1

Moral Self in Community

Introduction to the Moral Life

Ethics can be defined simply as critical reflection on the moral life, or critical reflection on morality. Morality, however, is more difficult to define. Our understandings of the moral life vary considerably. Some think about morality in terms of duties. Some think in terms of rights. Some think in terms of law. Some think in terms of grace. Some think in terms of consequences to come. Some think in terms of promises made. Some think in terms of human nature. Some think in terms of nature itself. Some think about personal virtues and vices. Some think about interpersonal relations. Some think about public policy and social justice. Some think about moral reasoning and volition. Some think about the narratives that shape us as moral agents. All of this is about morality. Ethics tries to make sense of it all.

Ethics as the study of morality draws from many resources and bridges many disciplines. It draws from philosophical schools and from theological traditions. It draws from our contemporary experience in culture and from our analyses of that experience. Each of these areas of reflection can provide a beginning point for the study of ethics. Each provides a point of entry, but each also entails limitations.

First, it has been the way of many philosophers to argue deductively from the general to the specific–to look for first principles by which further lessons can be deduced and to articulate general theory from which particular conclusions can be drawn. Second, it has been the way of many theologians, similarly, to begin with

theological affirmations and draw ethical conclusions, or to begin with questions of method (e.g., questions about the authority of scripture, the nature of revelation, etc.) and assume that ethical conclusions will then dependably follow.

These two beginning points, however, represent two temptations for ethical deliberation and moral reflection. In the first case, ethics tends to devolve into epistemology. In the second case, ethics tends to devolve into hermeneutics. Epistemology and hermeneutics are important, but ethics is not contained by either of these.

I prefer to begin in the middle. Ethics becomes important as people make decisions that affect other people and as they participate in lifestyles that have implications for future generations or for the earth as a whole. The perennial questions in ethics are huge in scope, e.g., "What is the nature of the good?" In actuality, though, people often begin with more immediate questions, such as "What should I do?" Everyone at some time or other asks this latter question. Many people, conversely, try to avoid the former. It may be, that such questions concerning the nature of the good are logically prior to, "What should I do?" Even more fundamental might be questions of identity, such as, "Who am I?" or, "Who are we?" But the importance of ethics, I would suggest, appears with salience in people's minds when we are wondering what to do, how to act, or how to respond in actual situations that have repercussions for ourselves or others. This is the middle–having to decide, to act, or to respond.

Pastoral ministers are fortunate in that we are able to encounter people in the middle. People come to us for advice or comfort in the middle of their quandaries or troubles. We frequently see people when they are in the middle of important decisions. We are not medical experts, but we visit people in hospitals as they are deciding about treatment for themselves or for their loved ones; these decisions can be matters of life or death. If death has occurred, we are with people in the midst of their grief and their struggle, with all the emotions, including guilt, that might be present.

We counsel people at pivotal points of commitment, based upon their previous experiences, and as they establish resolve for the future–moments of conversion, of baptism, of confirmation, and of renewal. Weddings also are significant beginnings that occur "in the middle" and that involve the moral resolve of persons together in family.

Even on a Sunday morning, if we preach a sermon to one hundred people, one hundred individual contexts for hearing the gospel are in the congregation that morning. Everyone will have his or her own struggles, own strengths, own relationships, own questions, own confusions, own regrets, and own hopes. As ministers, we are fortunate

to be able to interact with people as they seek the grace to live their lives faithfully. For people and their pastors, ethics is not solely a matter of philosophical abstraction from life. Rather, ethics makes contact with life itself, but it does so utilizing the philosophical and theological resources that are accessible to us "in the middle."

■ CASE FOR DISCUSSION: Caught in the Middle

Pastor Anne has been serving for only three weeks in her first position as a minister. Her church is in an inner city neighborhood where poverty is prevalent, though most of the members of the congregation are in the economic middle class. Nevertheless, some do struggle to be able to afford even the basics of food, clothing, and rent. Many within the community are also affected by such problems as alcoholism and drug abuse.

Anne is excited to be in pastoral ministry. She is especially excited to be serving in a neighborhood where she thinks she might be able to make a difference in people's lives–where people's situations seem to call out to her for ministry. This early in her ministry, she is still attempting to establish a routine and to get to know the different members of the congregation. She has been putting a lot of energy into preparation for congregational worship on Sunday mornings. Worship is one of the aspects of church life that she enjoys highly.

