

Understanding and Responding to Moral Pluralism

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My task is to explore the issue of moral pluralism, with a view to laying the ground for developing Christian responses to the situation which are both theologically responsible and legitimate on the one hand, and grounded in the realities of the North American situation on the other.

The importance of the subject is matched by its complexity. In part, I must explore the factors which have led to the rise of moral pluralism in modern western culture. Inevitably, this must mean engagement with the ideas which lie behind this development, especially within liberal and postmodern thought. I have no hesitation in declaring from the outset that this process of exploration will be critical; I shall be pointing out the serious deficiencies of these approaches as we proceed, indicating the kind of reasons why Christian thinkers and social activists have every right to protest both against the *intellectual foundations* and the *moral consequences* of this lazy pragmatic approach to matters.

But I would fail in my task if I were simply to present you with an academic account of the origins of moral pluralism. Let me concede immediately that an understanding of the theoretical aspects of pluralism is of essential importance to the formulation of effective Christian responses to a pluralist situation.—but it is not enough. For pluralism is not simply an academic question. It is a contentious and highly polarized political issue. To do justice to my task, I must also engage with political theory, above all the philosophy of the modern liberal state. It is only by doing this that we can gain an appreciation of the pressures and factors which lead liberal societies, such as the United States and Canada, to behave in certain quite definite ways toward pluralism—both religious and moral pluralism.

Above all, I must highlight areas of disagreement among leading contemporary liberal political theorists, which point to potentially productive approaches on the part of Christians wishing to ensure that a distinctively Christian moral presence is maintained in the public arena. I therefore propose to explore the kinds of approaches which have gained influence within liberal political circles, such as those associated with the new Democratic administration. Pluralism is not simply about ideas; it is about communities, and the bitter struggle for power in a highly technological yet socially fractured modern society.

UNDERSTANDING MORAL PLURALISM

To understand moral pluralism, we must understand something of the North American context in which it has become such an issue. Moral pluralism is to be seen against a broad cultural backdrop, with three major constituent elements.

1. An **intellectual pluralism**, which finds its expression in postmodernism, which asserts that there is no objective truth. Plurality of beliefs is thus inevitable and to be encouraged. As a result, those who claim to have access to truth are to be regarded with something between suspicion and derision.
2. A **religious pluralism**, which takes its starting point from the undeniable observation that many different religions exist in North America, and proceeds to draw the conclusion that they are all equally valid manifestations of the same ultimate reality. Recognizing that religions have ethical beliefs associated with them, this leads to the assertion that moral pluralism is to be tolerated, indeed, even celebrated. To do otherwise would seem to belittle important minority elements in North America culture.
3. A prevailing **liberal political philosophy**, which encourages plurality of beliefs and actions, and places considerable emphasis upon individual freedom of action. Moral pluralism is the inevitable consequence of any political philosophy which emphasizes toleration and individual self-determination.

In what follows, I shall offer first some further exploration and critical comments about each of these significant elements, as background to my proposals concerning a Christian response.

RELATIVISM AND PLURALISM DISTINGUISHED

Let me begin by making a fundamental point. Relativism and pluralism are not to be confused. 'Relativism' is the declaration that there are no fixed absolutes; or, that if there are, they cannot be known by human beings. It is a philosophy, an ideology, a prescriptive statement concerning human knowledge, which logically leads to pluralism. 'Pluralism,' however, is a descriptive term, which refers to the existence of a number of different viewpoints within the same society. Pluralism of itself does not imply relativism; it simply implies divergence. Indeed, in its neutral sense, 'pluralism' is simply another word for diversity. It describes the fact that, in modern western society, a diversity of outlooks—religious and moral—exist.

One of the most perceptive analysts of modern western culture is Lesslie Newbigin, for many years a pastor and bishop in India, and more recently a prominent figure in the ‘public truth of the gospel’ movement in the United Kingdom. Commenting on the theme ‘the gospel in a pluralist society’, Newbigin remarks:

It has become a commonplace to say that we live in a pluralist society—not merely a society which is in fact plural in the variety of cultures, religions and lifestyles which it embraces, but pluralist in the sense that this plurality is celebrated as things to be approved and cherished.¹

Newbigin here makes a vital distinction between pluralism as a fact of life, and pluralism as an ideology—that is, the belief that pluralism is to be encouraged and desired, and that normative claims to truth are to be censured as imperialist and divisive.

With the former, there can be no arguing. The Christian proclamation has always taken place in a pluralist world, in competition with rival religious and intellectual convictions. The New Testament itself bears witness to the emergence of the gospel within the matrix of Judaism, and the subsequent expansion of the gospel in a Hellenistic culture. Christian apologists and theologians, not to mention ordinary Christian believers, have been aware that there are alternatives to Christianity on offer. Yet this poses no decisive difficulties for Christianity, in theory or practice.² The ability of the gospel to transcend cultural barriers is one of its chief glories.

The basic phenomenon of pluralism, then, is nothing new. What is new is the intellectual response to this phenomenon: the suggestion that plurality of beliefs is not merely a matter of observable fact, but is theoretically justified—in intellectual and cultural life in general, and in particular in relation to the religions. Claims by any one group or individual to have any exclusive hold on ‘truth’ are thus treated as the intellectual equivalent of fascism. Significantly, the first casualty of the pluralist agenda is truth.

One of my basic concerns is to show that pluralism is fatally flawed, riddled with internal contradictions, and fails to correspond with the world as it really is. Pluralism is compromised by a series of fatal inconsistencies, which cumulate to render it implausible, save to those who are totally precommitted to it, for cultural reasons. My approach involves bringing to the level of conscious articulation some of the central presuppositions and methods of a pluralist ideology, in order to subject them to the kind of critical scrutiny which is so long overdue. My anxiety, shared by many other Christians, is that some mainline churches are rushing into commitment to some kind of pluralist outlook, without giving the issue the full care and attention which it so obviously demands.

Our starting point is fundamental. Morality depends upon an understanding of human nature and destiny. To ask, 'What is right?', is to ask about the fundamental characteristics of human existence—about what life is all about, and about what is worthwhile. In short: morality rests upon a worldview. This point is made with care and persuasion by the distinguished Oxford philosopher of religion Basil Mitchell. In his essay 'Is There a Distinctive Christian Ethic?', Mitchell stresses that ethics depend upon worldviews—and that worldviews in turn depend upon doctrine.

Any worldview which carries with it important implications for our understanding of man and his place in the universe would yield its own distinctive insights into the scope, character, and content of morality. To answer the further question, 'What is the distinctive Christian ethic?', is inevitably to be involved to some extent in controversial questions of Christian doctrine. This important observation makes the important point that Christian ethics is based upon Christian doctrine—a point which many liberal writers overlooked in the heyday of the 1960s, but which is now firmly back on the mainline agenda. But it also allows us to understand how moral pluralism arises. Secular worldviews have a whole variety of conceptions of human nature and destiny, as do the various religions—despite the rather crude and unconvincing attempts of people like John Hick and Paul Knitter to force them all into the same mold. Intellectual and religious pluralism thus lead inexorably on to moral pluralism.

THE THREE MAJOR ELEMENTS OF PLURALISM

INTELLECTUAL PLURALISM AND POSTMODERNISM

The intellectual foundations of moral pluralism are associated with postmodernism.³ This is generally taken to be something of a cultural sensibility without absolutes, fixed certainties, or foundations, which takes delight in pluralism and divergence, and which aims to think through the radical 'situatedness' of all human thought. Postmodernity is a vague and ill-defined notion, which perhaps could be described as the general intellectual outlook arising after the collapse of modernity.⁴ Although there are those who maintain that modernity is still alive and active, this attitude is becoming increasingly rare. The trauma of Auschwitz is a powerful and shocking indictment of the 'pretense of new creation, the hatred of tradition, the idolatry of self' characteristic of modernity.⁵ It is modernity, especially with its compulsive desire to break totally with the past, which gave rise to the Nazi holocaust and the Stalinist purges. There has been a general collapse of confidence in the Enlightenment trust in the power of reason to provide foundations for a universally-valid knowledge of the world, including God. Reason fails to deliver a morality suited to the real world in which we live. And with this collapse in confidence in universal and necessary criteria of truth, relativism and pluralism have flourished.

To give a full definition of postmodernism is virtually impossible;⁶ nevertheless, it is possible to identify its leading general features, in so far as it is likely to be encountered on North American college and university campuses. This is the precommitment to relativism or pluralism in relation to questions of truth.

The area of Christian theology which is most sensitive to this development is apologetics, traditionally regarded as an attempt to defend and commend the truth-claims of Christianity to the world.⁷ Apologetically, the question which arises in the postmodern context is the following: how can Christianity's claims to truth be taken seriously, when there are so many rival alternatives, and when 'truth' itself has become a devalued notion? No one can lay claim to possession of the truth. It is all a question of perspective. All claims to truth are equally valid; there is no universal or privileged vantage point which allows anyone to decide what is right and what is wrong.

This situation has both significant advantages and drawbacks for the Christian apologist. On the one hand, apologetics no longer labors under the tedious limitations of the petty Enlightenment worldview, fettered by the illusions and pretensions of pure reason. Christianity can no longer be dismissed as a degenerate form of rational religion. But with this undoubted advance has come a retreat. Postmodernism declares that all belief-systems are to be regarded as equally plausible. Something is true if it is true for me. Christianity has become acceptable, because it is believed to be true by some—not because it *is* true. How can Christianity commend itself on campus, when the truth-question is virtually dismissed out of hand in advance? This has important implications in the area of college evangelistic work. The Christian campus apologist will wish to stress that Christianity believes itself, on excellent grounds, to possess insights which are both true and relevant.

