Christian Ethics Beyond Humanism

Carl-Henric Grenholm, Uppsala

In his research, Werner Wolbert is dealing with some of the most basic issues within moral philosophy and Christian ethics. He has written important books on philosophical theories, one on the principle of human dignity and one on arguments for and against utilitarianism. He has made a most interesting study on the prohibition of killing, and he has treated fundamental problems in moral theology. Above all he has written on the role of the Bible in Christian ethics and the interpretation of moral statements in Biblical texts.

In his dissertation on moral teaching in the First of Corinthians, chapter 7, Werner Wolbert discusses what moral theology can learn from the Bible and how moral statements in Biblical texts can be interpreted. He makes an important distinction between "exhortations", which recommend us to do what we already know is right, and "normative ethics", which develop criteria for a right action. Since many Biblical texts contain exhortations, and not normative ethical arguments, it might be contested if Christian ethics give any particular contribution to the content of normative ethics.[1]

A similar problem is dealt with by Werner Wolbert in his rather new book on *Was sollen wir tun?* This book is also a study in ethical hermeneutics of Biblical texts, and it raises the issue of the authority of the Bible as a source to Christian ethics. Werner Wolbert develops the thesis that Biblical texts are exhortations to do what we know is right, and he gives a thorough interpretation of the golden rule, the love commandment, and moral teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. One particular problem concerns the relationship between these texts and a theory of natural law in moral theology. According to this theory humans get moral insight by using their reason. But what is the relationship between this insight and the kind of moral insight given by Biblical texts?[2]

In this paper I will discuss three different models of Christian ethics. One of them is closely related to a theory of natural law. This position claims that an action is right if it is in accordance with human nature. Every person is capable to get moral insight by rational considerations, independent of the divine revelation in Christ. Thus there are common moral convictions which are universal and justified independent of Biblical texts.

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1   Wolbert, Werner, Ethische Argumentation und Paränese in 1 Kor 7, Düsseldorf 1981, 18f and 54ff.

2   Wolbert, Werner, Was sollen wir tun? Biblische Weisung und ethische Reflexion, Freiburg CH/Freiburg i. Br. 2005, 44f.

This position is today questioned by perspectives on ethics developed within postmodern reflection. Postmodernity is a challenge to ethical theories within humanism and enlightenment philosophy, but it is also a challenge towards the theory of natural law. Reason is no longer believed to be an adequate basis for moral considerations, and every kind of ethical universalism is rejected. Postmodernity questions all ideas about moral truths, as well as the idea that there is a specific human nature which is the basis for morality.

In this paper my purpose is to discuss how Christian ethics should relate to these challenges from postmodern reflection. This means that I also will discuss how Christian ethics today should relate to the classical theory of natural law. Should we still maintain that human nature is the basis for morality and argue that every human being by her reason can understand what is right and good? Or do we need today an ethical position beyond reason and human nature? Should we still defend the kind of moral realism and ethical universalism which are parts of a theory of natural law? Or should we accept the kind of ethical contructivism and the kind of ethical contextualism which are defended within postmodern philosophy? Would ethical contextualism imply an ethical relativism which is difficult to accept?

This means that I will primarily deal with two basic problems in my paper. One is what kind of argument can be given to justify moral judgements and what are the sources to moral insight. Is moral insight primarily based upon reason and rational considerations? The second problem is if there are any universal criteria for a rational justification of moral beliefs, which are independent of different cultural and social contexts. How should Christian ethics today relate to the controversy between ethical contextualism and ethical universalism?

Natural Law in Christian Ethics

One of the most influential ethical models within Christian tradition is the theory of the natural law. This theory is developed by Augustine and primarily by Aquinas, but it is not only a part of thomistic moral theology. A natural law model is of great importance in Christian ethics today, and it has obvious similarities with ethical theories within western humanism. One basic idea is that an action is right if it is in accordance with human nature. Another one is that human nature is characterized by rationality, which means that we are obliged to act in accordance with reason. In her analysis of the theory of natural law in scholastic theology, Jean Porter writes:

> "At the same time, rationality is considered to be the human characteristic *par excellence*. This fits well with the understanding of nature as equivalent to the essential or proper characteristics of a specific kind of being; if the natural law is understood as an expression of the principles of action intrinsic to a given kind of nature, then it makes

sense to say that the properly human expression of the natural law involves acting in accordance with reason, because the characteristic expression of human nature is to act in accordance with reason".[3]

The similarities between the theory of natural law and ethics within humanism are quite obvious in the ethical model developed by the German moral theologian Bruno Schüller in his book *Wholly Human*. Here he gives a most important interpretation of the theory of natural law. One basic idea within this theory is that the divine revelation in Christ is not a prerequisite for moral insight. Every human being is capable to understand what is right and good by using her practical reason. According to this position, that *ethics is based on reason*, all arguments which can be given to justify moral judgements are based upon human experiences and rational considerations. Moral conceptions can be justified independent of the divine revelation in Christ.