On this third Sunday of Anne's pastorate, however, she is suddenly taken off guard. Just as Sunday worship is beginning, as she is seated behind the pulpit listening to the prelude and thinking about her sermon on the good Samaritan, a church usher approaches her and interrupts her meditation:

"Excuse me, Pastor, a woman here insists that she see you. She seems distraught. She says that her sister in Kansas has suffered an accident and that she needs to get to her right away. The bus leaves for Kansas in forty minutes, and she needs $70 for the fare. Do you want to see her? What should I say to her?"

Anne is not sure what to do. Should she delay the start of the service to see this person? If she chooses to see her, would she know how to respond to her request? If she chooses not to see her, is she hiding behind her robes and pulpit to avoid a neighbor in need? What ought she do?

■ ■ QUESTIONS

1. How would you imagine yourself responding if you were in Anne's position?
2. As you think about your response, what seems to carry weight in your own moral reasoning or moral inclinations? What seems to

"decide this" for you? Is it a moral intuition or hunch? Is it a rational principle? Is it a sense of duty? Is it a goal or a moral objective? Is it an identification with a biblical story? Is it a sense of one's role within the community of faith or within the neighborhood community? Is it a sense of loyalty or commitment? In other words, how do you find yourself thinking?

3. How satisfied are you with your response? Do you think you have taken into account the most morally important dimensions of this scenario? Are you relatively certain–or uncertain–that your response would be just? Do you experience a kind of moral conflict or dilemma in this situation–a kind of regret that a perfectly just solution would prove elusive? Even if you feel conflicted in this scenario, do you think you would be able, nonetheless, to justify your decision to others?
4. If you are answering these questions in the context of a class, share your responses to these questions with others. Is the reasoning of your neighbors similar or different than yours? Are you surprised by this similarity or difference? How would you describe the differences you are encountering with each other?
5. In analyzing this case, what aspects of the pastoral role become salient?
   a. Does this seem to be an issue of pastoral care–needing to respond in some way, primarily to the woman who is making the request for cash?
   b. Does this seem to be an issue of pastoral leadership–needing to respond in some way, primarily to the usher who is seeking guidance or direction to know how to proceed?
   c. Does this seem to be an issue of worship leadership–needing to be responsive to the community gathered for prayer and praise?

Anne is experiencing moral uncertainty or moral confusion. She is uncertain about how to proceed in response to the information she is receiving from the usher. Her confusion is heightened by the timing of the incident–just prior to Sunday worship. She feels under pressure to respond, but the right response is not immediately clear to her.

Anne must, nevertheless, do something, even if only to ignore both the usher and the woman and to proceed with the worship service as planned. Anne is a "moral agent" in this situation. Drawing on her understanding of the situation and on her moral resources as a person, she must make a decision. Her decision will reflect a number of factors:

- her own personal moral character
- her understanding of herself and of her roles in relationship to others
- the institutional parameters that might be defining her authority or limiting her power
- her moral reasoning about obligation or duty
- her perception of and sensitivity to the persons making requests of her

Her decision occurs within this complex matrix of perception, emotion, commitment, and reasoning. The same complexity is present whether the decision is made spontaneously or after long and thoughtful deliberation.

In their influential book, *Bible and Ethics in the Christian Life,* Bruce Birch and Larry Rasmussen distinguish between "an ethics of being" and an "ethics of doing."[1] This distinction provides one way of beginning to sort through the myriad moral factors at play in a situation such as Anne's. By an "ethics of being," Birch and Rasmussen are referring to matters of personal character–a person's moral habits, her virtues and vices. How is she disposed to respond in a given situation because of who she is? What are the strengths of character that enable her to respond in one way or another? While virtues of character may be thought of as a person's own particular moral dispositions, they develop within a person over time and through interaction with others in community.

An "ethics of doing" attends less to the person as a moral agent and more to action itself and to the options for responding that may be present in a given situation. While an ethics of being focuses more inwardly on a moral agent's personal character, an ethics of doing focuses more outwardly on the kind of action that might be called for and the kinds of moral principles that might function as guides for decision-making. In real life, of course, both "being" and "doing" are constantly related.[2] The distinction is a conceptual one that allows a person to explore the moral life, first from one angle and then from another.