This brings us to perhaps the real challenge posed by postmodernism. Postmodernism has an endemic aversion to questions of truth. Pluralism discourages us from asking about truth. Political correctness suggests that the idea of ‘truth’ can approach intellectual fascism, on account of its authoritarian overtones. As Allan Bloom summarizes this outlook in *The Closing of the American Mind*:

The danger . . . is not error but intolerance. Relativism is necessary to openness; and this is the virtue, the only virtue, which all primary education for more than fifty years has dedicated itself to inculcating. Openness—and the relativism that makes it the only plausible stance in the face of various claims to truth and the various ways of life and kinds of human beings—is the great insight of our times. The true believer is the real danger. The study of history and of culture teaches that all the world was mad in the past; men always thought they were right, and that led to wars, persecutions, slavery, xenophobia, racism, and chauvinism. The point is not to correct the mistakes and really be right; rather it is not to think that you are right at all.⁸ The real challenge of pluralism lies in the position outlined by Bloom—that claims to ‘be right’ constitute an intolerant intellectual fascism.

The danger of all this is clear. Beneath all the rhetoric about ‘openness’ and ‘toleration’ lies a profoundly disturbing possibility—that people may base their lives upon an illusion, upon a blatant lie, or that present patterns of oppression may continue, and be justified, upon the basis of beliefs or outlooks which are false. Even the most tolerant pluralist has difficulties with that aspect of Hinduism which justifies the inequalities of Indian society by its insistence upon a fixed social order. As Allan Bloom remarks, the most tolerant of individuals finds difficulty in justifying the Hindu practice of forcibly burning alive a widow on her late husband’s funeral pyre.⁹

To the postmodern suggestion that something can be ‘true-for-me’ but not ‘true,’ the following reply might be made. Is fascism as equally true as democratic libertarianism? Consider the person who believes, passionately and sincerely, that it is an excellent thing to burn widows alive on Hindu funeral pyres.¹⁰ Or that child sacrifice is to be regarded as an acceptable means of ensuring soil fertility. Or that female infants ought to be killed, on account of their being an expensive inconvenience to their parents.¹¹ Or, to take an example which brought a civil war to this continent, that slavery is to be accepted. Or the person who argues that it was entirely proper to gas millions of Jews during the Nazi period. Such beliefs may certainly be ‘true-for-them.’ But can they be allowed to pass unchallenged? Are they as equally valid as beliefs such as that one ought to live in peace and tolerance with one’s neighbors, including Jews?

The moral seriousness of such questions often acts as the intellectual equivalent of a battering ram, bringing out the fact that certain views just cannot be allowed to be true. There must be some criteria, some standards of judgment, which allow one to exclude certain viewpoints as unacceptable. Otherwise, postmodernism will be seen to be uncritical and naive, a breeding ground of the political and moral complacency which allowed the rise of the Third Reich back in the 1930s. Even postmodernism has difficulties in allowing that Nazism is a good thing. Yet precisely that danger lies there, as evidenced by the celebrated remark of Sartre: ‘tomorrow, after my death, certain people may decide to establish fascism, and the others may be cowardly or miserable enough to let them get away with it. At that moment, fascism will be the truth of man.’

This is an important point, perhaps the point at which postmodernism is at its most vulnerable. To lend extra weight to it, we may consider the consequences of the ethical views of Michel Foucault, generally regarded as one of the intellectual pillars of postmodern thought. Foucault argues that the very idea of ‘truth’ grows out of the interests of the powerful. ‘Truth’ can support systems of repression, by identifying standards to which people can be forced to conform.¹² Thus, what is ‘mad’ or ‘criminal’ does not depend upon some objective criterion, but upon the standards and interests of those in authority. Each society has its ‘general politics of truth,’ which serves its vested interests. ‘Truth’ thus serves the interests of society, by perpetuating its ideology, and providing a rational justification for the imprisonment or elimination of those who happen to contradict its general outlook. For such reasons, Foucault believes that the very idea of objective truth or morality must be challenged. Ideas—such as ‘truth’—which legitimate or perpetuate repression are to be spurned. This belief has passed into the structure of much of postmodernism, and has had a deep impact upon many liberal political writers, such as Richard Rorty.

So it is influential. But is it right? Is not the truth that Foucault's criticism actually rests upon a set of quite definite beliefs about what is right and what is wrong? To give an illustration: throughout Foucault's writings, we find a passionate belief that repression is wrong. Foucault himself is thus committed to an objective moral value—that freedom is to be preferred to repression. Foucault's critique of morality actually presupposes certain moral values. Beneath his critique of conventional ethics lies a hidden set of moral values, and an unacknowledged commitment to them. Foucault's critique of the moral values of society seems to leave him without any moral values of his own—yet his critique of social values rests upon his own intuitively accepted (rather than explicitly acknowledged and theoretically justified) moral values, which he clearly expects his readers to share.

Yet, why is struggle preferable to submission? Why is freedom to be chosen, rather than repression? These normative questions demand answers, if Foucault's position can be justified—yet Foucault has vigorously rejected an appeal to general normative principles as an integral part of his method. In effect, he makes an appeal to sentimentality, rather than reason, to pathos rather than to principles.¹³ That many shared his intuitive dislike of repression ensured he was well received—but the fundamental question remains unanswered. Why is repression wrong? And that same question remains unanswered with postmodernism, which is vulnerable precisely where Foucault is vulnerable.

As Richard Rorty, perhaps the most distinguished American philosopher to develop Foucault's dislike of general principles and normative standards, remarks, a consequence of this approach must be the recognition that

There is nothing deep down inside us except what we have put there ourselves, no criterion that we have not created in the course of creating a practice, no standard of rationality that is not an appeal to such a criterion, no rigorous argumentation that is not obedience to our own conventions.¹⁴

But if this approach is right, what justification could be given for opposing Nazism? Or Stalinism? Rorty cannot give a justification for the moral or political rejection of totalitarianism, as he himself concedes. If he is right, Rorty admits, then he has to acknowledge

. . . that when the secret police come, when the torturers violate the innocent, there is nothing to be said to them of the form 'There is something within you which you are betraying. Though you embody the practices of a totalitarian society, which will endure forever, there is something beyond those practices which condemns you.'¹⁵

It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that, for Rorty, the truth of moral values depends simply upon their existence. And it is at this point that many postmodernists feel deeply uneasy. Something seems to be wrong here.

Arguments such as these will probably cut little ice with a postmodern audience, who may feel inclined to dismiss such appeals to 'values' or 'truth' as an irrelevance, given their presuppositions. But the considerations I have noted above are not necessarily aimed at a committed postmodern constituency. I have two specific audiences in mind.

1. An *evangelical* constituency, which needs to have its confidence in its own arguments and rationalities bolstered. These arguments will reinforce and encourage evangelicals in their convictions, confirming the plausibility and integrity of their beliefs in the face of postmodern criticism.

2. A *wider public*, overhearing this conversation between evangelicalism and postmodernism. Such an audience is likely to be dismayed by the practical implications of the postmodern dismissal of truth, even if postmoderns themselves can live with them. The considerations noted above serve to undermine the public plausibility of postmodernism, by demonstrating the incongruity of postmodernism at a series of vital junctures. If the evangelical cannot persuade the postmodern of the importance of the truth-question, he or she can show that postmodernism stands defenseless in the public arena, charged with lending covert support to beliefs and practices which are regarded with intense distaste by the population as a whole.

This point is especially important for the mainstream churches. A naive commitment to pluralism has its darker side, too easily overlooked by those unwilling to take the trouble to ask hard questions before moving on to the next culturally acceptable issue on the modern agenda. Can these churches really expect to have their social and religious views taken seriously, if they commit themselves to such an intellectually and morally shallow outlook? There is a real issue of concern here.

RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

Alongside the postmodern celebration of pluralism in general, we now encounter a new concern for *religious pluralism*. As is well known, moral pluralism is closely linked with religious pluralism. Differing religious views have fundamental moral consequences. One illustration will serve to make this point clear. Consider abortion. At what point is the fetus to be considered morally as a person? The answer to that question is of crucial importance to the debate. Yet it is not a scientifically-determinable issue. It is a matter of faith. Other examples could be given, demonstrating how moral values and principles depend upon religious convictions. What is 'good' depends upon how 'good' is understood. Thus Edward Conze, the great scholar of Buddhism, recalled that he 'once read through a collection of the lives of Roman Catholic saints, and there was not one of whom a Buddhist could fully approve . . . They were bad Buddhists though good Christians.'

The rise of religious pluralism can be related directly to the collapse of the Enlightenment idea of universal knowledge, rather than any difficulties within Christianity itself. Often, there is a crude attempt to divert attention from the collapse of the Enlightenment vision by implying that religious pluralism represents a new and unanswerable challenge to Christianity itself. Princeton philosopher Diogenes Allen rightly dismisses this as a spurious claim: 'Much of the distress concerning pluralism and relativism which is voiced today springs from a crisis in the secular mentality of modern western culture, not from a crisis in Christianity itself,'¹⁶ Yet these relativistic assumptions have become deeply ingrained within secular society, often with the assumption that they are to the detriment of Christian faith.

Given that there are so many religions in the marketplace, how can Christianity claim to be true? It is important to appreciate that a cultural issue is often linked in with this debate: to defend Christianity is to be seen to belittle non-Christian religions, which is unacceptable in a multicultural society. Especially to those of liberal political convictions, the multicultural agenda demands that religions should not be permitted to make truth-claims, to avoid triumphalism or imperialism. Indeed, there seems to be a widespread perception that the rejection of religious pluralism entails intolerance, or unacceptable claims to exclusivity. In effect, the liberal political agenda dictates that all religions should be treated on an equal footing. It is but a small step from this *political* judgment to the *theological* declaration that all religions are the same. But is there any reason for progressing from the entirely laudable and acceptable demand that we should respect religions other than our own, to the more radical demand that we regard them all as the same, or as equally valid manifestations of some eternal dimension of life?