Schüller writes that the Christian person comes to know the requirement of morality in the same way that every human being does, namely through her conscience or natural reason. Even those moral imperatives which are expressed by Christ in his teaching are in principle possible to understand by natural reason. Every human being has a conscience, which makes it possible for her to know what is good and evil, independent of the Christian message.[4]

In his book, Schüller argues that the content of Christian ethics is in no way different from the content of ethical models in other traditions. He embraces what we can call an *identity theory*, according to which the content of Christian ethics is possible to accept independent of the cultural and religious tradition to which we belong. There is no unique Christian contribution to the content of normative ethics. The question concerning what is right and good is a purely philosophical issue, to which Christian tradition does not give any particular contribution.

However, according to Schüller the divine revelation in Christ gives a contribution to morality of a different kind. It gives us a strong recommendation to do what we already know is right. In the New Testament there are several imperatives, which tell us to do what is good, and the action of God is often regarded to be a model for our action. These imperatives do not give us any new moral insight, but they are "exhortations", which means that they urge us to do what is right. One such Christian exhortation is the recommendation to live in the imitation of Christ. God´s act in Christ is a model for our action, and this means that the stories about Christ give a recommendation to promote what is

3   Porter, Jean, Natural and Divine Law. Reclaiming the Tradition for Christian Ethics, Grand Rapids 1999, 87.
4   Schüller, Bruno, *Wholly Human*. Essays on the Theory and Language of Morality, Dublin 1986, 26.

good. Thus, Christian faith gives a motivation to act according to what we already know is right.[5]

What, then, is the criterion for what is good and right? Bruno Schüller delivers a critique of a deontological interpretation of the theory of natural law. According to him, a problem with deontological rule ethics is that it cannot solve the conflicts between different rules, when they give different recommendations for human actions. Instead, the love commandment, which is the basic norm in the natural law, should be interpreted as a teleological principle. According to this principle it is our duty to promote what is good for all human beings.[6]

What, then, can be regarded to be good for human beings? According to Schüller what is good is the truly human. The human life is the criterion for what is good in itself. The terms "morally good" and "human" are synonymous, which means that a truly human action is a morally good action. According to this theory human nature is a norm for morality in the sense that an action is right if it promotes a truly human life. Thus, the term "human" can also be understood as a term which expresses an obligation.[7] Schüller writes:

> "The foregoing reflections should make it clear that we need to interpret the phrase »human being« strictly as an obligation name, so that »to be human« means »having one´s destiny and vocation in moral goodness«, which makes it self-evident why terms like »morally good« and »human« are synonymous, like »morally bad« and »inhuman«".[8]

The theory of natural law embraces according to Schüller a particular value theory. This is *cognitivism,* according to which value judgements are either true or false. Moral judgements are not only expressions of emotions or recommendations; they are propositions which have a truth value. This also means that we have to accept a *moral realism*, according to which moral values have an objective existence, independent of human consciousness. Goodness has an inherent ontological status, according to Schüller. Every human being can understand what is good by using her practical reason, but values are not constructed by humans.[9]

What kind of rational arguments can be given in order to justify moral convictions? The theory of natural law, which is defended by Bruno Schüller, is combined with an *ethical universalism*. According to this position, there are moral convictions which are common for different traditions and cultural contexts. There are at least some moral principles and values which are universal, in the sense that they are accepted by all humans, independent of the contexts to which they belong.

5   B. Schüller, Wholly Human 21f, 24f and 29f.
6   Schüller, Bruno, Die Begründung sittlicher Urteile. Typen ethischer Argumentation in der Moraltheologie, Düsseldorf 1987, 202f, 206f and 208f.
7   B. Schüller, Wholly Human 107f and 112ff.
8   B. Schüller, Wholly Human 114.
9   B. Schüller, Wholly Human 184, 71ff, 80ff and 91ff.

Ethical universalism also embraces an epistemological position, which maintains that all humans can justify moral convictions by the same kind of rational considerations. It is possible and desirable to give arguments for the justification of moral convictions which can be accepted by all humans, independent of cultural contexts. According to the theory of natural law, there is a universal human nature which is the norm for morality, and all humans can understand what a truly human life is, by using their practical reason. This means that this theory does not accept an epistemological relativism, which argues that every cultural context has its own understanding of moral rationality.[10]

Postmodern Critique of Humanism

There are obvious similarities between the theory of natural law and ethical models developed within Western Humanism. Ethics in humanism is today closely related to enlightenment philosophy, with its strong belief in human rationality. This is true for Kantian ethics, where ethics is regarded to be an autonomous activity within the limits of pure reason. This is also true for utilitarianism, which defends a normative theory based on rational considerations with strong universalistic claims. Even if there are differences between these theories, they rest upon some common ideas.