Most of this book will center on the "ethics of doing" for persons engaged in congregational leadership and ministry. In the body of the book, each chapter will highlight a particular principle for moral action as it might apply in pastoral practice, e.g., nonmaleficence (not causing harm), veracity (truth-telling), and confidentiality. At the same time, though, an "ethics of being" will never be far away. To act in a way consistent with any of the principles suggested in this book

would require the strength of character to discern one's duty in a particular situation and to respond with virtues such as compassion and courage. Nevertheless, the primary focus in the chapters to follow will be on the "ethics of doing" for pastors and congregational leaders.

This chapter, however, will continue with a discussion about an "ethics of being" and, in particular, how personal virtue might be seen to be related to one's culture and community. Culture and community, it will be seen, give shape to personal virtue. This is both empowering and delimiting. On one hand, culture provides us with the moral resources for virtue; on the other, it also limits and constrains virtue.

Character in Context

Character refers to our personal capacity to will good and to do good (or to will and do evil, as the case may be). In classical moral theory, a strength of character is referred to as a virtue (from the Latin *virtus*), and a weakness of character is referred to as a vice. In the above case, Pastor Anne seems to be presented as a person of good moral character. She is a person of good will in that she wants to do the right thing. She seems to display the virtues of compassion for people in need, diligence in the exercise of ministry, sociability in wanting to get to know others, and reverence in the practice of worship.

At the same time, Anne is aware of other, perhaps less virtuous inclinations. She is guarding against the vice of cowardice (concerned that she might be hiding behind her robes and pulpit) and the vice of indecisiveness (concerned that even if she meets with the woman she still might not know what to do). On balance, though, Anne appears to have sufficient strength of character to help her respond to the moral quandary she is facing. These are her personal moral resources, her capacities for moral action.

However, the same personal quality that appears as a strength or virtue can, in an extreme form, appear instead as a weakness or vice. For instance, Anne's virtue of compassion, in extreme form, might become codependency–her own need to be needed. Her diligence, in an extreme form, could appear to be a vice of overworking if she does not rest or take care of herself. Likewise, her sociability might appear to be a vice if she were uncomfortable being alone and so was always looking for a party. Even her reverence might be thought of as a vice if Anne appeared overly pious or self-righteous in her piety.

On the other hand, those qualities mentioned in the above paragraph as vices might, in more moderate form, provide the strength Anne needs to face her current challenge. Rather than being cowardly

or indecisive, Anne might be demonstrating a necessary and prudent caution–especially if she is responding to a person who might represent a danger or threat to herself or to her congregation. Thomas Aquinas, following Aristotle, has suggested that for the most part virtue follows the mean rather than the extreme.[3] It is a matter of developing the right balance of personal disposition that enables one to respond appropriately in a given situation.

This discussion about virtue following the mean points to the potential for virtue theory to take cultural variability into account. To find a mean or to strike a balance between virtue and vice would seem to depend on cues from one's cultural context. Given the rich diversity of virtues encouraged by different cultures and the various kinds of strengths required of people in different circumstances, one would expect cultural influence to enter into our thinking about human virtue. One would think, furthermore, that moral character would be shaped by one's social location and the ways in which one experiences oppression or privilege in society. In other words, one might inquire about the kinds of social conditions that have challenged a person to develop particular moral strengths, and one might inquire as well about the cultural meaning that attaches to those strengths.

Katie Cannon provides an example of such culturally informed thinking about virtue. Cannon takes seriously the particular experiences of oppression that have formed the context for virtue among African American women. Cannon appeals to the primacy of experience. Her *Black Womanist Ethics* begins with an appeal to the experience of African American women rather than to ethical theory, and she draws out the ethical implications of this experience. "I believe," states Cannon, "that basic experiential themes and ethical implications can lead to norms lived out in the realities of day-to-day experience."[4] Analyzing the life and literature of Zora Neale Hurston as a source reflecting African American women's experience, Cannon highlights the importance of survival itself as a central virtue in Hurston's "unctuous moral agency":

> Zora Neale Hurston came to appreciate that surviving the continual struggle and the interplay of contradictory opposites was genuine virtue. Hurston knew that there could be no "perfectionism" in the face of the structures of oppression she experienced as a Black-woman-artist. For her, the moral quality of life was expressed not as an ideal but was to be fulfilled as a balance of complexities in such a way that suffering did not overwhelm, and endurance with integrity was possible.[5]

Cannon continues by describing corollary virtues of "invisible dignity," "never practiced delicacy," and "quiet grace."[6]

Cannon's work demonstrates how one can attend to a particular person's experience to describe moral virtue both as the unique set of virtues of a particular person and also as suggestively representative of that person's cultural community. She also demonstrates how this list of virtues might be shaped by a people's historic need to exercise moral agency while contending with powerful social forces that attempt to constrain that agency. Katie Cannon is able to portray an understanding of character and virtue that is relatively free from previous Western theories about character.