In one of its more extreme forms, this view might be stated as follows; all religions lead to God. But this cannot be taken seriously, when some world religions are avowedly non-theistic. (Although some western writers, irritated by non-theistic religions, have argued that they really are theistic, despite what their adherents believe—thus neatly forcing all religions into the same mold.) A religion can hardly lead to God if it explicitly denies the existence of a god or any gods. We therefore need to restate the question in terms of ‘ultimate reality,’ or ‘truth.’ Thus refined, this position might be stated as follows: Religion is often determined by the circumstances of one’s birth. An Indian is likely to be a Hindu; an Arab is likely to be a Moslem. On account of this observation, it is argued, all religions must be equal paths to the truth.

This makes truth a function of birth. If I were to be born into Nazi Germany, I would likely be a Nazi—and this makes Nazism true? If I had been born in ancient Rome, I would probably have shared its polytheism; if I had been born in modern Arabia, I would be a monotheist. So they are both true? This shockingly naive view of truth would not be taken seriously anywhere else. No other intellectual discipline would accept such a superficial approach to truth. Why accept it here? It seems to rest upon an entirely laudable wish to allow that everyone is right, which ends up destroying the notion of truth itself. Consider the two propositions:

- A. Different people have different religious views.
- B. Therefore all religious views are equally valid.

Is proposition (B) in any way implied by proposition (A)? For the form of liberalism committed to this approach, mere existence of a religious idea appears to be a guarantor of its truth! No-one seems prepared to fight for the truth-content of defunct religions, such as classical Roman polytheism—perhaps because there is no one alive committed to them, whose views need to be respected in a multicultural situation?

The fatal weakness of this approach usually leads to its being abandoned, and being replaced with a modified version, which could be stated thus: ‘any view which is held with sincerity may be regarded as true.’ I might thus be a Nazi, a Satanist, or a passionate believer in the flatness of the earth. My sincerity is a guarantee of the truth. On this view, it would follow that if someone sincerely believes that modern Europe would be a better place if six million Jews were to be placed in gas chambers, the sincerity of those convictions allow that view to be accepted as true. British philosopher of religion, John Hick, summarizes the contempt with which this view is held: ‘to say that whatever is sincerely believed and practiced is, by definition, true, would be the end of all critical discrimination, both intellectual and moral.’¹⁷

The Case of John Hicks. It is therefore more than a little ironic that the most significant advocate of the pluralist ‘truth-in-all-religions’ approach is this same John Hick, who argues that the same basic infinite divine reality lies at the experiential roots of all religions. However, they experience and express this reality in different ways. Why? ‘Their differing experiences of that reality, interacting over the centuries with the different thought-forms of different cultures, have led to an increasing differentiation and contrasting elaboration.’¹⁸ This approach thus suggests that the various religions must be understood to complement one another. In other words, truth does not lie in an ‘either-or’ but in a ‘both-and’ approach. On the basis of Hick’s homogenizing approach, no genuine conflicting truth-claims can occur. They are ruled out of order, on a priori grounds. By definition, religions can only complement, not contradict, each other. In practice, Hick appears to contradict himself here, frequently declaring that ‘exclusive’ approaches to religions are wrong. For example, he styles the traditional ‘salvation through Christ alone’ statements of the 1960 Congress on World Mission as ‘ridiculous’—where, by his own criteria, the most stinging criticism that could be directed at them is that they represent a ‘difference in perception.’ The inherent absurdity of Hick’s refusal to take an evaluative position in relation to other religions is totally compromised by his eagerness to adopt such a position in relation to versions of Christianity which threaten his outlook, both on account of their numerical strength and non-inclusive theologies.

When all is said and done, and when all differences in expression arising from cultural and intellectual development are taken into account, Hick must be challenged forcefully concerning his crudely homogenizing approach to the world religions. It is absurd to say that a religion which says that there is a God complements a religion which declares, with equal vigor, that there is not a God (and both types of religion exist).¹⁹ If the religious believer actually believes *something*, then disagreement is inevitable—and proper. As the distinguished American philosopher Richard Rorty remarked, nobody ‘except the occasional cooperative freshmen’ really believes that ‘two incompatible opinions on an important topic are equally good.’²⁰

One of the most serious difficulties which arises here relates to the fact that, on the basis of Hick’s model, it is not individual religions which have access to truth; it is the western liberal pluralist, who insist that each religion must be seen in the context of others, before it can be evaluated. As many have pointed out, this means that the western liberal doctrine of religious pluralism is defined as the only valid standpoint for evaluating individual religions. Hick has set at the center of his system of

religions a vague and undefined idea of ‘the Eternal One,’ which seems to be little more than a vague liberal idea of divinity, carefully defined—or, more accurately, deliberately not defined, to avoid the damage that precision entails—to include at least something from all of the major world religions Hick feels it is worth including.

Yet is not this approach shockingly imperialist? Hick’s implication is that it is only the educated western liberal academic who can really understand all the religions. Their adherents may naively believe that they have access to the truth; in fact, only the western liberal academic has such privileged access, which is denied to those who belong to and practice such religion. Despite not being a Buddhist, Hick is able to tell the Buddhist what he or she really believes (as opposed to what they think they believe). Perhaps one of the most astonishing claims made by liberals in this respect can be found in a recent publication provocatively entitled *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, in which a number of contributors—such as Paul Knitter, Langdon Gilkey, Rosemary Radford Ruether, and Tom Driver—assert that all the religious traditions can share a common outlook on justice and liberation. This arrogant imposition of political correctness upon the world religions glosses over the patently obvious fact that the world religions have differed—and continue to differ—significantly over social and political matters, as much as over religious ideas.

In an important recent study, Yale theologian Kathryn Tanner makes the point that liberal pluralist theology has succumbed to ‘colonialist discourse.’²¹ The crude pluralist attempt to reduce religions to manifestations of the same transcendental impulses, or to minimize their differences for the sake of theoretical neatness, is totally unacceptable:

Pluralist generalizations about what all religions have in common conflict with genuine dialogue, in that they prejudge its results. Commonalities, which should be established in and through a process of dialogue, are constructed ahead of time by pluralists to serve as presuppositions of dialogue. Pluralists therefore close themselves to what people of other religions might have to say about their account of these commonalities. Moreover, . . . a pluralist focus on commonalities slights differences among the religions of the world. The pluralists’ insistence on commonalities as a condition of dialogue shows an unwillingness to recognize the depth and degree of diversity among religions, or the positive importance of them.²²

In addition, Tanner makes the point that pluralists conceal the ‘particularities of their own perspectives by claiming to form generalizations about the religions of the world.’ Apart from being untrue, Tanner remarks, this approach ‘brings pluralist theorists of religion close to the kind of absolutism that it is part of their project to avoid.’²³

To develop this important point, let us consider a well-worn analogy concerning the relation of the religions. Let us allow Lesslie Newbigin to describe it, and make a vitally important observation:

In the famous story of the blind men and the elephant . . . the real point of the story is constantly overlooked. The story is told from the point of view of the king and his courtiers, who are not blind but can see that the blind men are unable to grasp the full reality of the elephant and are only able to get hold of part of it. The story is constantly told in order to neutralize the affirmations of the great religions, to suggest that they learn humility and recognize that none of them can have more than one aspect of the truth. But, of course, the real point of the story is exactly the opposite. If the king were also blind, there would be no story. The story is told by the king, and it is the immensely arrogant claim of one who sees the full truth, which all the world's religions are only groping after. It embodies the claim to know the full reality which relativizes all the claims of the religions.²⁴

Newbigin brings out with clarity the arrogance of the liberal claim to be able to see all the religions from the standpoint of one who sees the full truth. On the basis of this familiar story, he demonstrates the importance of the possession of an appropriate framework to interpret experience. In this case, the apparently unrelated experiences of the blind men are brought together in a greater and consistent whole by the king, who is able to interpret them in the light of the overall elephantine framework. The liberal pluralist is the king; the unfortunate evangelical is the blindfolded beggar. Or so the pluralist would have us believe. Perhaps a more responsible—and considerably less arrogant—approach would be to suggest that we are all, pluralists included, blind beggars, to whom God graciously makes himself known.

Hick appears to labor under the misunderstanding that where Christian frameworks are biased, those of liberalism are neutral and disinterested. Yet one of the more significant developments within the recent sociology of knowledge has been the realization that there is no *neutral* point from which a religion or culture may be evaluated; all vantage points imply a valuation. Hick naively assumes that his liberal pluralist approach is 'detached' or 'objective,' whereas it is obviously nothing of the sort.

Let me quote from my distinguished Oxford colleague John Macquarrie, unquestionably one of England's greatest living theologians, who makes a fundamental point here:

What is meant by 'liberal' theology? If it means only that the theologian to whom the adjective is applied has an openness to other points of view, then liberal theologians are found in all schools of thought. But if 'liberal' becomes itself a party label, then it usually turns out to be extremely illiberal.²⁵

The deeply disturbing paradox of modern theology is that the most dogmatic of its representatives lay claim to be liberals. Liberalism, in the traditional and honorable sense of the word, carries with it an inalienable respect for and openness to the views of others—evangelicals included. Yet liberalism finds itself challenged to its very foundations by evangelicalism. The new dogmatism with liberalism is itself a sure indication of a deep sense of unease and insecurity, and an awareness of its growing isolation and marginalization with North American Christianity. There is, however, no reason why those who are unpersuaded by the pluralist agenda should allow such shallow theology and questionable reasoning to pass unchallenged.

But I have dealt thus far primarily with the intellectual aspects of my agenda. I must now turn to deal with the political dimension. As I stressed earlier, we need to make a careful distinction between ‘relativism’ and ‘pluralism.’ I have argued that the former is intellectually shallow and untenable. The latter is simply an acknowledgement of a plurality of outlooks within a single society.

Or is it? In what follows, I want to suggest that some very hard questions need to be asked about the role of the state in relation to moral pluralism. My thesis, in effect, is that there has been a loss of a notion of ‘common good,’ as a unifying vision. It has apparently been replaced by the goal of toleration of divergence, without any sense of where that toleration will lead. A means has become an end.