One of these is that morality is autonomous. What is right and good is a result of human will and human decision. This means that the decision on what is right and good is not taken by any moral authority above the humans. According to humanism, every human being is autonomous in the sense that she decides herself what moral principles and rules she has to follow. Since she is a rational being with free will, she shall not be governed by anyone else in moral issues.[11]

Secondly, humanism has a strong belief in human reason, also in the area of morality. Ethics is based on reason, which means that every human being can get moral insight by rational considerations. According to humanism, moral judgements can be justified by rational reasons, which can be accepted by all human beings. This is the position of Kant, when he writes that if an action is right or not depends upon the rational principle which governs the will. Pure rational considerations are the basis for a valid ethical rule. This is also the position of John Rawls, when he develops his contractarian theory. A moral principle is

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10   Grenholm, Carl-Henric, *Bortom humanismen*. En studie i kristen etik, Stockholm 2003, 88f.
11   C.-H. Grenholm, Bortom humanismen 41f. Cf Beauchamp, Tom, L., Philosophical Ethics, New York 1991, 180f.

justified if it is chosen by free persons in a rational choice under the veil of ignorance.[12]

Thirdly, ethics in humanism often defends a principle of human dignity. According to this principle every human being has a value in herself, and all humans have an equal value. This means that humans should always be treated as ends, never only as means. The argument in favour of this principle is that we share a common human nature. According to Kant we are all rational beings with a free will, and therefore we should always treat humanity in ourselves and in every other human being not only as a means but always also as an end.[13]

Ethics in humanism is anthropocentric. It maintains that what is good in itself is what is good for human beings. Only experiences and relationships between humans have intrinsic value. In classical humanism the criterion for what is good is human nature, which often means that a true human life is regarded to be the happiness we should strive for. Moral goodness is to realise our possibilities as human beings.[14]

Finally, humanism typically defends an ethical universalism. According to humanism, there are moral convictions which are common for all humans. At least some values and moral principles are accepted by all human beings, independent of their social and cultural context. Humanism also maintains that there are criteria for ethical rationality which are universal. It rejects epistemological relativism, and argues that all humans can justify moral convictions by the same kind of rational considerations.[15]

As we can see, there are obvious similarities between ethics in humanism and a natural law model in Christian ethics. However, ethical theories in humanism are today challenged by postmodern philosophers. Postmodernity is a critical response to modernity, particularly ideas within enlightenment philosophy. It delivers critique against modern philosophy and liberal tradition, not at least against its rationalism and strong belief in human reason. Postmodernity is characterised by a relativistic position, where the belief in reason and absolute truths is weak. The only truths we have are partial, subjective, and individual.[16]

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12   Kant, Immanuel, *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten*, fünfte Auflage. Herausgegeben von Karl Vorländer, Die Philosophische Bibliothek 41, Leipzig 1920, 36 and 44. Rawls, John, A Theory of Justice, Oxford 1976, 118f and 136ff.

13   Kant, Immanuel, Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten 54.

14   C.-H. Grenholm, Bortom humanism 40f.

15   C.-H. Grenholm, op.cit., 54f. One example of such a criterion for ethical rationality, which is regarded to be universal, is the "principle of universalizability", which is proposed by Richard M Hare in: Moral Thinking. Its Levels, Method and Point, Oxford 1981, 21 and 108. Cf Hare, Richard M., Freedom and Reason, Oxford 1963, 10ff, 30ff, and 37ff. Another example is the "principle of consistence", which is a part of the theory of reflective equilibrium proposed by John Rawls in: A Theory of Justice, 20f and 48ff.

16   Lakeland, Paul, Postmodernity. Christian Identity in a Fragmented Age, Minneapolis 1997, 1ff and 13ff.

Postmodern ethics is a critique of perspectives on morality within modernity. Zygmunt Bauman shows in his book *Postmodern ethics* that postmodernity challenges the rationalism and the universalism which are parts of liberal tradition and ethics in humanism. Postmodern ethics maintains that there is no rational basis for morality, and ethical universalism is neither possible nor desirable. Thereby, postmodern ethics is a challenge not only to humanism but also to the theory of natural law within Christian ethics.[17]

First, postmodern ethics maintains that there is no rational basis for morality. Instead, morality is beyond reason in the sense that it is not based on any general principles, which are rationally justified. According to Bauman there is a morality in postmodern culture, but it is not based upon ethical theory. Our moral conceptions are not justified by rational considerations. This means that morality in a postmodern culture is not possible to control and foresee. Morality in a society without foundations cannot be based upon ethics.[18]