We now turn to some of these Western theories about character and conceptions of the moral self.

Models of the Moral Self

Any discussion about personal moral qualities or capacities (virtues) must assume some understanding of the self or some psychological model. For such an understanding of the self, Western moral theory has tended to rely on psychological categories from classical Greek philosophy–Plato and Aristotle–as these categories were further developed and shaped in Christian tradition–particularly by Saint Thomas Aquinas. The language of virtue in this tradition distinguishes between reason, will, and the appetites. The classical model of the self has produced a high degree of system in Western theory concerning the intricacies of virtue, vice, and character.

Traditional Model of the Self

Classical categories of virtue can still be seen as influential today. In the last twenty-five years, many writers have shown a renewed interest in the relevance of virtue and moral character for thinking about ethics. Some are explicitly critical of modernity and find in classical virtue theory an ancient alternative to categories of the Enlightenment.[7] Others voice a preference for biblical teaching over Greek philosophy, but can still be seen to assume categories characteristic of this philosophical tradition.[8] Some have applied virtue theory specifically to the practice of ministry.[9] Still others have emphasized the role of the church as a community that nurtures people of virtue.[10]

However, while the classical systems of virtue continue to be inspiring and instructive, it is probably not advisable to approach them in too literal a fashion. Alasdair MacIntyre is among those ethicists responsible for the renewed interest in virtue. Voicing

appreciation for Thomas Aquinas's system, MacIntyre nevertheless notes that even the most "exhaustive and consistent classificatory scheme ought always to arouse our suspicions." The reason for MacIntyre's caution is that our knowledge of the virtues is primarily learned empirically rather than deduced neatly from theory, and that there is therefore a necessary "empirical untidiness" in our experience and knowledge of our own and others' virtue.[11]

Resonating with MacIntyre's insight, we noticed the empirical untidiness of beginning in the middle. Decisions that confront us suddenly, such as the decision that confronted Pastor Anne, evoke from us those moral resources–those virtues or strengths of character–that have been developing within us over time and in concert with others. Our personal virtue is nurtured within community, and it takes on meaning within culture.

Classical psychology and virtue theory assume the existence of a personal soul able to willfully participate with one's environment in shaping one's own personality. The classical model presents the individual as developing morally in dynamic interaction with his or her social environment. Nevertheless, because of the high degree of system achieved in this line of thought, the importance of cultural influence can sometimes become obscured in favor of a detailed taxonomy of individual virtues.

New psychological perspectives in both modernity and postmodernity have stretched our self-understanding of what it means to be human. At the same time, we need to reconsider our understanding of human moral capacity. Contemporary theories of psychology, as often as not, avoid the question–thus making difficult any articulation of a correlative theory of virtue. A major theoretical challenge for theological ethics early in the third millennium is to develop such contemporary understandings of moral virtue.

Contemporary Models of the Self

The Behaviorist Model

In the middle of the last century, the behavioral psychologist, B. F. Skinner, championed the idea that environment is determinative of the behaviors of individuals. Skinner presented this challenge with such hyperbole, though, that many moralists rather easily dismissed him. In *Beyond Freedom and Dignity,* Skinner pronounced the death of "autonomous man."[12] By this he meant that a person's behavior could be explained by reference to a person's environment alone–thus negating the relevance of questions of virtue entirely. Skinner was unapologetically reductionistic in this regard, but his theory about

environmental conditioning continues to be very influential in behavioral science. Many in our congregations have studied his or similar theories.