POLITICAL PLURALISM

The Constitution of the United States of America may be said to provide a basis through which a variety of communities might come together to form a single union. *E pluribus unum!* It could be argued that one of the greatest achievements of the United States has been the creation of a common vision for the common good out of a vast mosaic of cultural, ethnic and religious diversities. The ethnic diversity of the United States has expanded still further through increased immigration during the twentieth century. The original American ‘tri-faith’ system (Protestant-Catholic-Jewish), upon which so much social theorizing up until around 1960 was based, has been overtaken by a much more complex societal framework, involving significant numbers of most of the world’s religions, as well as an increasing number of ‘religious nones.’ This has resulted in a breakdown of previously accepted cultural norms, especially well-established conventions and understandings concerning the relation of religion and politics.

Liberal optimists of the 1960s and 1970s dreamed that America would be the melting pot in which the richness of this diversity would be channeled into a greater whole. What has actually happened is that a series of communities has arisen, with little shared understanding of morality or religion. In part, this development reflects the shift in social policy which began to take place during the 1970s. The civil rights movements of the 60s set loose a series of demands for public recognition on the part of hitherto marginalized groups, defined with relation to sexual orientation, gender, or race. The result of this has been social fragmentation and polarization, with increased use of litigation where reasoned discussion once held sway. The phenomenon of increasing social diversity was thus complemented by the rise of an ideology which sought to identify and exploit diversity for political ends.

John Locke and Religious Diversity. It is therefore important to consider the political aspects of religious diversity in a pluralist society, such as the United States. The classic liberal argument for toleration of diversity in matters of religion goes back to the European Wars of Religion, and may be found in John Lock's *Letter Concerning Toleration*. Locke argues for religious toleration on the basis of three general considerations, as follows.

First, it is impossible for the state to adjudicate between competing religious truth-claims. This does not mean that there is no truth in matters of religion, or that all religions are equal in terms of their insights into reality. The modern view, associated with writers such as John Hick, that all religions are equally valid is simply the improper extrapolation of a political judgment to a metaphysical plane. Instead, Locke points out that no earthly judge can be brought forward to settle the matter. For this reason, religious diversity is to be tolerated.

Second, Locke argues that, even if it could be established that one religion was superior to all others, the legal enforcement of this religion would not lead to the desired objective of that religion. Locke's argument here is based upon the notion that 'true and saving religion consists in the inward persuasion of the mind, without which nothing is acceptable to God. And such is the nature of the understanding, that it cannot be compelled to the belief of any thing by outward force.' It is interesting to note that Locke's argument here is shaped by Christian conception of justifying faith; a religion which interpreted salvation purely in terms of external conformity to a set of regulations would not be amenable to his analysis.

Third, Locke argues, on pragmatic grounds, that the results of trying to impose religious uniformity are far worse than those which accrue from the continuing existence of diversity. Religious coercion leads to internal discord, or even civil war.

In other words, religious truth cannot be established with certainty. Even if it could be established with certainty, its imposition would not lead to inward faith. And if it were imposed, the negative results would far outweigh the advantages gained. Note carefully that religion is seen as a private matter, pertaining to what consenting individuals think in the subjective isolation of their minds or the solitude of their homes. It is most emphatically not seen as a public claim to truth with implications for social and political action.

Yet Locke does not see this toleration of religious diversity as leading to moral diversity. Theological disputations may be tolerated, precisely because they do not, in Locke's view, have any impact upon the core moral agreement which his commonwealth presupposes. Indeed, at several points, Locke suggests that the religions—Jewish, Christian, and Muslim—are consistent with, and supportive of, public morality. Tocqueville provided much support for this view, with his observation that, although there is 'an innumerable multitude of sects in the United States,' there was nevertheless agreement concerning duty and morality.²⁶ For Locke—as, I believe, for the founding fathers of this nation—the idea of giving irreligion equal public status with religion would be inconceivable.

But Lock's solution is ultimately pragmatic. He is concerned to establish a framework in which religious disagreement may be tolerated within a society which would otherwise be destroyed by religious warfare. Yet it raises fundamental questions—questions which, to my mind, have been given new focus in modern America. Let me explain what I have in mind.

The Case of John Rawls. Modern political philosophy has sought to emancipate itself from 'metaphysical' or 'theological' assumptions. Most of the participants in the debate within the United States work on the basis of the assumption that political debate can proceed without reference to fundamental assumptions, for example, about human nature and destiny. Thus John Rawls is quite clear that his conception of justice in particular, and his social philosophy in general, does not require metaphysical or religious presuppositions.²⁷ So what justification does he give for favoring a liberal pluralist democratic system? Rawls argues that his approach 'matches the fixed points of our considered convictions.'²⁸ Now there is an obvious blind spot here. Rawls' theory seems incapable

of providing a critique of the dominant values of the culture in which it is articulated. In other words, Rawls theory rests upon the conventional wisdom of society, which accepts the prevailing ‘considered convictions.’ Although his *Theory of Justice* can be read (and is read by some) as a rationalist account of justice, its more fundamental theme is that of developing a theory of justice which resonates with prevailing ideas—ideas that are neither rigorously derived nor subjected to any kind of penetrating critique. William Waldegrave, currently a British cabinet minister, recognized the deficiencies of this approach some fifteen years ago, when he wrote of liberal political philosophies such as that of Rawls:

The fallacy is that the liberal system must rest on moral foundations, and on institutions designed to preserve those foundations which cannot be derived from it if it is to be other than mere anarchy; while at the same time the system extols the individual in such a way that he is bound to feel free to undermine those foundations and those institutions.²⁹

The potential weakness of this approach may be considered by turning to another work dealing with the theme of justice.

The Case of Bruce Ackermann. In his *Social Justice in the Liberal State* (1980), Bruce A. Ackermann argues that nobody has ‘privileged insights into the moral universe denied to the rest of us.’ There is thus no absolute concept of justice which can be publicly defended; the state, like all individuals, is denied privileged access to a correct and universal notion of justice.³⁰ For this reason, the state must be morally neutral, and committed to pluralism. Individuals must be free to define what they regard as morally correct, and be free to pursue their own moral visions. One of the central functions of the state is thus to prevent citizens from imposing their moral convictions and goals upon others. The only moral truth to which the state can be committed is that of pluralism—that is, the toleration of a plurality of conceptions of morality.

But it is quite clear that the approaches of both Ackermann and Rawls rest upon unacknowledged assumptions. A hidden moral vision lies behind their outwardly professed moral relativism. We noted precisely the same point in relation to Foucault, whose dislike for truth rested upon the assumption of the self-evident truth of certain moral values—values which, to use Rawls’ phrase, correspond to the ‘considered convictions’ of the liberal western public to which his works were directed. Foucault was thus assured of a positive reception by his readership; yet a more critical perspective engenders a series of worrying questions. Why these values, and not others? What is their ultimate justification? And precisely the same questions may be directed against Rawls and Ackermann. Moral pluralism seems to be little more than a pragmatic response to the modern

American situation, where recognition and toleration of moral diversity has become the ultimate goal of the state. Once more, the wisdom of Basil Mitchell's statement, noted earlier, becomes apparent; 'Any worldview which carries with it important implications for our understanding of man and his place in the universe would yield its own distinctive insights into the scope, character and content of morality.'

For the moment, many Americans are probably content to leave things there. But some hard questions need to be asked, and I have begun to ask some of them. However, the task facing our Christian communities today has both negative and positive components. Negatively, we must show up the intellectual vulnerability of the relativist assumptions of modern society. We may be like the little boy, who risked ridicule by flaunting popular sentiment, and declaring that the emperor's new clothes were a fiction. But popular mood changes, and we must work to change that consensus. The exposure of the vulnerability of a pluralist ideology is an integral part of that strategy.

But there is also a positive component to our approach. We must work to construct a credible and attractive moral vision for this nation. Perhaps that is the more difficult task. But I shall begin to consider it in the following section.

RESPONDING TO MORAL PLURALISM

PLURALISM IS INTELLECTUALLY AND MORALLY FLAWED

The Approach is Absolutely Crucial. The first point I want to make is important, and is highly likely to be misunderstood. One of our most important tasks is to persuade those who are currently committed to a pluralist worldview that this view is untenable. One way of doing this might be to demonstrate the impressive credentials of a Christian worldview. But I have to tell you that this could well be counterproductive. To gain a hearing from a secular audience, we need to enter into their worldview, and explore it from within. Imposing our own worldview upon them will meet with resistance. The strategy that pays the greatest dividends, in my experience, has been to meet a secular pluralist head on, on his or her own terms—and show up its weaknesses from within. In this way, you are demonstrating publicly that you are prepared to take such people and their ideas seriously.

To tell such people that they are wrong, because their outlook is not Christian, will get you nowhere fast—and, if I dare to say so, you will have fully merited this negative response. Such an approach conveys the impression of being unthinking and wooden, merely branding anything that is not Christian as ‘wrong.’ It is important to be convinced of the rightness of the gospel, of that I am absolutely sure. I want to make sure that I am not misunderstood here. In saying that we ought to take a pluralist worldview seriously, I am not asking you to endorse it, or implying any deficiency on the part of the gospel. I’m simply making the point that to get heard by people who are not Christians, you need to learn their language and understand their worldviews.

The Schaeffer Model. Now this point will be familiar to all of you who have read Francis Schaeffer. All belief systems rest upon presuppositions. Francis Schaeffer develops this point as follows in *The God Who Is There*:

Let us remember that every person we speak to . . . has a set of presuppositions, whether he or she has analyzed them or not . . . It is impossible for any non-Christian individual or group to be consistent to their system in logic or in practice . . . A man may try to bury the tension and you may have to help him find it, but somewhere there is a point of inconsistency. He stands in a position which he cannot pursue to the end; and this is not just an intellectual concept of tension, it is what is wrapped up in what he is as a man.

The basic point Schaeffer makes is of considerable importance to a person-centered apologetics. You can tease out the presuppositions upon which their lives rest. It is quite possible that their lives are actually grounded on a whole set of unrecognized presuppositions, which your gentle and patient inquiry can bring to light. And experience suggests that such gentle explorations can sometimes be devastating, in that they expose the inner contradictions and confusions within someone's outlook on life. A crisis may result, in which faith can be born.

