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How Can Theological Ethics Be Christian?

Douglas F. Ottati

THIS ESSAY PRESENTS THE ARGUMENT THAT A THEOLOGICAL ETHIC CAN be Christian if it is shaped by a Christian theology or a reflective attempt to articulate a Christian worldview in the service of the life of faith. But there is no generic Christian theology, only historical varieties, many of which shape our ethics differently and also include distinctive self-critical resources. Therefore, although theology is not all you need, you must also be your own theologian to be a critical, interesting, and ecclesially relevant Christian ethicist.

Some years ago, my teacher James M. Gustafson asked, “Can ethics be Christian?” He argued that aspects of Christian believing can qualify important dimensions of ethics. For example, faith in a loving God may dispose one toward becoming a loving sort of person. Believing that God commands—or, more broadly, that we should respond faithfully to divine activity—may shape our motives or reasons for being moral. Convictions about divine activity, such as “God liberates” or “God judges,” may influence interpretations of historical circumstances that call for moral involvement. Emphases on love and reconciliation anchored in narratives about God’s dealings with God’s people or in stories about Jesus may also qualify our understandings of certain moral principles or norms such as justice as well as our understanding of how to apply them. The unique norm of radical discipleship may authorize a strict Christian pacifism that differs substantially from behaviors authorized by approaches that leave more room for self-regard. On these grounds, Gustafson answered his question in the affirmative. Ethics can indeed be distinctively Christian, although important aspects of Christian ethics often overlap with other ethics.

The question I ask here, as well as the answer I give and explore, owes a good deal to Gustafson’s earlier argument. I assume that theological ethics can be Christian. My initial question is simply how they can be? That is, I assume theology matters for ethics. I assume that a picture of human life and the world in relation to God can make a difference for our practical orientations and...
stances in life. And I assume that a Christian theology can qualify our ethics and practical stances in distinctive ways.

My starting point also owes much to an argument made by another Gustafson student, John P. Reeder Jr., in his article “What Is a Religious Ethic?” Drawing on the work of Clifford Geertz and William Christian Sr., Reeder argued that religions furnish visions of the good and the real, worldviews that locate us in relation to what is important and to the possibilities afforded by the nature of things. We may therefore compare and contrast the worldviews offered by different religious communities and their traditions. We may also compare them with the pictures of what is important and possible offered by Marxists, existentialists, and others. A difference between Reeder’s concern and mine is that he focuses on religious ethics whereas I am concerned chiefly with theological ethics and, within that designation, theological ethics that are Christian. But I agree that what I call theological ethics as well as what I call Christian theological ethics are species of religious ethics (more or less) as Reeder describes them. Indeed, I subscribe to a signal implication of both Gustafson’s and Reeder’s arguments. If you want to articulate a Christian ethic in full, or “all the way down,” as it were, you need to not only identify moral norms and interpret circumstances; you also need to articulate a comprehensive doctrine, worldview, or theological vision.

My initial question, then, is, how can theological ethics be Christian? My answer, predictably enough, is that a theological ethic can be Christian if it works with a Christian theology. But the significance of this answer only becomes apparent when we probe it further, when we ask just what Christian theology is and does, when we note ethically significant historical varieties of Christian theology, and when we explore how these varieties may include resources for self-criticism. Once we do these things, in fact, we shall be in a position to make observations about the enterprise of Christian ethics and what it means to be a Christian ethicist.

What Christian Theology Is and Does

Theology is logos of theos, or discourse and reflection about god or the gods. It is the reflective attempt to understand god or the gods more truly. A discourse is theological if it has something to do with god or the gods.

Many statements may be about matters of genuine importance, such as personal fulfillment, politics, or life in the cosmos, and yet not be theological. Conversely, statements about very many matters, including personal life, politics, and planetary ecologies, may be theological if they refer to god or the gods, or if they are made in a context that refers to god or the gods. Gustafson says he once attended a party where a colleague in chemistry challenged him to say
something theological. He responded by saying, “God,” and he regards theology (rightly, I think) as an attempt to understand things in their appropriate relations to God. Thomas Aquinas wrote likewise that theology (sacra doctrina) expresses judgments about God and about creatures in relation to God. Relatedness to God is what defines theological reflections.

