

Article

Public Moral Discourse

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Abstract: Public moral discourse encompasses open discussions in which moral concepts of good and right are brought to bear on questions of public policy and on broader issues of basic rights and the goals and rules that guide social institutions. These public questions also raise practical, apologetic, and political concerns that are central to Christian ethics and moral theology. Public discourse frames legal and political understandings of religious freedom, and Christian ethics has a practical interest in ensuring that these choices do not limit Christian worship and formation or unduly restrict the institutional life of the church. Public discourse also engages apologetic theology in a moral task because the questions raised in public discourse involve conceptions of human good, human nature, and human community that have been discussed in Christian theology across the centuries. Christians have a distinctive understanding of persons in society that they hope to make effective, or at least to make understood, in a wider public discussion. Finally, public moral discourse gives rise to a moral responsibility for Christian participation in politics to create a public consensus on the creation of shared human goods.

Keywords: democracy; liberalism; religious freedom; apologetics; politics



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1. Introduction

This essay aims to relate public moral discourse to the concerns of Christian ethics by describing it as a “province” within the larger realm of Christian theology. The guiding metaphor that shapes this set of essays as a whole is particularly apt in this case. A province that forms a recognized part of a political whole has both enduring geographical landmarks and changing historical and cultural features that give it its character at a point in time. In the same way, public moral discourse takes place in some form in almost every organized society, but in modern society, it has been shaped by democratic ideals, religious conflicts, and human aspirations in ways that give it a particular character that demands attention from Christian theology in particular ways.

In the most general terms, public moral discourse is simply how a society brings moral concepts of good and right to bear on matters of public policy and on questions about law, justice, and the goals of public institutions. The history of these discussions can be traced back to scholars who advised the rulers of ancient China and to the citizen assemblies of Greece and Rome. These enduring features of human political life are important, and they receive keen interest from historians, anthropologists, and archaeologists. However, public moral discourse in the specific ways we understand it expanded dramatically at the beginning of the modern era, and the cultural forms that developed from those beginnings still define the terms of public moral discourse as we recognize it in democratic states and international forums today.

The expansion was most obvious in the growing number of participants, as new opportunities for education, more rapid communications, and the politics of regular elections drew increasing numbers of people into the discussions. While the early modern discussions look open compared to ancient and medieval precedents, they were sharply limited by gender and property qualifications and even more by cultural expectations related to race, class, and status. Still, ideas expressed in public have a way of eliciting responses even from those who are not supposed to have ideas, and over the long run, the

more they participate in the actual discourse, the harder it is to exclude them from office and power at every level. Public moral discourse as we understand it is addressed to and articulated by an inclusive public.

Technological and social changes that made public moral discourse more inclusive also made it more durable, since written arguments could be circulated widely over time as well as among larger audiences. This allowed the elaboration of shared political principles, as well as arguments about particular issues or candidates. The general use of terms like “conservative”, “liberal”, “progressive”, or “radical” is a reminder that modern public discourse shapes and is shaped by political philosophy, even if few of the participants are aware of the theoretical disagreements among the scholarly specialists.

The purpose of this discussion of public moral discourse as a “province” of Christian ethics, then, is to review some of these developments that shape the discourse as we have it today in relation to the problems of religious freedom, apologetic theology, and the political concerns of contemporary Christian theology. That will leave many philosophical questions about the discourse itself unanswered, but this overview should be sufficient to explain why theologians and Christian citizens should take an interest in the subject.

2. What Makes a Discourse “Public”?

What makes a discourse “public” is that it is generally open to participation by those whose lives and interests are bound up with the society, state, or political system, of which they are a part. At the limits, this public is potentially universal, as when we consider climate change and environmental sustainability, but even very local issues can call forth a public discourse with wide boundaries.