Secondly, postmodern ethics maintains that we have to live without moral principles and ethical rules. Postmodernity is characterised by a morality without ethics. There are no ethical theories, which can give us guidance when we face moral dilemmas. This means that the human person creates her own values and norms in a postmodern culture. She develops a morality, characterised by a responsibility for the Other person, which is independent of ethical theories. This responsibility is experienced in a concrete relationship with the Other, but there is no ethical guidance to the dilemmas we face in human relationships. We have to accept moral insecurity.[19]

Thirdly, postmodernity delivers critique of the idea that there is a specific human nature, which is the basis of morality. There is no common human nature, but the human being can be regarded to be a social construction. This means that moral subjectivity is formed within particular social and cultural contexts. The human person is not an isolated individual person but a situated self, dependent on a particular culture and social position. Therefore, a common human nature cannot be the criterion for what is right and good.[20]

Fourthly, postmodern ethics contains a critique of the moral realism which often is combined with the theory of the natural law. Postmodern philosophers maintain that not only human nature but also moral values are socially constructed. This means that they defend an *ethical constructivism*, according to which values do not exist independent of the human mind. Values are created by humans, socially constructed within particular cultural contexts. This position is

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17 Bauman, Zygmunt, *Postmodern etik*, Göteborg 1995, 13ff, 84f and 87f.
18 Bauman, Zygmunt, Skärvor och fragment. Essäer i postmodern moral, Göteborg 1997, 29. Cf Bauman, Zygmunt, Postmodern etik 19f, 21f and 79.
19 Z. Bauman, Postmodern etik 43f.
20 Henriksen, Jan-Olav, Grobunn for moral. Om å vaere moralsk subjekt i en postmodern kultur, Kristiansand 1997, 13f, 17ff and 273ff.

combined with an epistemological relativism, according to which moral convictions can be justified only within the contexts in which they have been constructed.[21]

Finally, postmodernity is critical against ethical universalism. According to postmodern philosophers we are living within a pluralistic society with no common morality. There are different moral convictions within different traditions and cultural contexts. There are also different ideas about the ways in which moral convictions can be justified. Every context and every tradition has its own criteria for ethical rationality. This means that we have to accept an ethical pluralism without any moral consensus.[22]

Postmodern ethics defends an *ethical contextualism,* which maintains that there are different moral convictions in different social and cultural contexts. Every human being is part of a particular context with its own morality and its own understanding of ethical rationality. This position is relativistic in two respects. It is a descriptive relativism, according to which there is no moral consensus in our plural society. It is also an epistemological relativism, according to which every context has its own conception of what kind of arguments can be given to justify moral convictions.[23]

Ethics beyond Reason

We have seen that postmodern ethics is a challenge to ethical theories within humanism and also to the theory of natural law within Christian ethics. Postmodern ethics maintain that reason is not an adequate basis for morality, and moral values are not based upon a common human nature. Postmodernity is also related to a critique of moral realism and any kind of ethical universalism. How should Christian ethics relate to these postmodern challenges? This question implies a critical evaluation of the theory of natural law. First, we have to ask if there are reasons to maintain that every human being can get moral insight by purely rational considerations. Should we accept the postmodern critique of ethics based upon reason?

There are in my opinion strong reasons against the position that moral conceptions are only based upon rational considerations. Certainly there are rational reasons which are relevant in a moral discourse, e.g. we can maintain that a reasonable moral judgement shall be part of a coherent system of opinions.

21   An analysis of postmodern non-realism is given in: Schweiker, William, *Power, Value and Conviction*. Theological Ethics in the Postmodern Age, Cleveland, Ohio 1998, 28ff, 58f and 62f.

22   W. Schweiker, Power, Value and Conviction 25f and 59ff.

23   Z. Bauman, Postmodern etik 19f, 53ff and 81ff. C.-H. Grenholm, op.cit., 18.

However, this is not enough. A valid moral judgement shall also coincide with our moral feelings and human experiences. In Christian ethics, we also have to take into consideration the divine revelation in Christ, in order to justify moral beliefs. The revelation in Christ gives perspectives on what moral feelings and what human experiences are relevant in a theory of justification. It may also give us deeper and new perspectives on moral ideals which we already accept.[24]

There are above all two objections to the position that ethics is based on reason alone. One is that it presupposes a view of human beings which is too optimistic. In Christian tradition, humans are regarded to be not only the image of God but also sinners. There are different interpretations of human sin, but in my opinion it means not only that we sometimes fail to do what we know is right to do. Human sin also means that we sometimes have a limited understanding of what is good and right. Therefore we need the guidance of the divine revelation in order to get a complete moral insight.