Even at this early stage in our inquiry, then, we may hazard a generalization. Theological ethics situate human life and the world in relation to something more that we do not entirely comprehend or control. They appreciate, as Gordon D. Kaufman might say, that we live “in face of Mystery,” and they tend to orient life toward a point of reference that lies beyond church, nation, ethnic group, or species. Indeed, when they do, theological ethics do not envision what is important and what is possible simply as functions of humanity on its own, which is why they sometimes seem troubling from the perspective of secular and humanistic ethics.

As a historical matter of fact, however, most theology is not freewheeling discourse about things in relation to god or the gods. It is also discourse and reflection in the service of the teachings and doctrines of particular religious communities. This is why there is no generic theology, and why we may speak of doctrinal reflections among Jewish communities, Islamic communities, and others that engage the historic teachings and sense-making resources of their respective traditions. Likewise, Christian communities have engaged in doctrinal reflections with the aid of the historic resources of the Christian movement. Through the centuries they have stated their teachings and doctrine in creeds, catechisms, and confessions, and Christian theologians from Origen of Alexandria to the present often have regarded themselves as teachers in the church.

The persistent connection of Christian theology with church teaching illuminates its practical nature. Broadly speaking, Christian teaching and instruction is training in a way of living, a New Testament theme also taken up in early postcanonical literature. It is training intended to help people interact with others, objects, situations, and realities in a manner that is faithfully responsive to the God disclosed in Jesus Christ. The church teaches as it helps its members interact with families, possessions, governments, forests, and more in a manner that is also faithfully responsive to God. The church teaches because its pastoral aim is the faithful formation of the people of God.

A critical point is that building up people in a faithful way of life requires reflective activity. We need a picture of things in relation to God if we are to know how to interact with them in a manner that is faithfully responsive to God. If we are to interact with families, possessions, governments, and natural environments in a manner that is faithfully responsive to God, then we need to have some picture of how they are related to God. This is where Christian theology comes in. Christian theology is the reflective attempt to picture or envision
ourselves as well as the many objects and others with which we interact in relation to the God disclosed in Jesus Christ. It is the reflective attempt to articulate a Christian worldview in the service of the life of faith. In short, it is a comprehensive doctrine that helps us to envision God, the world, and ourselves.

Varieties of Christian Theology

The connection with church teaching also illumines the historical nature of Christian theology and the emergence of distinct subtraditions. Indeed, the rise of theological subtraditions is endemic to the dynamics of faithful formation. By means of preaching, teaching, and pastoral care, communities try to form people at particular places and times. They train people to interact with things in a manner that is faithfully responsive to the God disclosed in Jesus Christ at Antioch in 380, Paris in 1270, and Cape Town in 2011. But at these places and times, the specific circumstances and realities, the challenges and the intellectual resources with which Christians interact differ, change, and develop. Over time, then, subcommunities and subtraditions emerge that are characterized by distinctive lines of faithful formation, practice, and theological reflection. It cannot be otherwise if Christian communities undertake the practical and pastoral business of faithful formation in history.

In addition, partly because so many biblical texts were written in the service of practical and pastoral aims, there is also plurality in the Bible itself. Subsequent communities therefore find themselves having to formulate normative and characteristic approaches to interpreting Jesus Christ and the scriptures (since there is, for example, no single unified Christology in the New Testament). Under the pastoral pressures of forming faithful persons at particular places and times, they select and develop different themes, images, and ideas from biblical portraits and texts. Consider, for example, Roman Catholic emphases on the Gospel of John, incarnation, nature, and grace; Lutheran emphases on Paul, crucifixion, law, and gospel; and Mennonite emphases on the synoptic gospels, Jesus's reign, and radical discipleship.

This helps to explain why there is no generic Christianity or Christian theology. It also indicates why claims that a particular position is or is not “orthodox,” or that a given theology does or does not affirm “the God of Jesus Christ,” rarely advance scholarly debates. We need to know whose orthodoxies and which Christologies are at issue, how they compare, and what counts for and against them. When it comes to Christian theology, one size never fits all since the dynamics of Christian theology and church teaching make for a historical plurality of Christian theologies.

Indeed, the subtraditions also continue to develop. This leads to significant emendations of received stances, such as Roger Williams's creative revision of
Calvinist ideas of civil society, religious liberty, and fairness in seventeenth-century Rhode Island, or Karl Barth’s sharp christocentric turn in twentieth-century Europe. Further subdivisions and strands therefore emerge within longer-standing theological subtraditions. In recent years, feminist varieties of Roman Catholic theology have emerged that support revised stances on marriage and family, justice, and priesthood that some other Catholics do not share. This, in fact, is how one might read Rosemary Radford Ruether’s classic book *Sexism and God-Talk.* Similar observations hold for appropriations of liberal, evangelical, and liberationist themes by Lutherans, Baptists, and others. Just as there is no generic Christian theology, there is also no generic Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Lutheran, Reformed, or Baptist theology.