Schaeffer provides a number of examples of cases in which exposure of contradictions and tensions within worldviews has important (and negative) implications for their credibility. We may note one. The essential point Schaeffer wishes us to notice is that persistent questioning exposed the inner contradiction within an alternative belief system. Yet to discover that contradiction, and to convince someone who accepts the worldview in question that there is a fatal contradiction, requires familiarity with that worldview.

Schaeffer skillfully deploys this approach against the ethical nihilism of Jean-Paul Sartre. Sartre's fundamental point was that ethics was something of an irrelevance. If there was any ethical component to an action, it lay in the exercise of choice, not the moral decision reached. This famous attitude attracted considerable attention. Then Sartre signed the Algerian Manifesto—a protest against the continuing French occupation of its colony, Algeria. Events in the real world called into question his ethical views.

took up a deliberately moral attitude and said it was an unjust and dirty war. His left-wing political position which he took up is another illustration of the same inconsistency. As far as many secular existentialists have been concerned, from the moment Sartre signed the Algerian Manifesto, he was regarded as an apostate from his own position, and toppled from his place of leadership of the avant-garde.

This illustrates Schaeffer's point that Sartre and other nihilists 'could not live with the conclusions of their system'—and so points to the need for the Christian apologist to explore what those conclusions might be. 'The more logical a man who holds a non-Christian position is to his own presuppositions, the further he is from the real world; and the nearer he is to the real world, the more illogical he is to his own presuppositions.'

Schaeffer develops this insight further, by analyzing the way in which worldviews construct shields to protect themselves against the real world. The apologist must remove that shield, and allow the harsh realities of the real world to raise questions about the credibility of that system.

It is like the great shelters built upon some mountain passes to protect vehicles from the avalanches of rock and stone which periodically tumble down the mountain. The avalanche, in the case of the non-Christian, is the real and the abnormal fallen world which surrounds him. The Christian, lovingly, must remove the shelter and allow the truth of the external world and of what man is to beat upon him.

Just as Sartre's views proved untenable when confronted with the crisis and situations of the real world, so other worldviews, according to Schaeffer, can be discredited in similar ways. Discovering the implications of outlooks is of major apologetic importance, as is a willingness to explore them, gently and lovingly, with those who cling fast to them. So, adopting this approach, the intellectual and moral deficiencies of a pluralist outlook need to be vigorously contested. I have two strategies to commend to you.

1. *Demonstrate that moral pluralism is untenable.* Limits have to be fixed. The God we worship will determine, to a large degree, the way we act. Worship a cruel God or an evil God, and your lifestyle will show it. To claim that it does not matter which religion we adhere to is in effect to say that it does not matter what behavior we adopt. The two are integrally connected. And that is very evident today when decline in religion in Western countries is accompanied by massive moral collapse. Relativism in belief and relativism in morals go together. The result is disastrous. Think of the unwanted girl children left exposed to die on the hillsides of Ancient Greece. Think of the human sacrifices to the fish deity in ancient Polynesian religion. Think of the murder and gang rape carried out by practitioners of Satanism. Are we to believe that these all spring from differing insights into the same ultimate reality, as the pluralists claim?

Not only is pluralism ethically irresponsible, it is also morally impotent. It gives you no ethical standard, and offers you no moral power. It is implacably opposed to the life-transforming experience which Christians call conversion and the new birth. Such opposition is tragic. For the gospel of Christ makes tremendous moral transformations all over the world. Charles Darwin was so impressed by the changes brought about through the missionary work in Tierra del Fuego that he became an associate member of the South American Missionary Society! History is studded with the lives of men and women from every religious background, and from none, who have found in Jesus Christ a moral power that brought them an undreamed of liberty. This happens to societies as well as to individuals. Think, for example, of the Sawi tribespeople in Indonesia, savage cannibals and ruthless killers, for whom treachery was the highest virtue. Through the courageous and imaginative evangelism of Don Richardson, whole villages of these people were won to Christ and their way of

life utterly transformed for the better. There is no such life-changing power in the ‘least common denominator’ approach of pluralism. Well did C.S. Lewis observe

The God of whom no dogmas are believed is a mere shadow. He will not produce the fear of the Lord, in which wisdom begins, and will therefore not produce the love in which it is consummated. There is in this minimal religion nothing that can convince, convert, or console. There is nothing therefore which can restore vitality to our civilization. It is not costly enough. It can never control or even rival our natural sloth and greed.

2. *Stress that moral pluralism and religious pluralism are inextricably linked.* The god you worship defines the way you act. The United States government has had no hesitation in suppressing terrorist groups, whose morality is determined by their political goals. If you believe in your cause as the most important thing on earth, you will bomb, maim, and kill in order to achieve that goal. And the casualties? These are regrettable but inevitable. Many ancient religions included the idea of human sacrifice: if these still existed, would this practice be tolerated? Certainly not.

To evaluate morals is thus to evaluate gods. A recent edition of the *Journal of Psychology and Theology* is devoted to ‘Satanic Ritual Abuse.’³¹ It is clear that much more empirical research is required before we can know just how much ‘satanic’ ritual is actually going on in our communities. But my approach is independent of this debate. I want to point up the total powerlessness of American liberalism to confront a serious moral issue when it arose. It all started with a book which appeared in 1969 by Anton Szandor LaVey, a self-styled iconoclast. Its title is: *The Satanic Bible*. The popular press loved it. They seized on its image of a naked woman altar, which symbolized the ‘freedom’ from biblical morality that LaVey wanted to advocate. Now the evidence suggests that LaVey may not have taken his own anti-Christianity with any great seriousness. But a whole bunch of impressionable teenagers and adult misfits did.³² They took on board a whole series of moral ideas, which they regarded as being linked with their religious beliefs. It does not matter to my argument whether those beliefs are true or not; my concern is to point out that people need a vision, something to get fired up by—whether it is Nazism, as it was in the early 1930s or as it is now reemerging in the 1990s, Marxism or Satanism. And those visions have moral consequences—consequences that many Americans would be very hesitant about affirming.

The strategy here is quite simple. We need to identify the negative social consequences of moral pluralism. Outwardly, it has a certain plausibility to a liberal-minded public; yet, on closer inspection, it has its darker side. It is our task to make sure that this closer inspection takes place, and that the darker side is exposed.

EVANGELICALS AND A PHILOSOPHY OF THE PUBLIC SQUARE

An Evaluation of the Stance of American Fundamentalism. Evangelicalism has only recently come to realize the enormous importance of the formulation of a philosophy of the public square—in other words, of a public polity, by which evangelicalism can engage with the political views of America as a whole, as an insider rather than as a curious and slightly perplexed outsider. The reasons for this are not difficult to discern. The public emergence of evangelicalism as a force to be reckoned with is a comparatively recent development. In its early stages, especially in the period between the First and Second World Wars, evangelicalism was dominated by fundamentalist attitudes towards the world. In using this term, I must stress that I intend neither approbation nor disapproval of the movement of that name. My concern is simply to note a major feature of the dominant fundamentalist ideology of that period—the instinctive reaction to withdraw from the world, and form a counter-culture.

According to historians George Marsden (Duke University) and Martin E. Marty (University of Chicago), fundamentalism arose as a religious reaction within American culture to the rise of a secular culture.³³ It was from its outset, and has remained, a counter-cultural movement, using central doctrinal affirmations as a means of defining cultural boundaries. Certain central doctrines (most notably, the absolute literal authority of Scripture and the premillennial return of Christ) were treated as barriers, intended as much to alienate secular culture as to give fundamentalists a sense of identity and purpose. A siege mentality became characteristic of the movement; fundamentalist counter-communities viewed themselves as walled cities, or (to evoke the pioneer spirit) circles of wagons, defending their distinctives against an unbelieving culture.³⁴

The emphasis upon the premillennial return of Christ is of especial significance. This view has a long history; it never attained any especial degree of significance prior to the nineteenth century. However, fundamentalism appears to have discerned in the idea an important weapon against the liberal Christian idea of a kingdom of God upon earth, to be achieved through social action. ‘Dispensationalism,’ especially of a premillenarian type, became an integral element of fundamentalism. As a result of this understanding of eschatology, there was little point in becoming involved in political matters. Premillennialism is, as has often been observed, politically quietist. On the basis of a premillennial worldview, there is no need for Christians to act to change history; they need only wait for God to intervene at his appointed time, and to inaugurate the millennial kingdom of Christ.

As Carl Henry pointed out in his prophetic work *The Uneasy Conscience of Fundamentalism* (1947),³⁵ this inevitably led to the privatization of faith, and an impoverishment of the Christian vision. The ‘Lordship of Christ’ was something which expressed itself in individual piety, and in the life of the Christian community—but which did not impact upon the world. This approach to Christian political action—or, as I have suggested, political inaction—resulted in the withdrawal of evangelicals from the public arena.

Now, with the benefit of hindsight, we may see that there may well have been some wisdom in this strategy. Evangelicalism needed to garner its resources, and build its strength and self-confidence, rather than engaging in a potentially pointless struggle with a better-organized, politically sophisticated and—perhaps most important of all—more numerous opponents. But that has changed. The break between fundamentalism and neo-evangelicalism in the late 1940s and early 1950s changed both the nature and the public perception of the latter. Billy Graham, perhaps the most publicly visible representative of this new evangelical style, became a well-known figure outside the United States—for example, in English society, and a role model for a younger generation of evangelicals.

The public recognition in America of the new importance and public visibility of evangelicalism dates from the early 1970s. The crisis of confidence within American liberal Christianity in the 1960s was widely interpreted to signal the need for the emergence of a new and more publicly credible form of Christian belief.³⁶ In 1976, America woke up to find itself living in *Newsweek*’s ‘Year of the Evangelical,’ with a born-again Christian (Jimmy Carter) as its President, and an unprecedented media interest in evangelicalism.