The second objection is that moral conceptions are developed within different traditions and social contexts. We are always related to particular cultural contexts and traditions when we reflect upon moral problems. This means that our ethical reflection is influenced by our view of life, and Christian ethics is closely related to the content of Christian faith. Moral reflection in Christian tradition is related not only to the doctrine of Creation but also to Christology and eschatology. Thereby, the revelation in Christ will have some impact on our interpretation of Christian ethics.

The radical alternative to ethics based upon reason is the position that ethics is based upon revelation alone. According to this position all arguments which can be given to justify moral judgements are based upon the revelation in Christ. Reason can be used in order to understand the content of this revelation. However, independent of the Christian revelation it is not possible to justify moral beliefs by rational considerations and human experiences. This is the position taken by the North American ethicist Stanley Hauerwas.

According to Hauerwas Christian ethics is different from ethical models within modern humanism and liberal moral philosophy. Christian ethics is virtue ethics, which tells us what human traits of character are desirable. It does not contain any moral principles which guide our actions, but a conception on the virtues we should develop. Christian tradition contains a specific conception on virtues, which is developed within the church as social community. The Chris-

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24   Grenholm, Carl-Henric, "Gränser för etisk rationalitet". Article in: Kurtén, Tage (ed), Ratio et fides. Studia in honorem Hans Olof Kvist, Åbo 2001, 112ff.

tian church is a community of human beings who develop virtues such as faith, hope and sacrificial love.[25]

Every tradition and social community is characterised and held together by certain stories, according to Hauerwas. This is true also for the Christian tradition and the social community of the Church. The best way of talking about God is to tell stories about the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. These stories include a recommendation to follow Jesus, to live in his imitation. This means that we should develop such traits of character which are ascribed to Jesus. Virtues such as faith, hope and sacrificial love are desirable, and we should try to become persons who are the image of God.[26]

This means that ethics according to Hauerwas is based entirely upon God's revelation in Christ. Moral insight is given only by the revelation in Christ and by membership in the Christian community. God's revelation is a manifestation in human life through certain historical events, such as the birth, life and death of Jesus. In order to understand the stories about Jesus we need to use our human reason. However, God's action in Christ and the stories about Jesus are prerequisites for moral insight. These stories about Jesus tell us what traits of character we should develop.[27]

The position that moral insight is given only by the revelation in Christ cannot be accepted. There are two serious objections against this position. First of all it presupposes a view of human beings which is too pessimistic. In Christian tradition human beings are regarded to be not only sinners but also created in the image of God. There are different opinions concerning what this means, but in my interpretation humans as the image of God are rational beings with a capacity to get at least a partial moral insight through rational considerations. Human sin does not mean that we have completely lost this capacity.

Secondly, the position that ethics is based upon revelation alone is difficult to combine with a mutual critique and a rational dialogue on moral issues between humans with different views of life. In my understanding, ethics as a critical reflection on morality is a discourse which presupposes such a dialogue. However, if only a person who accepts Christian belief in God can attain moral insight, such a critical dialogue is not possible. According to this position Christian ethics gets a rather exclusive character with limited relevance.[28]

Therefore I would prefer a third position, according to which ethics is based upon both reason and revelation. This means that some arguments which can be given to justify moral conceptions are based upon human experiences and ra-

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25   Hauerwas, Stanley, *The Peaceable Kingdom*. A Primer in Christian Ethics, Notre Dame 1986, 20ff and 103ff. Hauerwas, Stanley, A Community of Character. Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic, Notre Dame 1981, 113.

26   S. Hauerwas, The Peaceable Kingdom 24ff, 72ff and 76ff.

27   S. Hauerwas, The Peaceable Kingdom 66 and 69.

28   C.-H. Grenholm, Bortom humanismen 259f.

tional considerations, while some arguments for the justification of moral beliefs are based upon the revelation in Christ. The Christian revelation can give new perspectives on our moral beliefs, but we have moral insights which are based on reason and independent of God's revelation in Christ.

This is a position taken by the American reformed ethicist James M Gustafson. In his important books on *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective* he argues that ethics should not be anthropocentric but theocentric. Morality does not exist for the sake of humans alone, and not only humans have a value in themselves. In ethics from a theocentric perspective the basic ethical question is: "What is God enabling and requiring us to be and to do?" From God's perspective the human being is not the centre of morality but a part of a greater community. God's aim is not only to promote the happiness of humans, but to promote the good for the creation in its totality.[29]

Ethics from a theocentric perspective delivers critique against both utilitarianism and Kantian ethics. These theories are regarded to be too anthropocentric. However, Gustafson maintains that Christian ethics should strive for a dialogue with moral philosophy and ethics in different traditions. A theological treatment of Christian ethics should always be a philosophical reflection. Thus, moral insight is given not only by the divine revelation in Christ, but also by experiences and rational considerations. There are four sources to the content in Christian ethics: (1) the Bible and the Christian tradition, (2) philosophical theories and methods, (3) scientific knowledge of reality, and (4) ordinary human experiences. These sources are equally important, which means that ethics is based upon both reason and revelation.[30]

In my opinion there are strong arguments in favour of this position. One is that it is related to a view of humans which takes seriously both the possibilities of a human being and her limits. Since all humans are created in the image of God, we have a capacity to understand what is right and wrong by rational considerations. However, since all human beings are sinners, we often get a limited moral insight, and therefore we also need the guidance of the divine revelation in Christ.