We are ready now to make a further point. Historical varieties of Christian theology become significant for Christian ethics when they support appreciably different practical stances. They become ethically significant when they qualify dimensions of ethics in distinguishable ways: when they dispose us toward different reasons for being moral, when they suggest different estimates of human possibilities and limits, when they encourage us to interpret circumstances differently, and when they influence us to understand and apply moral norms differently.

**An Extended Illustration**

John Calvin published nine editions of *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* from 1536 until 1559, when it finally had become a 1,500-page tome intended for students at the Academy of Geneva. However, it always concluded with a chapter on civil government where, in the later editions, Calvin contrasted his reflections with those of Peter Rideman, a Hutterite who published his *Account of Our Religion, Doctrine and Faith* in 1545.

Rideman’s take on Christian faithfulness stressed a holy community that obeys Christ’s reign, holds possessions in common, and participates in civil society in a comparatively restricted way. Civil government, he said, is from God’s wrath; it is an enterprise by which God permits the godless to discipline, punish, and restrain the wicked by means of the sword. By contrast, Christ’s disciples put off all worldly glory. “Thus no Christian is a ruler and no ruler is a Christian, for the child of blessing cannot be the servant of wrath.” Moreover, “a Christian neither wages war nor wields the worldly sword to practice vengeance.” Christian citizens pay general taxes, but refuse to pay special taxes levied for war. “Neither can they make weapons,” sit as judges, or participate in civil courts. In sum, for the occasionally imprisoned Protestant radical, civil government “has its place outside Christ, but not in Christ.”

The contrast with Calvin was nearly total. The humanist student of law railed against “certain fanatics” who boast that once we are in Christ and “are
transported to God’s Kingdom... it is a thing unworthy of us... to be occupied with... vile and worldly cares.” He claimed that God has established civil government to provide for the public manifestation of religion and so “that humanity may be maintained among men.” Moreover, he said, its function “is no less than that of bread, water, sun, and air.” Discussing magistrates, Calvin claimed, “God has entrusted to them the business of serving him through their office,” and “civil authority is a calling, not only lawful before God, but also... by far the most honorable of all callings, in the whole life of mortal men.” It is the responsibility of magistrates to represent “some image of divine providence, protection, goodness, benevolence, and justice.”

Unlike Rideman, Calvin also thought it worthwhile to distinguish better and worse forms of civil government. Much depends on circumstances, he said, but because kings very rarely control themselves “so that their will never disagrees with what is just and right,” and because some kings are not especially wise, “a system compounded of aristocracy and democracy, far excels all others.” That is, human failings and shortcomings make it safer and more bearable where a number exercise government and therefore help, teach, admonish, and restrain one another. Calvin commended “restraint and humanity in war”; he claimed that magistrates properly exercise violent means “to restrain the misdeeds of private individuals” and “also to defend the dominions entrusted to their safe-keeping, if at any time they are under enemy attack.” Turning to civil laws, he noted that God is a lawgiver, that varied historical constitutions are founded on natural equity, and that Christians should not reject the judicial process.

My reason for eavesdropping on this debate is that we have here two specific varieties of Christian theology whose differences are significant for Christian ethics. The varieties offer dramatically different construals in relation to God of civil government, a basic reality with which faithful Christians interact. These different portraits in turn reflect different primary images of Christian faithfulness and our reasons for being moral. Rideman saw civil government in terms of a fundamental conflict between Christ’s rule and the reign of fallen principalities and powers. He therefore regarded government service and the rest as instruments of divine wrath to be exercised only by the ungodly to restrain the wicked. This correlates with Rideman’s view of Christian faithfulness as the commitment to follow Jesus rather than other (and alien) lords. Calvin saw Christian faithfulness as a response to God’s universal reign, a reign disclosed in Jesus Christ but one in which civil government may mediate God’s providence, goodness, and justice. His understanding of civil society was representative of a spirit of faithful participation in God’s world that yields a “worldly Christianity.” Government service, soldiering, the legal profession, and more were therefore understood by Calvin and later Puritans as legitimate callings, ways of pursuing justice and combating injustice, lines of both faithful and public service before God.
The difference persists. Somewhat like Rideman, John Howard Yoder, whose thinking has influenced Stanley Hauerwas and others, claimed that Jesus brings a way, pattern, or direction of living that founds the church and contrasts pointedly with fallen principalities and powers. The emphasis, to quote Hauerwas, is on the church as “the only true polity we can know in this life.” Somewhat like Calvin, the Dutch theologian and prime minister Abraham Kuyper, whose thinking has influenced Max L. Stackhouse and others, claimed that God's single government of the world takes place by means of differentiated spheres that are structured by appropriate institutions, such as politics and civil government, religion and the church, scholarship and the university. Kuyper's spheres accord with what Robin W. Lovin calls a “pluralist realism.” They emphasize diverse institutions such as corporation, family, church, government, and culture that constitute distinguishable contexts for responsibility.