This media interest also highlighted the lack of political sophistication of the movement. An evangelical president might be in the White House, but evangelicalism as a whole was widely regarded as handicapped by the lack of a credible and Christian public polity. As Os Guinness comments, ‘failure to articulate and abide by a vision for the common good has been the Achilles Heel of public involvement by evangelicals.’³⁷ In part, this is a direct consequence of the privatization of Christian faith by evangelicals.

Many evangelicals have realized that they must enter the public arena. Jerry Falwell is an example. He writes:

Back in the sixties, I was criticizing pastors who were taking time out of their pulpit to involve themselves in the civil rights movement or any other political venture. I said you're wasting your time from what you're called to do. Now I find myself doing the same thing and for the same reasons they did.³⁸

Falwell is an important and, I think, persuasive witness to the evangelical need to get involved in the world. He reminds us that 'we are not to be only the light of the world but also the salt of the earth.'³⁹

The Public Pressure to Privatize Religion. In a previous section, I stressed the importance of understanding the American political context, especially the dominance of liberal public politics, as a fundamental precondition for the formulation and application of effective Christian responses to the pluralist situation which we face. I must now return to this theme. A central point which must be firmly appreciated is that this liberal polity *wants* Christianity to become a private matter, without any public impact. Why? Because it can be mastered more effectively, and accommodated easily within a pluralist culture. Os Guinness puts this point neatly:

To many Americans, especially among the thought leaders, the question of religion in public life has become unimportant. It is viewed as a non-issue or a nuisance factor—something which should be a purely private issue, which inevitably becomes messy and controversial when it does not stay so, and which should therefore revert to being private as quickly as possible.⁴⁰

A Christianity which vigorously asserted that it, by its very inalienable nature, has social implications will cause difficulties for a liberal social polity. How? Because that polity will be obliged to admit that this social polity tolerates actions and doctrines only to the extent that they do not undermine liberal values. This point is clearly recognized and stated by liberal political theorist William A. Galston (University of Maryland):

The moral commitments of liberalism influence—and in some cases circumscribe—the ability of individuals within a liberal society to engage fully in particular ways of life. If, to be wholly effective, a religious doctrine requires control over the totality of individual life, including the formative social and political environment, then the classic liberal demand that religion be practiced privately amounts to a substantive restriction on the free exercise of that religion. The manifold blessings of liberal social orders come with a price, and we should not be surprised when those who are asked to pay grow restive.⁴¹

In this situation, some are going to lose out. Some liberal thinkers might wish to suggest that only unworthy ways of life lose out. But leading liberal theorist John Rawls has now conceded that this is not the case, and recognized that some hitherto acceptable ways of life with special values will suffer as a result. He thus endorses the view of Isaiah Berlin, who noted that ‘there is no social world without loss—that is, no social world that does not exclude some ways of life that realize in special ways certain fundamental values.’⁴² In practice, these ways of life are going to be religious. William A. Galston summarizes the situation as follows:

Liberalism may be said to have originated in an effort to disentangle politics and religion. It has culminated in what I see as a characteristic liberal incapacity to understand religion. This incapacity has theoretical implications, for it prevents liberals from fully comprehending what is distinctive (and partisan) in their creed. Nor is it devoid of political consequences: policies that liberals typically defend as neutral are experienced by many religious communities as hostile. Liberals see themselves as the defenders of our constitutional faith, while many of the religiously faithful see themselves as the victims of secularist aggression.⁴³

One of the tasks of evangelical writers, speakers, and lobbyists is to bring home the point that the alleged neutrality of juridical liberalism conceals a definite bias against any version of Christianity which extends its interest and concerns into the public domain—and thus encourages precisely the kind of quietism and individualism which allowed Hitler to come to power in 1930s Germany. It forces Christians to retreat away from the public square, precisely because they cannot give full expression to their faith in this area. ‘To demand “neutral discourse” in public life, as some still do, should now be recognized as a way of coercing people to speak publicly in someone else’s language and thus never to be true to their own’ (Os Guinness).⁴⁴

The reason that I am stressing this point is that I believe the potential bias of liberal public polity against religious movements such as evangelicalism is understood, at least at the theoretical level, by many liberal writers. Yet the point at issue has not fully registered with the opinion makers. Religion is here understood as private thoughts, which are not to be permitted to have any effect upon the world, least of all in the public domain. Christians must learn to challenge the terms laid down for political debate by individualistic liberalism, which dictate in advance the outcome of these debates. The guys who make the rules win the game—and those rules are unfairly biased against critics of liberalism. We must make sure that this point gets heard! In his recent study *Liberal Purposes*, William Galston notes that Christianity may be being hurt by liberalism, and argues that this is a bad thing. The paper which makes this point, cited favorably by Galston, is by a writer called Jon

Gunneman. It is entitled ‘A Theological Defense of the Brute: The Christian Stake in Liberalism.’ It is unpublished.⁴⁵ We need to get these ideas on the public agenda—in print!

This points to the crying need for evangelicals to enter into the world of political philosophy. Yet hardly any are doing so. Honorable exceptions exist—for example, individuals such as Os Guinness and institutions such as the Institute for Christian Studies at Toronto, with writers such as Paul Marshall making interesting contributions. But it is not enough. Evangelicals need to get involved in mainline political debate—otherwise they will get sidelined.

“PUBLIC TRUTH”: A FLAWED APPROACH

So what strategies may we adopt? One of the most significant has been the ‘gospel as public truth’ movement, especially associated with writers such as Lesslie Newbigin. One of the great merits of the ‘gospel as public truth’ approach is that it represents a principled rejection of narrowly partisan and sectarian approaches on the part of Christians to the ethical and social issues of our day. Yet this approach can easily rest upon flawed assumptions. To illustrate this point, let me explore a recent proposal which seems to recognize the need for such an approach, only to adopt an approach which lacks both credibility and any specifically Christian character.

In a recent article in the *Christian Century*, two liberal Christian ethicists—Max L. Stackhouse and Dennis P. McCann—emphasize the need for a revival of ‘a public theology.’⁴⁶ In the light of the new situation following the collapse of socialism as a credible worldview, they argue, there is a need to move away from ‘confessional particularities, exclusive histories and privileged realms of discourse.’ ‘This agenda for Christian thought requires a “public theology,” a way of speaking about the reality of God and God’s will for the world that is intellectually valid in the marketplace of ideas and morally effective in the marketplace of goods and services.’

A Critique. There is much to commend this proposal. It insists that Christian theology addresses the widest of publics, demanding a hearing in even the most secular of contexts. Unless Christians are merely to ‘preach to their choirs,’ they must find some ‘intellectually valid’ way of addressing the secular world at large. Yet on closer inspection, the proposal advanced with such earnestness by these writers turns out to be fatally flawed. It rests upon the assumption that, while the language and values of Christian theology are shaped by history, the values and language of secular American culture are unconditioned by such influences. At the heart of the argument lies an appeal to the ‘context-transcending principles of truth, justice, and love.’ In other words, it is alleged that these

three abstract notions are universally valid, and determine the framework which a public gospel must address.

There are three major flaws with this approach. In the **first** place, these three notions are barren abstractions, which can only come to life when they are given substance. They must be particularized, located in real life situations. This point has been appreciated by most Christian preachers and pastors, concerned to deal with the issues of real life, rather than the dulling abstractions of general principles. In his *Leaves from a Notebook of a Tamed Cynic* (1929), Reinhold Niebuhr wrote:

If a minister wants to be a man among men he need only stop creating a devotion to abstract ideas which everyone accepts in theory and denies in practice, and to agonize about their validity and practicability in the social issues which he and others face in our present civilization. That immediately gives his ministry a touch of reality and potency.⁴⁷

Precisely that ‘touch of reality and potency’ is missing from the vacuous and unfocussed approach of Stackhouse and McCann.

In the **second** place, the approach adopted by Stackhouse and McCann actually seems to be little more than a capitulation on their part to secular culture. They speak of ‘going public’; in reality, they have gone secular. Lacking any real confidence in the resources of the Christian faith, they have floundered around in their desperation to gain a hearing in the secular national culture. Mesmerized by the specter of being ‘relegated to irrelevance’ within western culture, they have thrown aside the distinctive resources of the Christian tradition—which they refer to condescendingly as ‘confessional particularities, exclusive histories, and privileged realms of discourse’—in their headlong rush to mimic the world. Lesslie Newbigin comments on the inevitable outcome of this stance:

We are like the Christian congregations under the *milet* systems of the Persian and Muslim empires: we use the mother tongue of the Church on Sundays, but for the rest of our lives we use the language imposed upon us by the occupying power. But if we are true to the language of the Church and the Bible, we know that this is not good enough.⁴⁸

The result of this approach is quite simple: it silences Christians, forbidding them to have any distinctive insights which need to get a public hearing. Christians must become secular liberals before they are allowed a public hearing. Again, the wisdom of Os Guinness’ remark will be clear: ‘To demand “neutral discourse” in public life . . . should now be recognized as a way of coercing people to speak publicly in someone else’s language and thus never to be true to their own.’⁴⁹

But there is a **third**, and more serious problem. Stackhouse and McCann appear to have overlooked that the Enlightenment is over. They are trying to bolt the stable door after the horse has died. The belief that the language and values of secular culture are universally valid is no longer taken seriously. Stackhouse and McCann retain a faith in the idea of some universal way of speaking and thinking, which transcends the irritating particularities of being a Christian (or Jew, or Socialist, or whatever). They believe in some kind of moral and religious Esperanto, which offers to break down divisive particularities, and allow all to speak the same language, and live happily ever after. The ‘Esperanto’ in question turns out to be an artificial language, an invention, which only a few isolated academics speak. Yet the language of morals must make sense to whole communities, before we can get anywhere. The rise of postmodernism is a telling indicator of the general collapse of confidence in the foundational belief of the Enlightenment in ‘universal morality.’ How, one wonders, can a Christian theology hope to maintain intellectual credibility in a postmodern world, if one were to adopt the outdated and discredited approach of Stackhouse and McCann, who seem to hanker after the good old days of the (now defunct) Enlightenment?