The Cognitive Developmental Model

A psychological model more directly influential on congregations' own educational programs is cognitive structuralism, or cognitive development theory, inspired by the work of French philosopher Jean Piaget. This model presents learning as a dynamic process in the relation between "organism" and "environment." As children mature in interaction with their environment, they develop mental structures for understanding their world in increasingly complex and abstract ways. Learning occurs on different levels; as the child's earlier cognitive structures become inadequate over time for assimilating new information and experiences, the child "accommodates" by developing more adequate structures to take account of the newer complexity of mental perceptions.[13]

Psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg further developed Piaget's model and applied it to the cognitive development of moral reasoning. Kohlberg examined moral reasoning as a matter of the development of cognitive structures. He identified a pattern of development that progresses through stages. "Preconventional morality" in young children emphasizes avoiding punishment, while "conventional morality" in older children and many adults stresses conformity to rules and the approval of others. Finally, "postconventional morality" emphasizes abstract principles and the development of a more autonomous conscience.[14]

Sunday schools are often organized according to age levels to facilitate instruction of children at particular stages of cognitive development. Mainline Protestant Sunday school curricula have been written with these cognitive levels in mind, so as to communicate lessons in a way that is appropriate for a particular age level and that offers children a fitting degree of cognitive challenge. The intent is to present matters of morality and religion in a manner most appropriate for maturing minds. In this way, congregations are attempting to provide educational environments conducive to developing people of good moral character and Christian faith.

In testing Kohlberg's moral development theory cross-culturally, however, cultural differences have been found. One study examined the use of Kohlberg's stages in twenty-seven different countries and found cultural variation, especially with regard to Kohlberg's higher stages. It would seem that Kohlberg's stages are far from universal,

and that cultural relativity characterizes the so-called higher levels of moral reasoning.[15]

Carol Gilligan, Lawrence Kohlberg's former colleague, has criticized Kohlberg's theory of moral development with regard to differences in gender. Gilligan has argued that Kohlberg's understanding of the higher stages of moral reasoning is biased toward the experience of men. Whereas men tend to reason formally and abstractly with regard to justice, she points out, women tend to focus more on relationships and to the actual obligations and responsibilities entailed in those relationships.[16]

Cultural Constructivist Model

More recent investigations in cultural psychology have become increasingly expansive in portraying the very structure of the "self" as cultural construction. This new line of psychological enquiry also poses new challenges for conceptualizing moral character. Cross-cultural studies have shown that people in different cultures can have very different perceptions of the "self." Westerners tend to view themselves with a higher degree of independence than do many non-Westerners. In the typical Western perspective, a person's attributes become internalized; they are personal virtues and characteristics, the self-identifying marks of the individual. For many Asians and other non-Westerners, however, a greater degree of fluidity exists between the self and the self's relationships with others. For people in these non-Western cultures, the significant characteristics of the "self" remain attached to these relationships themselves–the roles, responsibilities, and feelings associated with particular relationships–rather than internalized more abstractly as personal character traits.[17]

In his book, *People: Psychology from a Cultural Perspective,* David Matsumoto reviews some of this cross-cultural research. His examples help illustrate these cultural differences. He notes that if people are asked to describe themselves by listing abstract traits of their personalities (e.g., "I am sociable"), Americans will list more of these traits than will Asians. Conversely, people from China, Japan, or Korea are much more likely to describe themselves in terms of social categories or relationships. However, if the context is explicitly described so that an individual is able to imagine the specific social occasion and the particular relationships that are most salient in this hypothetical occasion, Japanese people are able to list a greater number of personal feelings and attributes than their American counterparts. The Japanese individuals would seem to be able to identify their own personal attributes best within the complex nexus

of particular relationships rather than as isolated or abstracted from these relationships.[18]

The significance of this cultural difference became clear to me through interaction with theological students in the Pacific Islands. I was lecturing in a course on psychology at the Pacific Theological College in Fiji. The students in this class came from throughout Oceania: Fiji, Samoa, Tonga, Tuvalu, and the Solomon Islands. Almost all of the students in the class identified with the more interdependent understanding of the self. When asked, they would each describe their "self" within complex sets of relationships—including chiefs, elders, ancestors, and church, as well as family and friends.

After class, one student came to me with a further question. This middle-aged Fijian man was a very well-respected minister in the community. He was intelligent and articulate in English, but seemed less Westernized than some of the other students. He presented me with a sack of yams from the firstfruits harvest in his parish and asked his question: "Excuse me, I am confused. Would you please explain to me the difference between the 'self' and the 'others?'" The very idea of a "self" was actually confusing to him.