These differences are also at work in recent debates over the participation of Christians in civil politics and public discourse in pluralistic democracies. Many agree that the different comprehensive views of human life, its possibilities and limits that cultural and religious communities support, make it difficult to elaborate political conceptions of justice. Many today also are more keenly aware than were their classical forebears that cultural and religious differences tempt civil governments to enforce settlements against the wishes and wisdom of particular groups. Even so, working from my own appropriation of the Reformed subtradition, I am comfortable arguing that Christians should participate in conversations aimed at political agreements and cooperative ventures among different communities.

I find considerable merit in Lovin’s recent analysis of social contexts of responsibility, public forums, and the possible contributions of comprehensive doctrines to public discourse in pluralist democracies. I also believe he is correct to note that, although they may not be required to do so, some churches and theological traditions may formulate important claims in ways that use points of contact with other groups and institutions. In fact, I think that Christian subtraditions such as my own have forthrightly “unapologetic” reasons to do so. I find merit, too, in Jeffrey Stout’s somewhat pragmatic call for a democratic exchange of reasons and mutual accountability and responsibility in democratic life. Critically understood, I think there is also merit in John Rawls’s revised, comparatively flexible, and inclusive account of “public reason” that admits shareable religious reasons as well as religious doctrines with analogues in other comprehensive outlooks.

These proposals differ, and estimates of them will depend partly on judgments that do not reduce to theology. Is pluralism or antireligious ideology the driving force of modern secularity and liberal democracy? How does the development in modern democracies of differentiated and internally complex contexts and institutions shape circumstances for conversations and public
deliberations? Even so, proposals such as those made by Lovin, Stout, and the later Rawls at times allow, encourage, and even require religious persons and communities to think both in their own confessional theological idioms and also in broader political terms. As Nigel Biggar notes, they call for religious persons and communities who are open to negotiations in which we listen to and reformulate each other's points of view. Ethicists indebted to a theological subtradition such as Rideman's may have deep confessional reasons to resist this call on the grounds that it threatens, corrodes, and perhaps even destroys the integrity of genuine Christian faith and community through an unholy compromise with principalities and powers. However, I am inclined to regard it as a call for religious persons and communities to pursue the social good of principled cooperation under certain contemporary conditions—a good that Reformed theology disposes me to value and accept. Indeed, Calvin's own theologically based argument in favor of "a system compounded of aristocracy and democracy" pursues this good. His argument expresses core doctrines of his comprehensive outlook; it is couched in broader political terms and is compatible with a willingness to exchange of shareable reasons. Moreover, to the extent that Calvin backs robust participation in the civil and public realm, his theology suggests unapologetic reasons for taking up the responsibility of framing a workable civil politics and discourse in later pluralistic settings. This trajectory in Reformed theology will only be strengthened if we attend, as James Calvin Davis has done, to Roger Williams's arguments in response to religious and moral pluralism in different and later circumstances.

I am a theological ethicist who believes and is willing to argue for these things. Bully for me. But my main point here is simply that my posture on these matters has much to do with my appropriation of ethically significant strands within my particular Christian subtradition.

**Resources for Self-Criticism**

Christian theology is a practical wisdom that develops differently in specific Christian communities and subtraditions as it serves the pastoral and ecclesial aims of faithful formation. Moreover, some historic varieties of Christian theology make for appreciably different stances in ethics. This is what I have argued thus far, and it tags me as a kind of a historicist. Have I also made a contemporary case for an isolated and noncritical traditionalism? Not at all, and so now I want to indicate that varieties of Christian theology often include resources for self-criticism. If I am correct, then there is little reason to assume that sustained attention to historic theological resources necessarily reprises cherished creeds and authorities. My procedure will be to outline three critical resources...
in my own appropriation of the Reformed subtradition and note overlaps, analogies, and comparisons with other varieties of Christian theology.