The second argument is that ethics based upon reason and revelation takes seriously both the particular character of Christian ethics and the necessity of a dialogue between different traditions. According to this theory ethics is developed within different traditions, and this means that Christian ethics has its identity in its relationship to the content of Christian faith. However, this does not

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29   Gustafson, James M., *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective, Vol I: Theology and Ethics*, Chicago 1981, 76ff and 91f. Gustafson, James M., *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective, Vol II: Ethics and Theology*, Chicago (1984) 1992, 1 and 4ff.

30   Gustafson, James M., Protestant and Roman Catholic Ethics. Prospects for Rapprochement, London 1979, 142f. f. J.M., Gustafson, Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective, Vol II: Ethics and Theology 143f.

mean that it is impossible to develop a rational and critical dialogue on moral is-
sues with other traditions. A mutual dialogue and critique across the borders of
traditions is possible.[31]

A Modified Contextualism

Postmodern ethics is not only a challenge to ethics based upon reason alone. Sec-
ondly, it is also a challenge to moral realism and ethical universalism. How
should we evaluate this challenge? Are there reasons to maintain that there are
moral convictions and criteria for ethical rationality which are common for dif-
ferent traditions and social contexts? Or should we accept the postmodern cri-
tique of ethical universalism?

Christian ethics is often combined with a defence of moral realism, accord-
ing to which moral values have an objective existence, independent of human
consciousness. The American ethicist William Schweiker maintains that this po-
sition is implied in Christian belief in God. If God has created the world, we
should also accept that values are created by God and therefore reject a postmod-
ern ethical constructivism. A second argument in favour of moral realism is that
there are values and norms which are common for all societies. In all human
cultures there are some common ideas about a good human life and basic human
needs, which indicates that there is an objective moral reality.[32]

In my opinion, these arguments are not quite convincing. First of all, it is
not necessary to regard moral realism to be an implication of Christian belief in
God. It might be possible to understand a Christian view on Creation and human
beings in such a way that it can be combined with an ethical constructivism, ac-
cording to which values are results of human choices and interpretations in vari-
ous cultural contexts. Secondly, empirical studies of values in different societies
demonstrate an obvious moral pluralism. In different cultures there are different
conceptions of moral principles and a good human life. Moral disagreement in a
multicultural society is difficult to explain if we accept a moral realism.[33]

Therefore, it is possible to defend an *ethical constructivism*, according to
which moral values do not exist independent of human consciousness. According
to this theory morality is a social construction, and values are created by humans
in different cultural contexts. This theory can easily be combined with an ethical
contextualism, according to which there are no universal moral convictions. Hu-

31   C.-H. Grenholm, Bortom humanismen 260.
32   W. Schweiker, Power, Value and Conviction 27ff, 61f, 82f and 140f.
33   Grenholm, Carl-Henric, "Faktisk moral och etisk teori", Article in: Östnor, Lars (ed),
      Etisk pluralisme i Norden, Kristiansand 2001, 39ff.

mans create values in different social contexts, which imply moral pluralism and different understandings of ethical rationality.

Ethical contextualism accepts in certain respects a relativistic position. In most cases it is not combined with a *normative relativism*, according to which an action can be right in one social and cultural context, while it is wrong in another context. Such a normative relativism is not reasonable, since it denies that every valid moral judgment should be possible to universalize. However, ethical contextualism is typically combined with a *descriptive relativism,* according to which our moral convictions are different, depending upon our social and cultural context. An action which is considered to be right in one society will often be considered to be wrong in another society. There is no universal agreement on moral issues.