Cultural psychology, like conventional psychology, focuses on the development of the "self," but it gives greater attention to cultural variability in the constitution of personality and self-understanding. In so doing, it suggests not only cultural differences in values, moral teaching, and personal virtues; it also questions the universality of the basic model of an individualized self as moral agent who possesses virtue apart from the actuality of social relationships in cultural context.

The cultural constructivist model of the self described by cultural psychology seems to offer a rich alternative to the earlier, more reductionist behaviorist model. The behaviorist model, by comparison, seems impoverished with its emphasis on environmental stimulus and behavioral response. In the behaviorist model, both the self and the environment are diminished: The self becomes a reactive "organism," and similarly the "environment" loses its own "personality" of cultural complexity and meaning. Both models, though, emphasize the importance of the wider world in shaping the individual person. Moreover, both models raise a challenge for conceptualizing moral character and moral agency when the individual's self is so greatly shaped by the social and cultural environment.[19]

Anthropologists have always studied and compared cultures. They have attended to various moral systems and the ways that moral values are taught, expressed, displayed, and internalized. Writing in 1934, the anthropologist Ruth Benedict articulated a case of cultural

relativity. She referred in particular to different patterns of vengeance considered laudable among the Dobu people in Melanesia, and among the Kwakiutl of the North American Pacific Coast. She then challenged people's tendency to extrapolate from their own localized experience to generalize more universally about morality and human nature. "We do not any longer make the mistake of deriving the morality of our own locality and decade directly from the inevitable constitution of human nature," she writes.[20]

Culture not only contributes to moral diversity, however; culture also allows us to communicate with each other and to develop shared conceptions of the moral life. Because we live together in culture, together we construct a shared world of meaning as we interact with each other and as we converse together. Culture enables us to interpret and to reinterpret our moral traditions to address new circumstances as they arise. Our moral world is made possible by culture.

Culture is not monolithic. It is permeable. It is composed of many overlapping subcultures, and it overlaps with other cultures within the global community of communities. We are constantly recognizing both similarity and difference as we communicate with others. Culture allows us to affirm this similarity and to recognize and learn from this difference. When people approach one another or when they approach the minister with a moral quandary, for instance, it is an invitation to further explore together our shared world of moral meaning. Communication rather than uniformity is to be expected in these encounters between people about moral matters. Culture allows for this communication of both similarity and difference.

Pastoral Response

For the pastoral minister interested in virtue and the formation of moral character, the emphasis on cultural and environmental influence presents two challenges. The first is the rather academic problem of how to conceptualize moral agency if so much of a person's actions and habits are shaped by the cultural environment. In other words, how do we begin to understand a person's will and a person's capacity to choose good or ill? The second challenge, though, is more pastoral than academic: How do we individually as ministers, and corporately as church, exercise our responsibility in shaping people's habits and actions? In other words, if people are shaped by their environment, how can the church be a responsible environment in helping to shape people of virtue? These two challenges are related to each other as theory to pastoral practice. They shall each be addressed briefly below. H. Richard Niebuhr provides one example

of conceptualizing moral agency to take into account cultural factors. Following the discussion of Niebuhr, we will address the second challenge concerning the church's role in nurturing virtue.

The Responsible Self

H. Richard Niebuhr provides one theological approach to conceptualizing moral agency in culture. A contemporary of Ruth Benedict, Niebuhr acknowledged the fact of cultural relativity in morality. Moral relativism is an unavoidable cultural phenomenon, according to Niebuhr, especially during times of social change. Nevertheless, Niebuhr noticed that every culture has some way of conceptualizing the moral life, even though these conceptions all vary. He then argued that individuals and societies have an obligation to pursue their best understandings of moral good even though these understandings vary among cultures.

Niebuhr even suggested this as an "absolute" obligation that people have relative to the moral insight of their respective cultures. In his own words, he affirmed an "absolute obligation of an individual or a society to follow its highest insights."[21] Niebuhr perhaps begged the question of the criteria for determining a culture's "highest" insights; he certainly did not consider all cultural values and virtues to be of equal worth. Nevertheless, the idea of cultural relativity, to interpret Niebuhr's thought, does not negate the task of ethics. Instead, cultural difference becomes a part of that very moral reality to which the subject of ethics must attend.