**Church Teachings Are Subject to Criticism**

Because I am a Reformed theologian of a comparatively ecumenical and liberal sort, I hope you will not mind if I begin with a statement made by my Roman Catholic teacher, David Tracy. There is no innocent tradition (and, I should add, no innocent subtradition either). This insight is one with which a good Reformed theology will concur.

“As we do not rashly condemn what good men, assembled together in general councils lawfully gathered, have set before us; so we do not receive uncritically whatever has been declared to men under the name of the general councils, for it is plain that, being human, some of them have manifestly erred, and that in matters of great weight and importance. So far then as the council confirms its decrees by the plain Word of God, so far do we reverence and embrace them.” These are the opening sentences of the chapter in the Scots Confession of 1560 on general councils, their power, and authority. These sentences express not only typical Scottish contrariness but also a classical Protestant idea that Reformed theologians share with Lutherans and others: church teaching and tradition are subordinate to scripture and subject to criticism in light of scripture. Moreover, as the deliberations and decisions of all persons, communities, and institutions not only draw upon limited insight but also are subject to the skewing effects of sin, all church statements, including those made by general councils, are fallible, a point that connects with the refusal of Calvin and the company of Genevan pastors to sign the Nicene Creed as a test of orthodoxy in a disputation at Lausanne in 1537.

Part of the Protestant idea is that we may go back behind accumulated teachings and traditions to the original documents of the Christian movement as the standard of criticism. These classic originals also stand in need of interpretation, so the Scots’ easy confidence that they will be able to confirm or deny conciliar decrees “by the plain Word of God” may justifiably be regarded as a recurrent Protestant hubris. Still, the critical regard for church teaching not only draws on convictions about the priority of scripture and the universality of sin. It also reflects the humanism of Calvin and other Swiss Reformers, such as Ulrich Zwingli, who shared Erasmus’s concern to work from the best editions of classical texts rather than only from later glosses and interpretations. Moreover, as is typical of other Reformed Protestants, the Scots continue to affirm a role for theological teaching and tradition (otherwise, why write a confession at all?). The net result is that appeals to church teaching are understood to contribute to inquiries of a certain kind. The
broaden theological conversation is never simply about (authoritative) tradition per se; appeals to church teachings and traditions are significant to the extent that they help us to get at the truth of the gospel.

**Respect for the Arts and Sciences**

Reformed theology has high regard for the arts and sciences, and willingly engages them. This is part of faithfully engaging society and world. Calvin himself regarded the arts and sciences as God’s good gifts, maintaining, “If we regard the Spirit of God as the sole fountain of truth, we shall neither reject the truth itself, nor despise it wherever it shall be found, unless we wish to dishonor the Spirit of God”—an affirmation he shared in substance with much Roman Catholic tradition. On this basis, Calvin commended writings of ancient jurists, philosophers (especially the Stoics), mathematicians, and physicians. He also claimed that astronomy, medicine, and natural science behold evidences of God’s “wonderful wisdom.” Again, Jonathan Edwards pondered, drew, and described the movements of spiders partly because he regarded natural philosophy as the study of the manner of God’s acting in the world.

The upshot is that Reformed communities have supported educational institutions and often refused to insulate theology from other inquiries. Where this impetus was combined with ideas about covenantal checks, balances, and the dispersal of powers, the preference was for schools that foster free and unfettered inquiry. Recall Kuyper’s claim that God rules human life through differentiated spheres and their appropriate institutions, including religion and church, scientific inquiry and university. Add his further claim that each institution in its appropriate sphere should be free from domination by the others lest we usurp God’s sovereignty. The result? Free investigation and inquiry in the university should be supported even though it “leads to collisions.”

Obviously, the Reformed Christian subtradition has had its share of disagreements and conflicts over freethinking and inquiry. Calvin prepared charges against Servetus, even if it is true that Roger Williams’s likeness appears on the Reformation wall at the University of Geneva. This is also a Christian subtradition that later found itself torn by the fundamentalist controversy. Nevertheless, in my judgment the liberal wing that comes to expression in the work of Friedrich Schleiermacher and others has been largely correct to intensify its critical impulses by advancing commitments to free thinking and by engaging well-attested scientific findings in fields such as evolutionary biology and modern cosmology on the theological ground that God is the source of all truth. In fact, the fidelity of the liberal wing to historic Calvinist principles in this regard has been routinely underestimated. A decision for it also entails a willingness to deploy methods of modern historical scholarship in the study of the Bible and church history, a development that finally led Union Seminary in New
York to sever relations with Presbyterian synods in the case of Charles Briggs and that necessarily leads to the rejection of overly sharp Protestant distinctions between the Bible and tradition. The Bible now is seen to be early tradition, a collection of charter documents produced by particular writers and communities. This observation, when leavened by postmodern liberationist, feminist, and womanist perspectives, opens the way to interpret the Bible with a dose of suspicion. Indeed, it pushes us toward Tracy’s further observation that there is no innocent classic (including the scriptures).