The broad and somewhat fluid boundaries of participation do not mean, however, that public moral discourse is unregulated. There are rules against violence and intimidation, for example, and those who violate them are often effectively excluded from the discussion by other participants. At the least, the public seems able to conclude when threats and force mean that public discourse has ended and a riot has begun. Other rules against ad hominem attacks and the use of pejorative labels are harder to enforce, as are rules against blatantly false claims or intentional deception. The complaints about political polarization that are frequently heard today give witness that these problems are becoming more common, but they also show a general awareness of the conditions that make public moral discourse possible. It is, after all, a discourse; it is governed by rules of logic, evidence, and argument designed to win intellectual, as well as emotional, assent to a conclusion. Rhetorical flourishes designed to entice or inflame and slogans or symbols that sum up a position on the issues are inevitable accompaniments, but without the underlying dynamics of claim and counterclaim, arguments, evidence, and conclusions, we do not have public moral discourse at all. We have wandered off into some other province, one that may not lie within the domain of ethics.

Like all discourse, then, the public moral discourse has rules. What is distinctive and compelling about public discourse is that these rules must be enforced by the participants themselves. There is no other authority to make those decisions.

This contrasts with other discourses, which deal with similar subjects, but which are neither open nor self-regulating in the ways just outlined. Legal discourse, for example, has advocates for opposing parties and a judge who enforces rules of argument. Discussions in legislatures, regulatory commissions, and other bodies that make up the structure of a complex modern democracy are usually governed by rules of transparency and openness that make them accessible to the public, but they are “public discourses” only in the broad sense that their results and the elected or appointed authorities who determine them become subject matter for the larger, self-regulated background discussion that is the focus of attention for this essay (cf. Rawls 1999, p. 576).

Similarly, many discourses in which moral concepts are brought to bear on political issues and social questions are not public because they occur in contexts where the possible conclusions are limited by higher authority or prior commitments. In traditional, hierarchi-

cal societies, religious doctrines or sacred authorities have often determined what social arrangements are acceptable. Historically, Confucian cultures have applied concepts of virtue to questions of governance and civic responsibility, and Islamic states have been governed by *Shari'ah* law. Christianity has generally made a distinction between religious and secular authority, but wherever traditionally Christian societies have existed, there have been normative theological accounts—Catholic, Orthodox, or Reformed—of the relationship between these powers. Indeed, through much of human history, discourses within authoritative traditions have determined the ordering of social life, and even in contemporary pluralistic societies, many individuals will choose to live their lives following these guidelines. The norms may, in fact, be very widely discussed over generations, but if the answers to questions about social life must be located within a tradition and secure the approval of its authorities, the discussion is not “public” in the way we are using the term here.

Likewise, modern states have sometimes set ideological limits on discussions about social practices, economic organization, and political authority. The French Revolution gave rise to a determinedly secular, rationalist regime that rejected other authority sources, especially the church. The Soviet Union constrained discussions about social organization within the limits of Marxist–Leninist economic theory and largely limited participation to authorized interpreters of the theory. Similar limits applied and were vigorously enforced at a local level in China during the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution of 1966–1976. Elsewhere, various forms of nationalism have created a canon of historical sources and authoritative interpreters to answer questions about the direction of their countries and set limits on the range of acceptable answers.

It thus quickly becomes clear that, while social questions about good and right are universal, the province of public moral discourse as a forum for addressing those questions has a more limited scope. It is primarily, if not exclusively, a feature of modern societies, especially of modern democracies. It arises as people develop a sense of individuality within their social location and as the growth of urban life, commerce, and education bring together a wider range of opinions and experiences. It becomes essential when economic and technological developments open new choices that cannot be fully decided within traditional social frameworks. It works best when the discourse supports a public consensus and elicits general cooperation that cannot be dictated by a central authority.

3. A Short History of Public Moral Discourse, with an Unexpected Ending

Because this discourse is regulated by the participants, its rules develop gradually. They vary considerably from place to place, and they remain somewhat fluid over time. Nevertheless, the evolving public discussion of moral questions about good and right has given rise to its own varieties of normative theory about how the discourse should be conducted and what makes the outcomes legitimate. As a province of ethics, public moral discourse is defined not only by its place in the history of politics and its location in relation to other kinds of traditional and ideological discourse but by a characteristic ethical theory. This begins early, with John Locke’s account of natural rights discerned by impartial reason and his corollary explications of consent, freedom of belief, religious toleration, and separation of powers as criteria of legitimate government. These were not abstract principles formulated in a vacuum. After the English revolutions of 1640 and 1688, they articulated a consensus on government by a limited monarchy, and in Locke’s thought, they began with a comprehensive rejection of Robert Filmer’s account of a traditional society ordered by patriarchal authority (Locke [1690] 1988). Locke’s defense of natural rights was, however, sufficiently adapted to the prejudices of its emerging modern culture to permit slavery and gender inequality and to restrict political participation by Roman Catholics.

