Is Christian Ethics Unique?

by Mark Miller, C.Ss.R.

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In this article, Father Miller reiterates some of the points he is making in his book *Living Ethically In Christ: Is Christian Ethics Unique?* published by Peter Lang Publishings. For more information, see [www.peterlang.com](http://www.peterlang.com).

**Christian Ethics**

In the 1980s, moral theologians asked themselves the question, "Is Christian ethics a different type of ethics from philosophical (or, perhaps, secular) ethics?" The importance of this question lies in two consequences. First, does God reveal anything to Christians about living morally which the rest of society does not know? And, second, do Christians therefore have the fullness of the moral law with the accompanying responsibility to instruct the rest of society about right and wrong?

Numerous answers have been offered by moral theologians about a specifically Christian ethics. Those who turn to the Bible for direct moral guidance and answers claim that the Bible is God's word and whatever is revealed there gives all human beings the true moral teaching. Other moral thinkers from the Mennonite tradition argued that Jesus gave his disciples a very specific moral command: never respond to another human being with violence.

**The Catholic Tradition**

The Catholic "natural law tradition" claims that God would not command anything unless God had made it possible for humans to understand what these moral demands were. Humans should be able to discern correct moral laws and demands by understanding the nature of created reality. In this tradition, some moralists argued that there is no specifically Christian ethic. We are discerning right and wrong in the reality of human thinking was sketched. The stages of "coming to know" go from experience through understanding to judgement and decision. Since all human thought follows this pattern, Christian moral theology can be understood in its components and then compared with other moral systems.

This is where the book is rather esoteric. First, Lonergan's system is explained and defended as adequate to the challenge of understanding human understanding and choice. His system is supported by the thought of two philosophers of science, Stephen Toulmin and Michael Polanyi. Both philosophers prove that a common assumption about scientific knowledge, namely, that it is objective, certifiable, and the most solid knowledge we possess, is contradicted by the very activity of scientists. A scientific breakthrough, for example, does not come from scientific method but from an insight, a new way of understanding how things fit together. Such insights allow knowledge to expand beyond the status quo following the searching nature of the human mind.

Furthermore, when scientists dismiss the divine from any kind of human knowledge (i.e., they will accept faith but only as a personal belief, not as an objective form of knowledge), they do so not as a scientific conclusion but because...
they have assumed that their scientific method is the only method that reveals true knowledge. On such a view, Christian ethics would be a subjective account of right and wrong (i.e., just for those who believe) but would have no validity scientifically and, therefore, for all of humanity.

The second aspect of this book sought to demonstrate that attempts to distinguish a Christian ethic from any other on the basis of the moral words used (as in a system of “unconditional love”) could never identify the unique Christian character. Because words and phrases are used analogously, i.e., we apply them with great flexibility such that youngsters today can be heard to say “I’m bad” and really mean “I am good in this particular area”, calling Christian ethics an ethics of love would be no different than a hippie claiming to follow an ethics of (divinely inspired) love.

**Uniqueness of Christian Ethics**

So, is there anything that makes Christian ethics unique? First, there is the reality of conversion whereby the Christian experiences and sees the world in a different light. Love, for example, is no longer an abstraction, but something experienced in history (the story of Israel, the Incarnation, the Cross) and embodied in the life and teaching of Jesus. Second, Christians understand themselves to be living as the Body of Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit. The Christian respect for human life manifests itself, in the inspiration or grace of Christ’s Spirit, as a respect for all human beings but with Jesus’ special awareness of the poor and marginalized because they are too easily overlooked in an abstract system of “perfect equality.” Kant’s ethics supports equal respect but does not recognize the reality of the poor. Karl Marx argued for revolution because of the injustice towards the working poor, but lost sight of the individual in recognizing “classes.” Noteworthy is not what Christians then “impose” on the rest of the world, but what values they can find to share with, often, the most unlikely of allies.

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**Christian Responsibility**

In short, what makes Christian moral thinking unique is that it is done by Christians in the context of their relationship with Christ (and in conjunction with the tradition of Christians who have lived this relationship over the centuries). This puts great responsibilities on Christians to discover the moral path of Christ and not use Christ as a cover or an excuse for their moral positions (as right-wing, Aryan, white supremacists do).

**Conclusion**

Christians are called to live Christ. However, Christ’s truth often comes in very surprising ways, as Gandhi showed. *Living Ethically in Christ* does not draw many particular conclusions; it is more concerned with the theory underpinning such conclusions. The book is principally for academics who know the issues, but I believe that there are many insights for those patient enough to work their way through the challenges of ethical theory.