An Ecumenical Appreciation for Plurality

Reformed theology harbors an ecumenical recognition of plurality that is based in ideas that emerged during scholastic debates between Lutherans and Calvinists.41 Reformed theologians such as Francis Turretin, maintained that God the Son was active also beyond the flesh of the man Jesus, before, during, and after the incarnation. The upshot, as far as they were concerned, is that the infinite truly manifests itself in the finite, but the finite cannot entirely contain or comprehend the infinite. This essential dialectic of theocentric Christology encourages ecumenical theologies that are open to continuing conversations. Why? Because, although it insists that we have no access to God apart from historical particulars, it also recognizes that there is more to God than any one particular contains. Therefore, no subtradition or theology encompasses and adequately represents all there is to know about God and the Word of God. All remain partial and incomplete.

The solution? Put the subtraditions and theological visions into conversation with one another and encourage them to reach out to the oikoumene, or the entire inhabited world. By means of these conversations, ecumenical Reformed theologians expect to encounter productive tensions and to become more aware of their own tradition’s distinctiveness. They do not try to supersede Christian subtraditions; neither do they endorse dogmatic isolation. Instead, they engage their own particular subtradition, bring it into conversation with other equally particular and partial subtraditions, and remain open to the possibility that these conversations may lead to vital and faithful emendations of Reformed theology.

Ecumenical theologians also appreciate the importance of conversations among broader faith traditions. They suspect that efforts to construct a single world theology fail to estimate sufficiently the importance of particular media and historical traditions of interpretation. They suspect further that world theologies almost inevitably entail attempts to formulate common or generic concepts, and that these attempts may sacrifice depth, foreclosing conversations about the meaning and adequacy of the many symbols and interpretive heritages borne by the multitude of particular religious traditions and subtraditions.42 At
the same time, they also reject exclusionary stances that do not recognize the limitations of our own traditions and do not allow for valid knowledge of God beyond the bounds of Christianity.

The idea is to put traditions into conversations that help us to appreciate distinctive features and doctrines as well as commonalities. Perhaps these conversations will also keep us questioning the adequacy of our own doctrines in the light of insights offered by others. The aim is neither a common world theology nor a defense of Christianity but rather illuminating conversation with worthy partners in our quests to know God more truly.

These critical resources of Reformed theology—an insistence that church teaching is fallible, a high regard for the arts and sciences, and an ecumenical appreciation for plurality—have roots in convictions about God. All express a theocentric bias. No created reality is infallible because no created reality, including the church, is God. Human competence in the arts and sciences is the gift of God, the source and fountain of all truth. God manifests Godself in historical particulars, but no finite reality entirely comprehends the infinite God. Therefore, genuine knowledge of God should be respected wherever it is found, and we should not equate our own tradition (or any other) with all there is to know about God. Other Christian subtraditions operate differently. Thus, Yoder grounded self-critical impulses Christocentrically when he argued against church tradition that violates principles of discipleship based in the teaching of Jesus.43

**Theistic Humanism?**

I turn now to a question I have been encouraged to raise by conversations with William Schweiker. Is there a fourth critical resource in the theistic humanism sometimes put forward by Reformed theologians?44 I believe there is and that it represents considerably more than a commitment to work from critical editions and to adopt certain methods of text analysis. At its best, the theistic humanism intimated by Reformed theology is a baseline for construing God and humans in their appropriate interrelations.