Nevertheless, the Lockean commitment to reason opened such practices to critical scrutiny even as it discounted established traditions of virtue and moral ideals in favor of individual preferences. This set the direction for the future development of public

discourse in liberal democracies. Against a Thomist or Aristotelian account that discerns natural ends toward, which every human life should aim, the impartial reason of liberal theory regards every individual's goals as equally worthy of fulfillment. If the rule is "each one to count for one and no one to count for more than one", then the goal of public discourse is to order affairs so as to create "the greatest good for the greatest number" (Bentham [1780] 1996). Many questions remain open for discussion when this maximization of public good conflicts with the claims of individual rights, and there are significant differences between utilitarian and rights-based theories about how public discussion of these questions should proceed. In broad outline, however, the public moral discourse of a liberal democracy presumes the equality of the participants and the equal *prima facie* value of the various goals they offer for consideration. In the debates that ensue, an impartial, instrumental reason tests claims of fact, but rejects prior commitments to goods and goals, except, perhaps, to a "thin" theory of the good that recognizes some minimal requirements of human nature that every form of social life must respect (Rawls 1971, p. 395).

Public moral discourse, so understood, gradually extended its reach around the globe and displaced hierarchical and traditional authorities like those it had opposed at its European origins. Its emphasis on freedom and equality increasingly questioned the numerous inequities that remained in social practices, political systems, and imperial dominions. The pace of change may have been slow, and the internal disagreements were sharp. However, the advocates of this idea of democracy defended it successfully both against more radical egalitarians (Burke [1790] 1987) and against traditionalists, who distrusted its confidence in public reason (Wollstonecraft [1792] 1999). By the twentieth century, liberal democracy had largely succeeded in delegitimizing traditional and hierarchical government systems, and the opposition it faced came from modern alternatives that questioned its account of reason and reality. Marx's materialist theory of history argued for scientific socialism that could offer a more definitive picture of the human future than the vague promise of "the greatest good for the greatest number". Meanwhile, the idea of human equality at the heart of democracy's public moral discourse came under attack by racist and nationalist ideologies that argued for a world order based on domination by those who were prepared to assert their own superiority.

By the end of the twentieth century, however, the failures of Marxist, nationalist, and racist regimes appeared to leave liberal democracy as the primary, if not the only, option for the human future (Fukuyama 1992). Societies that had been organized around other ideas raced to put market reforms and political democracy in place. Established democracies found new opportunities to address their own internal contradictions, and public moral discourse appeared poised to expand until it became global in scope.

In recent years, this long narrative of progress has become significantly more complicated, and the high hopes of the 1990s have faded. While external threats are for the moment held in check, liberal democracy faces internal challenges to its discourse and new questions about the legitimacy of its public reason. New ways of communicating ideas and organizing action that seemed to offer the possibility of a global public discourse have instead provided ways to bypass the shared account of the facts that established media that once provided. Sharply different views of reality give rise to polarized opinions that are exploited by political leaders, who maintain power by appealing to extremes on the left and right, rather than seeking consensus in the center. As commitments intensify, people become less open to persuasion, less willing to listen, and quicker to question the motives of those who disagree with them. Convictions about civic equality and conventions of mutual respect erode, and so, eventually, do assumptions about equal rights. Critical legal and social theories raise the possibility that "reason" is simply another form of power, wielded to silence those whose needs and goals do not fit the purposes of the dominant groups.

The causes of these developments are multiple, but the effects include significant political dysfunction in the oldest democracies and a resurgence of authoritarian constraints and nationalist ideologies in public discourse around the world. Rather than the reasoned

discourse among equals depicted by liberal political theory, the aim in speech and writing seems to be a sharply honed characterization that suggests the opposition deserves to be ignored, or perhaps even suppressed. Instead of an orderly province governed by moral rules, public discourse increasingly appears to be disputed territory, where marauding bands claim space for their own purposes, only to yield it when displaced by a stronger force with a different idea of who is equal and what is reasonable.