There are also good reasons to accept an *epistemological relativism.* In my opinion it is possible to give rational arguments for and against moral judgements, but in different contexts there are different understandings of what rationality means. Different traditions have different criteria for ethical rationality, and there are no universal criteria for the justification of moral judgements.[34]

Within Christian ethics there are different forms of ethical contextualism. One of these is a *strictly ethical contextualism,* according to which all arguments which are given to justify a moral judgement are context-dependent. This is a position taken by Stanley Hauerwas. In his book *The Peaceable Kingdom* he argues that ethics is dependent upon the cultural context and the particular social community within which it is formed. In different traditions there are different moral conceptions and different criteria for ethical rationality. This means that Christian ethics has a particular character and is relative to the Christian community within which it is developed.[35]

According to Hauerwas Christian ethics is formed within a particular social community, which is characterised and held together by the stories about God's action in human history. The church does not give us any moral principles and rules, but it is a community for the development of particular ideals for a human personality. The church is the context within which Christian ethics is formed and developed, and moral insight is given by membership in a Christian community. Thereby Christian ethics has its particular identity in contrast to other ethical models, and within the church a particular way to argue in moral issues is developed.[36]

There are two arguments against this strictly ethical contextualism. One objection is that a dialogue on moral issues between persons belonging to different traditions will be difficult, if there are no criteria for ethical rationality which

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34   C.-H. Grenholm, Bortom humanismen 18ff and 246ff.
35   S. Hauerwas, The Peaceable Kingdom 1ff.
36   S. Hauerwas, op.cit., 6ff, 17ff, 60ff and 96ff.

are common for at least some traditions and social communities. In order to communicate on moral issues in a pluralistic society, we need to agree upon at least some kind of arguments which are relevant. And such a dialogue on moral issues between different traditions is important in a democratic society.

The second objection is that a strictly ethical contextualism implies an uncritical position to moral conceptions within its own tradition. These conceptions can only be evaluated from criteria for ethical rationality which are accepted within the tradition, which implies a position which is too uncritical. Ethics should be a critical reflection on morality, which implies a willingness to be critically examined by persons belonging to different cultural contexts.[37]

If we accept these arguments, another form of ethical contextualism is to be preferred. This is a *modified ethical contextualism,* according to which some arguments for the justification of moral conceptions are dependent on our cultural context and tradition. There is no universal agreement upon criteria for ethical rationality. However, according to this position our understanding of ethical rationality is not completely dependent upon our culture and social position. There are at least some criteria for ethical rationality which are common for at least some different traditions and social contexts.

This is a position taken by James M Gustafson. He argues that ethics is always developed within a particular context and tradition. Ethics is always based upon human experiences, and these experiences are always made within a particular social community. They are articulated and understood through the culture to which we belong.[38] Gustafson writes:

> "There is no way in which we can be totally relieved of the boundaries of the particular communities to which we belong and the particular periods of culture in which we live and work".[39]

According to Gustafson, theological and ethical reflection is always developed within a particular tradition and a particular cultural context. There is no universally accepted morality, and no ethical theory is independent of a particular context. Ethical reflection is formed by the tradition we belong to.[40] This is also true for Christian ethics. Theocentric ethics, as developed by Gustafson, is obviously formed by the reformed tradition, particularly ideas within Calvin's theology. Ethics from a theocentric perspective is related to a view of God and a view of humans which to a great extent are formed by Calvinist tradition.[41]

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37   C.-H. Grenholm, Bortom humanismen, 248f.
38   J.M. Gustafson, Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective, Vol 1: Theology and Ethics 115f and 120ff.
39   J.M. Gustafson, op.cit., 125.
40   Op.cit., 126f and 317f.
41   J.M. Gustafson, Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective, Vol 1: Theology and Ethics 157, 163ff, 236ff and 294ff.

At the same time Gustafson maintains that Christian ethics should be open for a dialogue with moral philosophy and ethics in other traditions. According to him every tradition does not have an understanding of ethical rationality which is completely unique. It is possible to develop a dialogue across the borders, since persons belonging to different cultural contexts can agree upon at least some criteria for ethical rationality. Such a dialogue is necessary, in order to develop a critique of moral conceptions within our own tradition. By relating to ethical models in different traditions we can understand the limits of our own positions.[42]

A modified ethical contextualism of this kind seems to be a reasonable position. It maintains that moral conceptions and ethical theories are developed within particular traditions and contexts. Some arguments for the justification of moral conceptions are dependent on our cultural context, but there are at least some criteria for ethical rationality which at least some different traditions can agree upon. Therefore, it is possible to listen to and learn from stories and experiences from contexts different from our own. A dialogue across the borders is possible, and by learning from different cultures we can develop a critical perspective on conceptions in our own tradition.[43]

Christian Ethics after Modernity

In this paper I have discussed how Christian ethics should relate to the postmodern critique of ethical theories within humanism. We have seen that postmodern ethics is a challenge not only to western humanism but also to the theory of natural law within Christian ethics. It delivers critique against ethics based upon reason and all kinds of ethical universalism. Thus, I have dealt with two problems in my paper. One is if moral insight is primarily based upon rational considerations. Another problem is if there are any universal criteria for a rational justification of moral beliefs.