A key insight is that human life is eccentric.45 It finds itself in the midst of interrelations with other things, but it is not itself at the center of things. Indeed, it is equipped to see that the value of other things is not merely a function of human needs, wants, and desires, and that the main point of human life lies beyond itself. This comes through in related affirmations of classical Reformed theology articulated by Edwards and by the Westminster Shorter Catechism.46 God's chief end in creating the world is God's own glory, and, according to Edwards, the glory of the God who creates and redeems is not God in isolation but God in relation to all things. The chief end of the human being,
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says Westminster, is to glorify God and enjoy God forever, or to be oriented not simply toward oneself but, if we accept Edwards' point, toward the encompassing reality of God and all things in which we participate. The theocentric bias of Reformed Christianity thereby furnishes a basis on which to criticize reductive anthropocentrism that celebrate humanity on its own and encourage a destructive attention to what is good for humans in isolation. Theistic humanism envisions people in the context of a Cosmic Passage or divine creativity whose wider activities and ends extend far beyond the frame of human realities. This is its "displacing" movement.

But the "displacing" movement also begins a "relocating" movement, a drive toward a theological estimate of the distinctive place and worth of humans. Reformed theistic humanism puts people in their place by insisting that, in the context of the divine creativity, the world beyond humans has value in relation to God. However, it also insists that the good gift of human life has a place and a time in God's cosmos and is endowed with impressive capacities of appreciation and intervention. It claims that humans have worth not as the primary point of God's cosmos but as distinctive and worthy participants. Theistic humanism affirms that human worth is not something that we, whether as individuals, communities, or institutions, simply devise, construct, or bestow. The value of humans as worthy participants in relation to God and to others is rather a reality we are called upon to recognize and acknowledge.

After teaching Calvin for many years, I observe that, on this score, his theology harbors considerable tensions. The Institutes begin with a balanced theistic humanism that emphasizes the relational character of the knowledge of God and of ourselves. Calvin's point is roughly that the classical dictum "Know thyself" is helpful but insufficient. For "Christian philosophy," as he sometimes calls it, the saying should rather be "Know God. Know thyself." Without knowledge of self and our gifts, limitations, and corruptions, there is no true knowledge of God: without knowledge of God, there is no true knowledge of self. This twofold knowledge, Calvin maintains, is the essential dynamic of true wisdom.

Occasionally, however, Calvin articulates a full-blown theological anthropocentrism, affirming at one point that "God himself has shown by the order of Creation that he created all things for man's sake." At the same time, he portrays the divine agent in a manner that threatens to render God the only reality, insisting that God determines all (including human actions), and he issues God a metaphysical blank check: God works in and through intermediaries, apart from all intermediaries, and even contrary to every intermediary. Still, when it comes to the worth of humans, Calvin insists that God finds something to love even in sinners and that the atonement is not the cause of God's mercy but its demonstration. Expositing the Christian life and the sixth commandment, he is adamant that we respect the image of God in all people,
including ourselves. Nevertheless, and as almost every theological student knows, Calvin upholds a doctrine of double predestination, which, no matter how he labors to integrate it with his theology of grace and justice, seems plainly misanthropic.

Tensions persist in Reformed theology on these points. Edwards affirmed divine determinism and double predestination, but he offered a more detailed and profound account of human agency than did the Genevan Reformer. Schleiermacher claimed divine determinism never operates apart from mundane causes; because he could not fathom a pious apprehension of God's goodness that supports a dual decree, he also allowed for the restoration of all. Barth believed Calvin went astray by making God great at the expense of humanity and world. Should Reformed theologians, even those of us who may find Schleiermacher's and Barth's resolutions flawed, and especially as we engage in ecumenical conversations with Catholic and Methodist friends, work to identify and construct theocentric bases for a robust theistic humanism that can counterbalance destructive impulses toward both hyperhumanism and hypertheism? Yes, I believe we should.

Conclusions

Now for some conclusions about Christian ethics and what it means to be a Christian ethicist. A theological ethic, I maintain, can be Christian if it works with and is shaped by a Christian theology. Even so, I have no intention of arguing that, when it comes to Christian ethics, theology is all you need. It is not, largely because important elements of ethics are not determined by theology alone. Other disciplines, many of them empirical, go into interpreting circumstances calling for moral action—for example, the devastation wrought by Hurricane Katrina and our nation's flawed response. Again, in addition to theology, our estimates of human possibilities and limits are responsive to philosophical perspectives, interpretations of biological bases for agency, and so on, not to mention insights garnered from biographies and novels. Multiple lines of reflection contribute to our understandings of moral norms such as fairness, justice, and care for the weak and dependent.