4. Withdrawal or Engagement?

Christian ethics has dealt with questions about public moral discourse ever since that discourse emerged early in the modern era. After all, it developed partly to bring an end to religious persecution and religious conflict, and the freedom of belief and toleration of differences it required marked a historic break with the theologies that had in earlier centuries legitimated political authority and mandated religious conformity (Habermas 2011). The rules of public moral discourse thus took a form designed to exclude claims based on religious authority, arguments based on religious doctrine, and moral obligations grounded in religious ideas of human nature. The equal citizens who had the same natural rights could be neither saints nor sinners. A case for policy and legislation had to rest on public reasons that everyone could assess, and though some democratic leaders may appeal for God's guidance, none could claim God's authority. Religious traditions tested these limits, especially in times of crisis, but they also adapted to these expectations with remarkable success, especially in the conflicts with totalitarian ideologies that marked the twentieth century. If both Christian ethics and public discourse required a distinction between them, each was susceptible to interpretations that made it an ally of the other (Niebuhr 1952; Murray 1960). In particular, in political contexts, the language of faith could gradually transform public expectations (Bellah 1975; Galston 2005).

The conflicts that have unsettled public moral discourse in recent years have, however, also posed new problems for Christian ethics. The question becomes not just whether Christian ethics can enter into public discourse without appeal to religious authority, but whether it can even make its ideas comprehensible to those who do not share its theological presuppositions (Hauerwas 2001). Ostensibly secular premises in public discourse may seem to depend on an appeal to an authority of their own, transforming religious ideas for their own purposes (Cavanaugh 2011). Perhaps the Christian purposes that were supposed to be achieved through participation in public life would be better served by attending more closely to moral formation within the Christian community. Some now speak of a "Benedict Option" based on self-conscious withdrawal from a society that has become confused about its moral purposes (Dreher 2017). Exactly what this entails has not yet become clear, but it recalls the origins of Benedictine monasticism in the political ruins of the Western Roman Empire. This combination of political disillusionment and religious aspiration was introduced some years ago by Alasdair MacIntyre, whose prescient account of philosophical disorder in modern moral thought anticipated the more obvious dysfunctions of today's politics. Amidst the ruins, he suggested, "We are waiting, not for a Godot, but for another—doubtless very different—St. Benedict" (MacIntyre [1981] 2007, p. 263).

However, is this withdrawal the most appropriate stance for Christian ethics in the unsettled world of contemporary democracy? To return to our metaphor, those who survey the province of public moral discourse from the high towers of the Benedict Option may see a troubled land filled with hostile forces at odds with each other and set to repel any external interference from Christian ethics. However, reconnaissance on the ground reveals a landscape largely empty and open to further exploration. To put the matter more straightforwardly, contemporary problems in both the theory and the practice of public moral discourse require prudent, specific responses rather than a general retreat into theological contemplation. Three areas, in particular, present risks and opportunities that cannot be ignored: the public understanding of religious freedom, the apologetics of Christian humanism, and the creation of penultimate goods.

5. Public Understanding of Religious Freedom

Freedom of religious belief is one of the assumptions of modern democracy, but the public exercise of that freedom takes many different forms, all of which are regulated in various ways by law, custom, judicial decisions, and local ordinances. Religious denominations, local congregations, and informal fellowships of believers plan their activities within a framework of expectations. Are they allowed to own property in the name of their religious group? Can they control the education of their children? Are their properties and activities subject to taxation? Are religious speech, dress and observances just another form of self-expression, or are they treated distinctively? During pandemic conditions, are their services protected from regulations that limit other public gatherings, or are houses of worship to be treated like gyms, bars and restaurants? No matter how these specific regulations may be enacted, questions about them come back to the broader forums of public moral discourse.