Niebuhr's model of moral agency emphasizes the important role that interpretation plays within a community of shared meaning. Niebuhr's understanding of "the responsible self" was informed by the social psychology of George Herbert Mead. Mead's understanding, much like some of the psychological theories discussed above, views the "self" as developing in interaction with one's particular social environment.[22] According to Niebuhr's understanding of moral agency, we respond to each other in accord with our interpretation of "what is going on," and we further anticipate that our actions will be interpreted meaningfully by others. This "meaning" includes an understanding of the moral import of our actions in response to one another.

The emphasis is on responsibility as responsiveness. H. Richard Niebuhr states that we respond to an event in accord with our interpretation of that event and expecting a response to our response.[23] By "expecting a response to [our] response," Niebuhr is acknowledging that as moral agents we internalize a pattern of interpretation that we expect to be held by others with whom we are interacting. Moral

meaning is something we share with others within culture. This openness of moral agency to cultural meaning allows Niebuhr's model to remain relevant even as we become influenced today by contemporary models of the self as shaped by culture.

Various value systems can enter into this process of interpretation, according to H. Richard Niebuhr. As a monotheist, Niebuhr affirms that ultimately God is the center of value for all that exists in interrelationship.[24] The value theory of Niebuhr's monotheistic theology, however, allows for the construction of many relative value systems with different provisional centers as one considers "the interaction of beings on beings, now from the point of view of [humanity], now from the point of view of society, now from the point of view of life."[25] These value systems allow us to interpret our world and to weigh alternative courses of action. They also allow us to recognize that our actions will, in turn, be valued by others in accordance with their interpretation of our actions. Niebuhr's model of moral agency is able to combine two concerns that may at first seem to be in tension: (1) an attentiveness to society and to culture as a shaper of moral agency; and (2) faith in God as the ultimate source of morality.

Character in Congregation

The church has opportunity to participate in defining good character and in nurturing people of virtue. As a community, the church can provide a culture or subculture in which persons can be shaped and their character formed. In *Bible and Ethics in the Christian Life*, Birch and Rasmussen maintain this emphasis on character formation within the context of congregations. Describing the church as a "shaper of moral identity," Birch and Rasmussen notice that character is both formed and reformed as people read scripture, worship, and deliberate together in community. The church, according to Birch and Rasmussen, contributes to the formation of moral character not only as a direct influence on people's lives but also as a place of centering where people can faithfully integrate various experiences and influences.[26]

Similarly, Stanley Hauerwas's primer in Christian ethics, *The Peaceable Kingdom*, promotes the idea that the virtues of God's commonwealth are nurtured within people through their participation together as church. Hauerwas recognizes that many social forces influence us as moral agents. He suggests that character be thought of as a matter of selection within and between these influences, rather than as a claim of radical human freedom apart from them.[27] Moral character necessarily develops within a set of social relationships,

social expectations, and cultural narratives. Freedom, according to Hauerwas, "is dependent on our being initiated into a truthful narrative."[28] In particular, Christians learn to identify themselves as "forgiven people" as they find themselves incorporated into God's story of salvation.[29]

As the title of his book implies, Hauerwas understands peaceableness to be a necessary virtue of Christian community. Such peaceableness reflects God's commonwealth and God's intentions for human society. It stands in contrast to the realities of the current fragmented and violent world. Personal virtues such as hope and patience are corollary to this central vision of peace in community, and are nurtured in us as individuals within the Christian community.

Another Christian writer, Tom Sine, has brought further urgency to the character-forming mission of the church as a kind of alternative culture in postmodernity. "If we try to follow Christ on automatic pilot," cautions Sine, "the values of modern culture will wind up defining the direction and the character of our lives."[30] Sine is especially concerned with helping to strengthen the church as an alternative community to counteract powerful forces of globalization.

The peaceable theme articulated by Hauerwas, I would emphasize, becomes urgent for the church during times of war or when the wider society is tempted toward violence. As the society as a whole turns to an increasingly martial culture, the church is in a position to provide the kind of alternative culture advocated by Sine, Hauerwas, and Birch and Rasmussen. This is perhaps one of the greatest opportunities for the mission of the church–to continue in times of war as well as in times of peace–nurturing people of faith rather than fear, people of peace rather than violence, people of moral virtue rather than moral weakness. The members of a congregation can do this for one another in every aspect of their lives together in fellowship. Even by simply encouraging such virtue among themselves, church members provide a witness and an influence to the larger society, which may be in need of that alternative vision.