Thus, rather than argue theology is all you need, I am arguing this. If you are a Christian ethicist, then you also need to be your own theologian. Why? For one thing, your ethic can be Christian if it works with a Christian theology, but there is no generic Christian theology available for you to adopt, and many of the available varieties support different stances in ethics. You cannot lift yourself out of history, and you probably began to be formed by a Christian tradition before you understood it. Nevertheless, without considerable theological study, you can only continue to consent to it (or not) uncritically.
Indeed, you are likely to work with a specific version of your subtradition without accounting for alternative voices within it. You are also unlikely to develop a deep appreciation for your own tradition's self-critical resources, and this will play into the hands of those who regard theology as nothing more than a form of special pleading.

But there is more. Without sustained attention to ethically significant varieties of Christian theology, you will fail to understand adequately not only historical differences in Christian ethics but also some important contemporary debates, say, over public conversations in pluralist democracies. You will miss a pronounced sense for the distinctiveness of your own theology and the ways it influences your ethics. You will miss opportunities to rethink and perhaps revise significant aspects of your own theological ethic in the light of productive tensions and conversations with other theologies, and you will miss the measure of humility that often accompanies the recognition that your own stance is one among many.

Let me also underscore two additional benefits that may accrue to Christian ethicists who are their own theologians, who engage the arts and sciences, and who are ecumenically inclined. First, if you attend to theology, then you will be able to ask in some detail what counts for and against the theological foundations of your ethical stance. In this regard, a host of topics seem important today, among them biological perspectives on human morality. Another matter, now of interest also to the Vatican, is the decentering implications, perhaps especially for some incarnational theologies, of recent cosmological findings and the possibility of life elsewhere.57 Second, you may compare your own theological vision with the outlooks, worldviews, or comprehensive doctrines that orient other persons and communities, whether these doctrines are Christian, theological, religious, or not. This point touches on comparative religious ethics. But it also seems important to ask what we may learn by comparing our own visions and doctrines with those suggested by classical and recent humanisms, sociobiologists, political ideologies, consumerist cultures, therapeutic perspectives, and so on.

So much, then, for the importance of being your own theologian. What shall we say of the Christian ethicist who downplays theology in order to assure colleagues at college and university that she can make intellectual contributions unsullied by religious sensibilities and convictions? There are, after all, important elements of a Christian ethic that, occasionally and with good reason, may be presented apart from their theological grounds. Moreover, it is not the case that, due to their theologies, Christian ethicists will understand every moral norm and problem wildly differently than others do. Nevertheless, to recall my undergraduate teacher, Van A. Harvey, there is pathos in the attempt to minimize the theological.58 A Christian ethicist who does so may, in fact, operate in a considerably less critical manner than her more theologically inclined
counterparts. She may also find both nonreligious colleagues and Christian ministers wondering whether there is finally anything integral, compelling, or especially interesting in what she has to say. We therefore arrive at a point on which both church and academy may agree: a Christian ethicist without a theology is finally beside the point.

Notes


7. For example, new scholarship about Paul on justification, grace, and law centers on the pastoral challenge of expanding the community of God's people to include non-Jews. See John G. Gager, *Reinventing Paul* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).


9. Vigen Guroian reminded me that his Armenian Orthodox tradition, having rejected the Chalcedonian Definition, is officially Monophysite. The reminder did me good, after teaching at a Presbyterian seminary.


15. Ibid., 4.20.3–4, 6.

16. Ibid., 4.20.8.

17. Ibid., 4.20.11–12.

18. Ibid., 4.20.16, 19.


31. However, Reformed theologians such as Karl Barth and Miroslav Volf, make proposals that move in a different direction. See Douglas F. Ottati, “What Reformed Theology in a Calvinist Key Brings to Conversations about Justice,” *Political Theology* 10, no. 3 (2009): 460–62.


35. This is a point made by Heinrich Bullinger in the Second Helvetic Confession, *Book of Confessions*, 5.010–11.


41. See my *Hopeful Realism: Reclaiming the Poetry of Theology* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1999), 69–84.


51. Ibid., 2.8.39–40, 3.7.4–6.

52. Calvin treats objections to his doctrine in ibid., 3.23.


55. Karl Barth, *The Humanity of God*, trans. John Newton Thomas and Thomas Wieser (Richmond, VA: John Knox, 1960), 37–65. “It is when we look at Jesus Christ that we know decisively that God’s deity does not exclude, but includes His humanity. Would that Calvin had energetically pushed ahead on this point in his Christology, his doctrine of God, his teaching about predestination, and then logically also in his ethics! His Geneva would then not have become such a gloomy affair” (49).
56. Schweiker, *Theological Ethics and Global Dynamics*, 211.