Those who chose the Benedict Option may argue that a secular public discourse can hardly comprehend the meaning of religious worship or the forms of religious fellowship, but a religious community cannot simply leave the matter there. Public moral discourse in a liberal democracy presumes a certain level of prudent self-interest on the part of the participants, whomever they may be, and failure to assert it will inevitably result in the erosion of a religious community's public position. This is not necessarily due to anti-religious sentiments among the wider public. It is the normal friction of a public discourse in which all sorts of interests are in competition. There may be religious groups that forbid *any* assertion of self-interest, and there are those who refuse, in principle, any participation in public discourse, but those are extreme positions. In democratic societies, many Christian groups regard the exercise of their religious freedom as a form of Christian witness, as well as a civic duty. They might even regard their political commitments to religious freedom as a kind of service on behalf of other Christians, who have scruples about asserting their own rights in courts or legislatures (cf. [Niebuhr 1940](#)).

Further complications arise when religious groups emphasize different aspects of religious freedom or disagree on what it means. A group that actively engages in proselytization, distributing literature to homes and preaching to the public on street corners may assert a religious obligation to proclaim its good news, even in the face of opposition by public opinion or public policy. An unpopular religious minority may claim the right to open a place of worship and announce it with signs and symbols, even though local authorities pass ordinances intended to prohibit it. A group that upholds the sanctity of marriage commitments between same-sex couples will insist on their right to celebrate those unions, even when they are not recognized by law. A religious community with the opposite beliefs will refuse those rituals, even when the law recognizes them. In the United States, claims of religious freedom have been asserted as reasons for a business to refuse a customer who wants food or flowers for a wedding celebration that violates the proprietor's religious beliefs or to claim exemption from mandated insurance coverage for employee birth control services ([Berg 2021](#)).

The theological and moral disputes behind these claims to religious freedom are best taken up in discourse within and between religious communities, but they enter into public discourse as well because these stances inevitably have an impact on how the public understands religious freedom in general. It is one thing if religious freedom is perceived as protection from discrimination for minority faiths or unpopular religious practices. It is quite another thing if religious freedom begins to mean freedom to discriminate or to refuse services for religious reasons when such actions would otherwise be unacceptable. In today's polarized political environment, those who resist exclusionary and discriminatory uses of religious freedom would do well to sharpen their theological arguments in favor of more inclusive interpretations, but prudent self-interest will also prompt them to engage in a carefully balanced moral discourse that upholds the public importance of religious freedom while rejecting its use to sanction discrimination. Otherwise, the whole idea of

religious freedom is at risk of being dismissed as an excuse for behavior that cannot be justified on any other grounds.

6. An Apologetics of Christian Humanism

Paradoxically, the cultural and philosophical confusion that leads some Christian thinkers to conclude that public moral discourse is impossible leads others to see new opportunities for engagement with ways of thinking that have in the past been skeptical of theological claims or dismissed them as irrelevant to the problems of public life. These efforts recall the renewal of Christian interest in classical literature and philosophy during the Renaissance, and so the work is often seen as a new version of Christian humanism (Zimmermann 2017). However, the contemporary version also includes dialog with other religious traditions and a wider and longer view of human culture that extends beyond classical Greece and Rome. Today's Christian humanism does not usually hold unrealistic expectations about re-creating universities, the arts, or literary culture along Christian lines. The more focused effort is to identify areas in which the traditions of Christian ethics and the questions of contemporary culture converge.

This Christian humanism is "apologetic" in the theological sense that it sees in these questions an opportunity to articulate Christian thought in ways that may correct misconceptions and build connections, leading to a wider understanding of the Christian faith. (One misconception the Christian humanist seeks to correct is the idea that all Christians think that their ideas about humanity and society are largely incomprehensible to those who do not share their theology). Cultural disorientation leads some to choose the "Benedict Option" and isolate themselves from ways of thinking that they reject, but it also raises questions that allow an apologetic theology to engage with cultures that previously saw no need for the kinds of answers that Christian theology offers.

These discussions certainly proceed in the open and without restrictions, but it may be asked whether they are really part of public moral discourse. Engagement with these questions about history, culture, and human nature requires considerable knowledge and, indeed, some specialized education in how to make the arguments and respond appropriately to criticisms. The dialog between a Christian humanist and a political philosopher may seem more akin to the specialized language of legal argument or to a peer review of field research in anthropology than to public discourse. However, the subject matter is relevant insofar as public moral discourse requires some shared understanding of the persons who participate in it. We must share a general idea of human nature to identify which arguments are, in fact, public and what sorts of questions public discourse is supposed to resolve.

