjust worldly powers?

- As a social revolutionary who opposed injustice?
- As one who established the Church as a community to promote a godly society?
- Christians operating on a bible-based morality take a range of political positions: capitalist to socialist. A common list of virtues can be given varying weights in political action: love, justice, compassion, honesty, selflessness, a radical preference for the oppressed, poor and marginalised
- How to develop from this a timeless moral framework:
 - Some will always regard biblical injunctions as particular timeless written laws
 - Some regard them as provisional, being limited by the time and culture of the authors, therefore open to be revised as time, culture and knowledge change
 - Some look at 2 Corinthians 3:4-6 “Such is the confidence that we have through Christ towards God. ⁵Not that we are competent of ourselves to claim anything as coming from us; our competence is from God, ⁶who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of letter but of spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.” as an indication that Christians should be a “Spirit-filled” community living by the “law of the heart” rather than by the letter of the written Law and thus we are empowered to develop new approaches.

5. Morality based on Natural Law

- Some Christians give proportionally more weight to Natural Law, i.e. a principle of morality that can be known by reason alone without the need for revealed law, therefore what is true and right can be discerned by reason alone, therefore it is binding on all human beings.
- Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Part 1, Q. 94, article 3. Aquinas argues that God created the natural order of things, therefore they express the purposes of God. Human beings are possessed naturally of the knowledge of such things, therefore all human beings are capable of perceiving the natural law as an expression of the divine law. By observation of the natural state of things, one can derive natural laws that should not be frustrated, e.g. human life is to be preserved, sex is for procreation.
- The Church is the guardian of the derivation of general principles from Natural Law, therefore the Church as Teacher (*magisterium*).
 - The preservation of human life and the protection of innocent life can be derived from Natural Law, therefore opposition to abortion and euthanasia; but can human life be justly taken in warfare or in capital punishment?
 - Procreation is part of the Natural Law, the vehicle is sexual congress, therefore the argument that all acts of sexual congress

must be open to procreation, therefore opposition to all forms of artificial birth control.

- Natural Law can come into conflict with the laws that human beings pass from time to time, therefore there is the potential for humans to challenge unjust laws on the basis of natural justice and Christian morality
- The pursuit of happiness can be seen as part of the Natural Law, but this needs to be tempered by the higher ethical good of loving and serving God rather than just passing pleasure, and also tempered by the higher desire for the common good of all humanity, which may limit my personal pursuit of happiness.
- Problems:
 - Not all human beings agree on moral judgements drawn from Natural Law. There can be differences as perceived by good, informed people, therefore can we say that there is one generally agreed Natural Law available to all rational people?
 - Is the natural order of things always morally good? What's good about disease-causing bacteria? Do we not need to thwart their natural progress for the higher good of human health and well-being? If so, then can we derive a Christian morality based on Natural Law alone?
- A principle of Natural Law leads on to an understanding of Natural Rights, therefore to the UN Declaration of Human Rights, e.g. that all human beings have the natural right to dignity, freedom to live, respect etc.
 - Natural Rights lead on to Christian liberation theology in South America.
 - In Regan/Thatcher period, Pope John Paul argued on the basis of Natural Law/Rights for a path between rampant capitalism, which requires a permanent underclass of the poor, and extreme communism, which denied the right to private ownership and therefore denied the principle of personal responsibility and stewardship.

6. Morality based on “human flourishing”

- Grows in the 20th century as a reaction to problems with a theory of Natural Law:
 - Natural Law opposition to vaccination
 - Natural Law opposition to contraception
 - Natural Law arguments to permit the execution of heretics
 - The role of the Church's *magisterium* as the guardian of Natural Law general principles and the rise of infallibility of the Papacy
- Grows from a shift in emphasis from the “biological” to the “personal and psychological”, e.g. understanding sex in its biological form as being primarily about procreation plays down other aspects: an

expression of love between two people, mutual upbuilding, psychological-spiritual healing/union, mutual pleasure

- Guiding principles:
 - Jesus' statement in Mark 2:27 "The Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath"
 - There is no moral purpose in nature, rather it must be given a moral value by people on the basis of "human flourishing"
 - What is conducive to "human flourishing" in a loving and just society is good
- Examples:
 - Human flourishing can include using and controlling the forces of nature, e.g. contraception to prevent over-population, to allow couples to have only as many children as can flourish within a marriage, to remove the fear of unwanted pregnancy so that a marriage can flourish
 - The natural principle of preserving human life can bear exceptions, e.g. abortion for a woman who has been violated, killing someone who is being tortured to prevent the disclosure of information that would lead to greater harm, euthanasia for a person who is terminally ill, in great pain and expressing the considered wish to die peacefully.
 - Accepting that for people with a homosexual disposition, who are in a long-term committed relationship, "human flourishing" can include them expressing their mutual love in sexual activity.
- Christian morality becomes an adventure in promoting and exploring ways to promote "human flourishing" in loving and just mutually supportive societies.