In my paper I have argued against both the position that ethics is based on reason alone and the position that ethics is based entirely upon the revelation in Christ. The arguments which can be given to justify moral conceptions are based upon both reason and revelation. I have also argued against an ethical universalism, according to which all humans can justify moral convictions by the same kind of rational considerations. There are good reasons to accept an ethical contextualism, which maintains that there are different criteria for ethical rationality in different traditions. However, this does not mean that all arguments which are given to justify a moral judgement are context-dependent.

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42   J.M. Gustafson, op.cit., 150ff.
43   C.-H. Grenholm, Bortom humanismen 249f.

The position I defend is a modified ethical contextualism, according to which some arguments for the justification of moral conceptions are dependent on our particular cultural context. Different traditions differ in their conceptions of ethical rationality. However, our understanding of ethical rationality is not entirely context-dependent. There are at least some criteria for ethical rationality which are common for at least some different traditions and social contexts. One example of such a shared criterion for ethical rationality is the idea that a reasonable moral judgement should coincide with human experiences.

A modified ethical contextualism makes it possible to listen to and learn from stories and experiences within different traditions and cultural contexts. This is a position similar to the communicative ethics as developed by Jürgen Habermas and Seyla Benhabib. They deliver critique against a liberal universalism, which does not take seriously that the moral self is always situated and part of a particular social context. At the same time they maintain that it is possible to communicate across the borders of different contexts. Thereby it is possible to learn from others and develop a critical perspective on moral conceptions within one's own tradition.[44]

How should Christian ethics relate to the postmodern critique of ethics within humanism? First of all, Christian ethics can learn a lot from the critique of ethical universalism. Ethical reflection is always situated within a particular tradition and a particular social context. Within different contexts there are different moral conceptions and different understandings of ethical rationality. However, as we have seen, Christian ethics should not accept a strictly ethical contextualism.

Secondly, Christian ethics should learn from the postmodern critique of the idea that moral conceptions are based on rational considerations alone. There are limits for ethical rationality, which are related to the limitations of human reason. This means that moral conceptions and ethical theories are dependent on different views of life, and the content of Christian ethics is to a large extent related to Christian faith. However, Christian ethics is not entirely based upon revelation. To a certain extent there is a rational basis for moral conceptions.

Thirdly, Christian ethics can learn from the postmodern critique of the idea that there is a common human nature, which is the basis of morality. Not only values but also conceptions of human nature seem to be formed within particular social contexts and traditions. However, this does not mean that human subjectivity is without any specific identity. The human being is formed within a tradition which gives her both identity and particular relationships.

Finally, Christian ethics can learn from postmodern critique of ethical theories. There are no universal ethical theories which contain general moral principles, from which moral norms and obligations can be derived. The task of ethics

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44   C.-H. Grenholm, Bortom humanismen 249f.

is not to construct universal theories which can give us guidance when we face moral dilemmas. However, it seems to be difficult to deal with moral issues without any moral principles at all. Moral intuitions often give rise to principles, even if they are formed within particular contexts.[45]

This means that Christian ethics today in certain respects should be an ethical reflection beyond humanism. Certainly, ethical theories within humanism contain ideas which still seem to be reasonable. One of them is that a critical dialogue with other traditions is important. Even if moral conceptions are formed within particular contexts, it is possible and desirable to have a dialogue across the borders of traditions. The reason is that there are at least some criteria for ethical rationality which are common for at least some contexts.

Secondly, ethical theories within humanism often have a content which Christian ethics can agree upon. The principle of human dignity, according to which all humans have equal value regardless of race, gender and social position, is important also within Christian ethics. It is related to the idea that all humans are created in the image of God. Even if we do not accept the anthropocentric position, that only humans have a value in themselves, we should defend the idea that all humans should be treated not only as means but also as ends.

However, there are ethical positions within humanism which should be criticized. First of all, Christian ethics should not accept the ethical universalism of humanism. A modified ethical contextualism is to be preferred. Secondly, Christian ethics should not be based upon rational considerations alone. It is based upon both reason and revelation. In these two respects both humanism and the classical theory of natural law need to be revised.[46]

Finally, Christian ethics has a content which is partly different from the content of ethics in humanism. Common is the principle of human dignity, which is the basis for the ideas that we should promote what is good for all humans, and strive for a just distribution of the good. However, Christian tradition also gives a unique contribution to the content of ethics. The unique contribution are the stories about Jesus Christ, which give us new perspectives on the meaning of love for others, a good human life, and what kind of persons we should be. The Christian ideal that we should strive for sacrificial love to all humans, in the image of Christ, gives a vision of a good human life beyond humanism.[47]

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45   Op.cit., 250ff.
46   C.-H. Grenholm, Bortom humanismen 254ff.
47   Op.cit., 263ff.