Modern political thought emerged after a century of religious conflict that rendered theological ideas about human nature and human goods controversial, at the same time that the development of scientific empiricism rendered claims to knowledge in these matters suspect. Individuals might still hold moral and religious ideas about the meaning of life, the immortality of the soul, and the end of history, but there could be no certain knowledge in these matters, and an attempt to impose one view or another by law would provoke conflict. What people could agree on was what the experience of their senses taught them. Reason might adjudicate some of their conflicts, but it was increasingly seen to be the servant of their passions and interests. For political purposes, the public consisted of isolated individuals. Their individual interests, rather than any generalizations about human nature, provided the material from which a social order had to be constructed, and their consent was the evidence that the political order was morally sound and socially durable (Macpherson 1962).

The public moral discourse of liberal democracy was framed by these assumptions about the public. Other ideas could be tolerated, and indeed, as political liberalism became well established, a range of alternative, illiberal ideas about tradition, authority, and liberty became familiar on the fringes of public discourse. However, the normative discussion that framed the possibilities for politics, legislation, and social expectations was conducted

by liberal individuals, who were expected not to build their public arguments on other premises (Rawls 1999; Audi 1997).

As the coherence of this modern framework comes under criticism, questions also arise about liberalism's outcomes for women, ethnic minorities, and disadvantaged groups. It is less and less clear an account of justice based on competing interests yields results that satisfy our intuitions about what justice means, or that a "thin" theory of the good tells us enough about what we are seeking to make a case for our choices in public discourse (Sandel 1982). This helps to explain why the problems in our public discourse became apparent precisely as the ideological alternatives to liberal democracy weakened their grip on world history. Contemporary liberalism does not need to be so concerned to argue against alternatives. It needs an account of human good and human nature that is sufficiently robust actually to account for liberal ideals and values and to support a public discourse in which the uncertainties and problems in those values can be resolved. In this contemporary situation, Christian ideas that once seemed superfluous or divisive may receive a better hearing.

While liberalism sought at first to defuse sectarian conflicts by making religious belief a matter of personal conviction, with no social implications beyond the ways it shaped individual interests and activities, some contemporary accounts connect the evolution of human sociality and the evolution of religion. Capacities for altruism and for social cooperation are not simply the result of a calculation of mutual interest. They develop along with a sense that the contingencies and conflicts of ordinary life are set in a sacred order that gives them meaning (Bellah 2011; Fuentes 2019). Seen in this way, politics emerges from a primordial awareness of the cosmos and community rather than being brought into being by an agreement between rational individuals. This anthropological account of the religious origins of political community does not, of course, prescribe any religious content for contemporary politics, but it does suggest that religious ideas and traditions may help us understand the possibilities and limits of politics. Rather than being safeguarded by the exclusion of religious language, the aims of public discourse may be illuminated by it.

Contemporary political thought also gives new attention to accounts of the characteristics by which persons become good citizens and lead good lives. Rising levels of polarization and political dysfunction in well-established liberal democracies raise questions about whether the minimalist account of rational individuals respecting one another's rights is sufficient to explain a political community or to keep one functioning. Alternative traditions of civic virtue develop normative ideas of character formation (Bellah et al. 1985). Moral philosophers give accounts of human capacities that must be developed for individuals both to lead good lives and to participate effectively in society (Nussbaum 2011). These proposals have conceptual and historical connections to ideas of natural law and thus invite comparison with Christian accounts of the moral agent drawn from that tradition (Biggar 2011; Bushlack 2015). These authors converge on a practical concern to promote civility in public discourse, and they share the idea that particular human goods are necessary for both a good life and a good society. Rational agreements on rights may be a part of that social good, but they are not sufficient to constitute it by themselves.

Likewise, the straightforward liberal account of human equality, based on equal parties consenting to form a society based on self-interest, begins now to seem unable to account fully for what persons bring to the social contract or what they should receive from it. Human beings have a dignity that entitles them to basic rights beyond any political boundaries and constrains what must be granted and what may be withheld from them in the political orders to which they do belong. Human dignity serves as the basis for universal human rights, and, like the natural law account of human capabilities, it connects our understanding of rights to a tradition older than the modern origins of political liberalism (Nurser 2005; Waldron 2017).