The Myth of ‘Universal Cultural Values.’ The task of constructing a public theology is too serious to be based upon outdated fairy-tale notions of ‘universal cultural values.’ ‘Truth, justice, and love’ all require to be defined—and they are defined in different manners by different people. Far from being ‘context-transcending,’ they are radically dependent upon their context for their meaning. This point has been made forcefully by philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre in his study, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* Irritated by the bland and vague generalizations of liberal writers—and Stackhouse and McCann illustrate this trend vividly—about ‘justice’ and ‘rationality,’ MacIntyre makes the point that these need to be defined. They are not self-evident, nor are they universal; they vary from one situation to another.

Stackhouse and McCann appear to believe that secular culture is unconditioned by the contingencies of history and culture, in contrast to what they clearly regard as the irritating and petty distinctive characteristics of Christianity. It is perhaps no cause for wonder that liberal Christianity is losing its voice, both within church and society. Liberalism has spent its fuel. For if Christianity has nothing that is distinctive to say, the world need not listen. And, to judge by the sense of despondency and despair which seems to resonate throughout Stackhouse and McCann’s article, the world has ceased to listen to them.

The need to be sensitive and responsive to developments within society is beyond dispute. Evangelicalism does not share fundamentalism's instinct to withdraw from the world, to form a counter-culture. Nevertheless, evangelicals do not share liberalism's willingness to allow its agenda and the resources which it brings to bear upon that agenda to be shaped by the world. Too often in the past, liberalism appears to have rushed to identify the Christian gospel with the latest cultural trend, or social theory. Sociologist Jacques Ellul identifies this trend, which appears to have reached its zenith in the late 1960s, and notes its fundamental flaws:

What troubles me is not that the opinions of Christians change, nor that their opinions are shaped by the problems of the times; on the contrary, that is good. What troubles me is that Christians conform to the trend of the moment without introducing into it *anything* specifically Christian. Their convictions are determined by their social milieu, not by faith in revelation; they lack the uniqueness which ought to be the expression of that faith. Thus theologies become mechanical exercises that justify the position adopted, and justify them on grounds that are absolutely not Christian.⁵⁰

Ellul here puts his finger on one of the most worrying aspects of liberalism during the 1960s: its tendency to fashion theologies in order to justify decisions that they have made on other grounds. Radical new theologies—'radical' being a word which then ensured the cultural credibility of the ideas attached to it—were fashioned, generally with minimal or highly selective reference to the Christian tradition, which provided *post hoc* rationalizations of attitudes and ideas, whose ultimate origin lay firmly in the social milieu.

Liberalism, then, represents one flawed attempt to deal with the issue of public truth. We may, however, learn from its failures—just as we may learn from the growing credibility of postliberalism, a movement which is now regarded as having discredited the liberal outlook.

FORGING AN ALLIANCE WITH POSTLIBERALISM

Perhaps one of the most constructive proposals to deal with the obvious failure of liberal Christian theology to take the Christian tradition seriously is postliberalism. A liberal religious outlook, upon which so much of the attractiveness of the pluralist agenda depends, is now regarded as intellectually *passé*.⁵¹ One of the most significant developments in theology since 1980 has been a growing skepticism over the plausibility of a liberal worldview. Accompanying this retreat from liberalism have been a number of developments, perhaps most important of which has been the repristination of more conservative viewpoints. One such development has been postliberalism, which has become

especially associated with Yale Divinity School, but is now gaining an increasing hearing. Its central foundations are narrative approaches to theology, such as those developed by Hans Frei, and to the schools of social interpretation which stress the importance of culture and language in the generation and interpretation of experience and thought.

One of the greatest weaknesses of contemporary liberal political thought is its failure to recognize that ‘justice’ is a contested notion, dependent upon prior conceptions of what it means to live a good life, or what the ultimate aim of human existence, individual or corporate, might be. This point has been brought out clearly and convincingly by Stanley Hauerwas, in his recent book *After Christendom?*.⁵² This work, which avoids the pitfalls associated with the uncritical affirmation of the individualist liberalism associated with Stackhouse and McCann, stresses how secular conceptions of human destiny are increasingly recognized to be flawed. Thus Hauerwas points out how John Rawls’ approach ultimately depends upon the notion of autonomy—of the self as an unencumbered, self-driven chooser of his or her own destiny. He correctly notes that this idea has been shown to be exceptionally vulnerable, through the writings of philosophers such as Charles Taylor. In any case, he observes, it is unChristian, in that the Christian does not seek autonomy, but only to serve God. Whereas secular notions of justice rest upon the idea of the autonomous self, the Christian notion must rest upon the idea of a free and joyful surrender of oneself and one’s personal ambitions to God.

The basic argument of Hauerwas, then, is that Christianity does have a distinctive idea of what ‘justice’ is, and that this may not necessarily be shared with the world around it. Christianity may find itself committed to a notion of justice which is in opposition to other notions of justice— notions which may enjoy considerable popular appeal. This is exactly what seems to have happened in Nazi Germany during the 1930s. Certain moral values and ideas became popular and appealing within German society—including the idea that Jews were subhuman, and that guns were more important than butter. Those who held that the church should follow the world duly did so, and thus, one hopes unwittingly, lent support to the horrors of Nazism. Donald Bloesch even cites the case of a senior German churchman who described the Nazis as ‘a gift and miracle of God.’⁵³ The church needs to stand up against secular ideas of morality and justice!

A Critique of Postliberalism. Now we can learn from that—and more than that: we can build upon it. Yet postliberalism has a weakness, it is in its failure to adequately develop a doctrine of Scripture, which gives theoretical justification to the movement’s emphasis upon the foundational role of Scripture in relation to Christian theology and ethics. I think that evangelicalism can be of service here! But we can also demonstrate how profoundly liberating the doctrine of the authority of

Scripture can be, and point out the negative consequences of allowing anything other than Scripture to control our thinking.

The characteristic evangelical insistence upon the authority of Scripture reflects a determination not to permit anything from outside the Christian heritage to become the norms for what is truly ‘Christian.’ Recent theological history has provided us with examples of what happens when a theology cuts itself loose from the controlling influence of the Christian tradition, and seeks norms from outside that tradition—for example, in ‘German culture.’ Evangelicalism is grounded in the belief that Christianity must remain faithful to itself, by taking its heritage with the utmost seriousness, and refusing to be controlled by anything other than the living Christ, as we find him in Scripture. Evangelicals affirm, with the German Confessing Church at the time of the Third Reich, that:

Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death. We reject the false doctrine, as though the Church could and would have to acknowledge as a source of its proclamation, apart from and besides this one Word of God, still other events and powers, figures, and truths, as God’s revelation.⁵⁴

In aligning itself with such declarations, evangelicalism affirms its intent to remain faithful to Jesus Christ, as he is made known through Scripture, and to avoid becoming enslaved to the ‘Self-Images of the Age’ (Alasdair MacIntyre). To allow our ideas and values to become controlled by anything or anyone other than the self-revelation of God in Scriptures is to adopt an ideology, rather than a theology; it is to become controlled by ideas and values whose origins lie outside the Christian tradition—and potentially to become enslaved to them.

REDISCOVERING THE IMPORTANCE OF DOCTRINE

Morality rests upon a worldview, which it both expresses and reinforces. The worldview comes first; the morality second. This illustrates the importance of Christian doctrine for ethics. To make this point, we may consider two highly-acclaimed fairly recent works on the theme of Christian ethics, Oliver O’Donovan’s *Resurrection and Moral Order*, and John Mahoney’s *The Making of Moral Theology*. Despite differences between the two authors, one theme emerges as of major importance: ethics rest upon doctrine. To give but one example: for O’Donovan, Christian ethics rest upon a proper understanding of the objective order imposed upon creation by God. To *act* in a Christian manner rests upon *thinking* in a Christian manner.

Jesus as Moral Authority. Let us explore this briefly by considering the ethical authority of Jesus Christ. To allow that Jesus is a religious teacher is to raise the question of his authority. Why should we take him seriously? We have been fortunate enough to have had the advice of countless moral and religious teachers in human history—what makes Jesus different? What singles him out as commanding attention? It is untenable to suggest that Jesus’ authority rests upon the excellence of his moral or religious teaching. To make this suggestion is to imply that Jesus has authority only when he happens to agree with us. We thus would have authority over Jesus.

In fact, however, the teaching of Jesus has authority on account of who Jesus is—and the identity and significance of Jesus can only be spelled out in doctrinal terms. ‘We cannot go on treating and believing in Jesus Christ in a way in which it would be wrong to treat and believe in another man, without a theory of his person that explains that he is something more than man’ (Charles Gore). It is doctrine which explains why and how Jesus’ words and deeds have divine, rather than purely human, authority. It is doctrine which singles out Jesus Christ, and none other, as being God incarnate. To pay attention to Jesus Christ reflects our fundamental conviction that God speaks through this man as through no other. Here is no prophet, speaking on God’s behalf at second-hand; here is God himself, speaking to us. ‘We have to do with God himself as we have to do with this man. God himself speaks when this man speaks in human speech’ (Karl Barth). Quite contrary to the liberals of the nineteenth century (who believed it was possible to uphold the religious and ethical aspects of Christianity, while discarding its doctrines), the authority of Jesus’ moral and religious teaching thus rests firmly upon a doctrinal foundation.

Let me return to the writings of the distinguished Oxford philosopher of religion, Basil Mitchell, to which I referred previously. In his essay ‘Is There a Distinctive Christian Ethic?’, Mitchell stresses that ethics depend upon worldviews—and that worldviews in turn depend upon doctrine.