Professional Ethics in Society

One of the complicating factors for Christians, however, is that we exist simultaneously in more than one community. We are members of churches with sacred scriptures and with traditions of interpretation pertaining to those sacred scriptures. We are also members of a national community with its own foundational texts and moral norms, such as a tradition that identifies and interprets human rights and civil liberties. We are also members of other

communities–neighborhoods, extended families, places of work. Indeed, people can identify very strongly with the culture and ethos of their profession or of their workplace. Strong and important moral resources are available to us in these other areas of social life as well as in the church.

The church's relevance depends as much on its appreciative attentiveness to the rest of society as it does to any dogmatic or judgmental criticism of that society. It is not simply that the other institutions in society are intellectually vacuous, morally bankrupt, and spiritually inert. It would be incredible (*in-credible*: without faith!) for the church to think so. Society has moral traditions that inform our understandings of political justice and that guide our understanding of ethics for professional practice in such areas as medicine, law, and business. In fact, during the last several years, courses in ethics are blossoming in colleges and graduate schools.

The church needs to attend for its own sake, as well as for its social relevance, to the moral conversations that are occurring in the other arenas of society. To do so is to recognize that various spheres of life are, in fact, held within the care of the Creator and that the culture, the tradition, and the society all provide resources for thinking about the moral life. There needs to be a common language about moral expectations as well as a difference in perspective. Indeed we need a common language about the moral life to even be able to communicate our important differences as well as agreements with each other.

A degree of shared expectations is necessary for morality to be mutually meaningful. We need to know that our kindnesses to each other are at least appreciated as kindnesses, that our injustices to each other can be recognized as such in order to be corrected, that our trust in each other can be reciprocated. This all presupposes a common language of moral discourse–or at least a common basic vocabulary. One might want to transcend the vulgar ethics of the secular society to attain a more perfect state, but one is likely to be surprised that one's perfection is perceived as unwanted or even dangerous by one's neighbors whom one is called to serve and with whom one is called to live.

A wider, pluralist culture contains us as Christians along with peoples of other faiths and beliefs. A wider society of political, economic, and social institutions numbers church organizations among them. This wider society and culture contains traditions of moral interpretation that may seem to make only occasional contact with the particular theological beliefs held by Christians. The

civilizational ethics of the wider society tends to affirm values and principles, however, that are often (but not necessarily) held in common with the Christian groups within society. Earlier Enlightenment thinkers (such as Immanuel Kant and others) shaped much of this moral tradition, but it continues to be interpreted as a lively tradition. The liveliness of this ethical tradition can be seen in the continuing development of courses and programs in professional ethics: medical ethics, research ethics, business ethics, legal ethics.

The following chapters are concerned with the professional ethics of clergy as leaders of congregations and as caregivers. Pastoral ethics will be brought into conversation with other areas of professional ethics in Western society. Pastoral ethics will be seen to share with other areas of applied professional ethics a common tradition of moral discourse. As pastors we must draw on the best of the moral insights we hold in common with other professions, so others with whom we reside in society and with whom we share cultural patterns of meaning can appreciate (or judge as the case may be) our own professional ethics.

The justification for appealing to this tradition of moral discourse is not the same as the arguments used in the past by Enlightenment thinkers, from whom we now inherit many of these categories. The presumption is not made for absolute certainty in rational argument. The presumption is not even made that all of the principles here discussed will necessarily be rationally consistent with one another. Rather the appeal is to four factors that suggest that society's moral discourse may be relevant as well for the church's ethics.

First is simply the prevalence of these moral categories within our shared moral world.

Second, the prevalence of these moral categories gives them a "track record"; there would seem to be a pragmatic dependability of these categories for achieving a modicum of responsibility among the professions.

Third, for our own practice to be recognized as just, the church's morality must be consistent with the best moral insights of culture.

Finally, we share H. Richard Niebuhr's confidence that there is one God whose grace prevenes our moral formation and whose providence informs culture as well as church.

We now move to the "ethics of doing" in pastoral practice. As a primary concern, we turn now to the matter of not hurting others.