Taken together, these ideas of dignity, virtue, and political community are transforming our understandings of public moral discourse in ways that provide a richer account of

what politics requires of persons and of the biological and social conditions that make it possible for them to rise to those requirements. They also offer new opportunities for apologetic theology to connect these accounts with ideas that have been central in the history of Christian social ethics. The sociologists, political philosophers, historians, and legal theorists, who are developing these new insights might be surprised to find themselves in dialog with apologetic theology, though many of them acknowledge the connections between their ideas and themes drawn from Jewish and Christian scriptures. However, for theologians, interdisciplinary conversations with natural science, social science, history, and philosophy provide starting points for an understanding of public moral discourse and the goods it aims to secure that can be enriched by theological insight (Lovin and Mauldin 2017). There is a risk in this approach to public moral discourse, as in any apologetic theology, that theological insights will be turned into cultural platitudes. However, there is also the possibility that in the dialog, theological ideas will come to be better understood—by the theologians as well as by their dialog partners.

7. The Politics of Penultimate Goods

Hence, Christian ethics enters the province of public moral discourse because it has important things to say about the people who carry on this discourse and about how their politics relates to their human nature. In the past, those questions may have seemed speculative, superfluous, or divisive to liberal theorists, but they are increasingly a part of an interdisciplinary discussion to which theology has something to contribute. Beyond these questions about what makes public moral discourse possible and about the terms in which it should be conducted, however, Christian ethics has reasons to enter into the discourse itself, even if that discourse does not always understand itself in ways that Christian ethics may prescribe. Whatever its flaws, public moral discourse is about questions that Christian ethics cannot ignore or postpone.

Christian ethics is centrally concerned about food for the poor, welcome for strangers, reconciliation between enemies, and justice for those who have been wronged. The commandments to love God and your neighbor (Matthew 22:37–40) may stand as a reminder not to confuse the Kingdom of God with questions of ethics, but the way in which they are connected suggests that the needs of the neighbor are important on their own terms. Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it this way: “The hungry person needs bread, the homeless person needs shelter, the one deprived of rights needs justice, the lonely person needs community, the undisciplined one needs order, and the slave needs freedom . . . To give the hungry bread is not yet to proclaim to them the grace of God and justification, and to have received bread does not yet mean to stand in faith. However, for the one, who does something penultimate for the sake of the ultimate, this penultimate thing is related to the ultimate” (Bonhoeffer [1949] 2005, p. 163).

There are many ways to meet penultimate needs, including individual acts of kindness and the charity of religious institutions. If medieval antecedents are any indication, a modern “Benedict Option” will include the penultimate goods of teaching, healing, food, and shelter among its concerns. However, in a democratic society, these goods of Christian ethics are also primary topics in public moral discourse. In those forums, goods are defined, the means to secure them are identified, and responsibilities for them are allocated, and modern Christian social teaching has understood the need to formulate the Gospel’s radical demands in terms that can be addressed by political means (Hinze 2021). Bonhoeffer not only envisioned a church that could resist the temptations of totalitarianism, but he also saw how important it was to maintain its integrity in the world of ordinary politics (Mauldin 2021).

Christian ethics cannot abandon concern for the neighbor’s needs, even under conditions of tyranny or anarchy, but where politics is possible, Christian ethics must enter fully into the discourse in which those needs are defined and met, even if the discourse itself does not entirely live up to our expectations. Politics is essential to the penultimate goods with which Christian ethics is concerned. Each person seeks bread, shelter, justice, and

community in a unique way, and the meaning of these things varies accordingly between communities, cultures, and different times in history. Understanding concrete goods means understanding not only the relationship between the penultimate and ultimate reality but a detailed understanding of the concrete goods themselves.

This is different from understanding what a thing is good *for* in terms of the use we might make of it or how we might market it in a consumer society. The “thing” here might be a specific material object, simple as a clay pot or complex as a computer. However, it might be as large and multifaceted as an urban neighborhood, a government office, or a university, composed of many different things and people in multiple relationships. The point is to understand what is necessary for *this* thing to come together and continue in existence as a good, functioning clay pot, a good pharmaceutical company, or a good university. We participate in a broad, public discussion about the various goods that are necessary to bring a concrete good into being and about the various goods that become possible when it successfully does what it is meant to do. To fully understand those relationships, we must also know what penultimate goods cost, not in abstract terms of dollars and cents, but in terms of the other goods we must be prepared to give up, delay, or diminish to have this concrete good, now.

This cannot be done by proclamation alone, any more than we can say to a person, who lacks food and clothing, “‘Go in peace, be warmed and filled’ without giving them the things needed for the body” (James 2:16). It requires detailed knowledge of how concrete goods are created, where the resources required for them may be found, and what sorts of collaboration will effectively bring them together. That is to say, we cannot proclaim the relationship between ultimate and penultimate things without joining in discussion with all sorts of people who can help us understand what is required to hold concrete goods together in meaningful lives. The skeptical, secular liberal, who insists on keeping attention focused on the penultimate, has something to contribute. So, too, does the political philosopher who has a thin theory of the good that may identify some goods that are part of everyone’s search, even if they are not quite all of the goods we need. The effort by which Christian ethics understands the penultimate includes persons of other faiths and persons of no faith whose practical wisdom and depth of commitment to their neighbors speaks to us of God, even if it does not speak in that way to them (Zimmermann 2019).

Christian ethics thus shares a common cause with everyone who seeks to name, create, and maintain concrete goods. The diversity among those involved in the public moral discourse is wide, and many of the disagreements are important. However, to seek agreement on everything would only contribute to the divisions and political dysfunctions that are putting concrete goods at risk for many people.

8. Conclusions

The involvement of Christian ethics in public moral discourse happens in different ways and for different reasons. To begin, there are institutional interests involved in the discussions of religious freedom. Public discussions of religious freedom shape how the church will be perceived and what scope Christians will need to maintain the institutions and practices that are essential to their ongoing communities of faith. A more basic connection between Christian ethics and public discourse is the apologetic purpose that seeks to communicate a Christian understanding of human goods and human nature in discussions where those topics are the focus of lively concern as they relate to the purposes and limits of politics. Finally, Christian ethics in today’s world cannot express love for a neighbor without involvement in a public discussion about what the neighbor’s needs really are and how those needs should be met.

There is an element of self-interest in each of these concerns, not only in the institutional concern for religious freedom. That is in the nature of public moral discourse. Those who take part in public discourse are expected to defend their place in it, and if they do not do so, that place will be eroded unless someone else—perhaps a concerned Christian—takes up their cause for them. Hence, it is hardly surprising that some members of the

public will complain that even when Christians are talking about caring for their neighbor, their discourse sounds suspiciously like evangelism, aimed at gaining converts rather than meeting needs. Others within the Christian community will insist that participation in public discourse is theologically suspect if it does not have that purpose.

The Christian account of public moral discourse is fragmentary. The parts do not always connect, and not everything we need is provided, even in a preliminary way. It is conflicted, both within the community of Christian ethics and in the wider public discourse it seeks to understand and engage. In fact, as we come to the conclusion of this essay, the reader may think that Christian ethics as depicted here resembles nothing so much as MacIntyre's account of the disordered province of public moral discourse with which we began. It would be reasonable to ask whether there is any option other than the Benedict option in which we withdraw to save what we can from the wreckage around us.

However, it is also possible that our situation is penultimate, rather than post-Christian. Through a long history, Christians have sought to order their lives on a pattern of creation, redemption, and fulfillment of all things in God, and they have repeated that narrative in terms that related the City of God to the earthly cities in which they happened to live at the moment (Biggar 2011). Today, the church asserts its institutional presence by demanding various forms of religious freedom. Christian ethics makes its arguments for human good and human dignity. Christian activists urge their causes in efforts to provide the things that everyone needs. Our efforts are fragmented and incomplete. We talk a lot, though when in the presence of God, we may not know what we are saying (Mark 9:6). Nevertheless, in the conflicted province of public moral discourse, there is important work to be done while we wait for a new, and doubtless very different, Saint Augustine.

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