Any worldview which carries with it important implications for our understanding of man and his place in the universe would yield its own distinctive insights into the scope, character, and content of morality. To answer the further question, ‘What *is* the distinctive Christian ethic?’, is inevitably to be involved to some extent in controversial questions of Christian doctrine. This point was made clearly and prophetically some fifty years ago by an Archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple. Writing against the ‘Religion without Dogma’ movement in 1942, he declared that: You would hardly find any theologian now who supposes that Christian ethics can survive for half a century in detachment from Christian doctrine, and this is the very last moment when

the church itself can come forward with outlines of Christian ethics in the absence of the theological foundation which alone makes them really tenable. Our people have grown up in a generally Christian atmosphere, and take it for granted that all people who are not actually perverted hold what are essentially Christian notions about human conduct. But this is not true.

(Temple then goes on to illustrate this point tellingly with reference to the rise of Hitler and Stalin in the 1930s). Although many liberal and radical writers of the 1960s suggested that Christian ethics could be divorced from doctrine, and maintain an independent existence, the wisdom of Temple's words is once more apparent. Distinctive ethics (whether Marxist, Christian, or Buddhist) are dependent upon worldviews, which are in turn shaped by doctrines, by understandings of human nature and destiny.

So what is the relevance of this point to our theme? Quite simply this. That in the midst of a sea of moral pluralism, Christians have every right, and a God-given responsibility, to maintain a distinctive moral vision. This belief is held on the basis of the firm conviction that this moral vision is grounded in the most reliable knowledge we have of the nature and will of God himself—given to us in Jesus Christ and Holy Scripture.

Moral pluralism poses a challenge to Christianity partly on phenomenological grounds. To put this in plain English: moral pluralism is unsettling for many Christians, because they look around them, and see so many different understandings of what is right that they begin to lose heart. They are tempted to lose confidence or be reduced to despair, and see themselves as a voice crying in the wilderness. We need to reassure such people that being right, and being recognized to be right, are two different things.

And that is why it continues to be important to insist, not just that truth matters, but that Christianity is true. Stanley Hauerwas wrote that 'the only reason for being a Christian . . . is because Christian convictions are true.'⁵⁵ Princeton philosopher Diogenes Allen tells the story of the person who asked him why he should go to church when he had no religious needs. 'Because Christianity is true,' was Allen's response.⁵⁶ Gordon Lewis' book *Testing Christianity's Truth Claims*⁵⁷ is important, not simply on account of its documentation of recent developments in apologetics, but because it firmly declares that truth claims are being made, that they are capable of being tested, and that, as a matter of principle, they *ought* to be tested. And if pluralism is resistant to having *its* claims tested, it can hardly expect to be taken seriously, save by those who—for the culturally-conditioned

moment—share its prejudices. It will be a sad day when a claim to be telling the truth is met with the response that there is no truth to tell.

The Church and Moral Pluralism. The churches, then, should see themselves as communities with a distinctive moral vision, which may at times complement, and may at times challenge, those of other groups in society. This is certainly the situation experienced by the early church, and by the church at other moments in history at which the state has adopted oppressive and repressive measures. Liberal Christianity has a distressing tendency to assume that what society says is what is right. For example, in the late 1980s, the Church of England produced a report entitled ‘Faith in the City.’ This report, which bravely addressed issues of poverty in modern Britain, made the fundamental assumption that Christian ethics has nothing substantially new to add to the understanding of justice and compassion held by ‘the great majority of the people of Britain.’⁵⁸ This delivers the church, it would seem, straight into the hands of the world, in that the world is allowed to dictate what is right and what is not, with the church as little more than a passive observer to what is going on. Nowhere in the New Testament is the church portrayed as a ‘yes-man!’

For reasons such as this, there is a need for the church to formulate a moral vision, which is grounded in Scripture and faithful to the gospel, in the sure knowledge that it is likely to find itself in conflict with other conceptions of justice currently in the social marketplace. This should not cause us to lack in confidence!

EVANGELISM

This approach has two important consequences. In the long term, it emphasizes the importance of *evangelism*. The impact of the Christian witness to a nation is dependent upon a number of factors, such as the quality of the lifestyle of Christian communities and the general positive and caring moral image which the church must seek to project. The truth of the Christian position is also of major importance. However, it must be conceded that numerical strength is an issue. It is not enough for us to proclaim that the Christian gospel is true, and worthy of trusting and obeying. We must work, in so far as we are able, to increase the number of those who acknowledge that truth, and respond to it in repentance, faith and obedience.

CO-BELLIGERENCE

Secondly, it points to the importance of what Francis Schaeffer termed ‘Co-Belligerence’ as a political strategy. Recognizing that the church may find herself unable to command universal assent throughout society, Schaeffer argued for the need to form coalitions with other groups on issues upon which agreement could be reached. This approach rested upon both *pragmatic* and *theological* considerations. *Pragmatically*, it rested upon the realization that there was a need to work together with others to work for the common good, and that aspects of the Christian vision for the common good were shared by others outside the church. To run with them on some issues was not to run with them on others.

An example of this from the United Kingdom may be of interest. Some months ago, a satirical television puppet show included comic scenes showing a puppet of Jesus Christ. Christians protested in droves; the television company showed no real sign of doing anything. Then Muslims started to complain. They had great respect for Jesus, they told the media, and were not prepared to tolerate him being portrayed in this ridiculous manner. The television company gave way, and announced that it would be introducing guidelines on this sensitive issue. Yet never in this debate was it suggested that Christian and Muslims were identical, or that they could reach agreement on other issues. They happened to unite over this issue, and were able to make an impact as a result.

But there is also a *theological* dimension to this approach. It is the notion of common grace, by which God is able to allow at least traces of his righteousness to be picked up outside the Christian faith. We should aim to look for these resonances between the gospel and the world, and exploit them where we find them. The point at issue is well made by Harry Blamires:

Desperate as we Christians are to stem the tide of immorality and degeneracy, we must not pretend that it is simply *qua* Christians that we man the barricades. . . . It is not just St Paul, St Augustine, John Bunyan, or John Wesley who would be horrified at what we have come to acquiesce in the way of legalized embryonicide and pornography. Surely Virgil and Seneca, Plato and Plotinus would be horrified too.⁵⁹

Earlier, I suggested that evangelicalism and postliberalism had much in common. I concede at once that they have differences. But in the short term, we can unite in our joint conviction that Christianity has a distinct moral vision, grounded in Scripture. Let us make sure that this vision is heard! A coalition of forces can make sure that this vision is taken seriously—as it must be taken seriously.

THE CHURCH AND PARTISAN POLITICS

Yet an obvious danger lurks here. The Christian churches can easily be seen simply as a sectarian power group or lobby.⁶⁰ Charles Colson, writing from the context of an experience of the corrupting effects of power which few of us can hope to share, stresses the perils of allowing the church to be seen as just another special interest group. He points to the case of Ronald Reagan's 1980 campaign, in which Reagan met up with some Religious Right activists. He was challenged for mixing politics and religion; his response was to the effect that the church was just like any other special interest group, such as a union.⁶¹ Colson, as many of you will know, takes delight in relating how he was able to set traps for religious leaders, to ensure that they gave President Nixon the maximum exposure and credibility when he needed it.

Any permanent alliance between the church and a political party or tendency will result in the church losing its public credibility. Charles Colson has stressed, rightly, that the moral witness of the church must be grounded in its pastoral care and compassion of people, citing his own experience in prison ministries as an example. The church needs to be seen to be above politics, if it is to gain respect and credibility. Sadly, when many Christians gain access to financial or political power, they often seem unable to handle it, as the saga of some tele-evangelists makes clear. If I may be permitted to offer you an outsider perspective: in Britain, there is a widespread perception that some evangelicals are hungry for power, and that the current involvement in party politics—as opposed to politics in general—is simply one aspect of this hunger. However, in fairness, I note that Jerry Falwell has made it explicitly clear that this is not *his* vision for a morally renewed America. Falwell writes as follows:

Fundamentalists are not interested in controlling America; they are interested in seeing souls saved and lives changed for the glory of God. They believe that the degree to which this is accomplished will naturally influence the trend of society in America . . . We are not a political party. We are committed to work with the multiple party system in this nation . . . We simply desire to influence government—not control government.⁶²

In any case, it would seem to me that the fundamentalist tendency to favour premillennialism excludes the postmillennialist theology which would give intellectual justification for any 'theocratic' approach to national affairs.

THE WAY AHEAD

The time has come for me to draw together the threads of my argument. It will be clear that I am concerned to develop approaches to the issue before us which will lead to the increased recognition and respect for the Christian moral vision in the public arena. As I have argued, that means engaging with the public arena, rather than simply asserting our own position behind hermetically-sealed barricades.

In the first place, it means engaging with a pluralist worldview on the basis of its own presuppositions, in order that its serious weaknesses and flaws may be shown up. Liberal pluralism may be attractive—but for how long can an outlook be sustained, when it so clearly rests upon such flimsy foundations? We must work to ensure that the flawed credentials of this approach become public knowledge!

In the second place, it means ensuring that evangelicals are fully engaged in the public debate over political philosophy. It needs to be made clear that Christianity gets hurt by a liberal philosophy. That fact needs to percolate through to the public arena, to the opinion makers of modern American society. Once it is seen that a group is victimized in this manner, some serious issues will be raised concerning the morality of a political philosophy which is so discriminatory. But few evangelicals are being heard—precisely because few evangelicals are bothering to get involved.

In the third place, it means showing how morality depends upon a worldview. The debate about morality is, in the end, a debate over the nature and destiny of humanity, including the vitally important question of the transcendent dimension of existence. That is why doctrine matters. That is why Christian apologetics matters. That is why evangelism matters. All of these are commending the validity and the veracity of the Christian worldview—and, in its wake, the Christian moral vision. There is a clash of worldviews taking place. We owe it to our future to make sure that the Christian worldview is defended and commended to the best of our ability.

That is why evangelism is so important. Pragmatically, we must realize that numerical strength *does* matter, even if it *ought not* to matter. And if we cannot gain converts at every point, then let us at least gain allies—people who are prepared to stand alongside us at vital junctures, even if our ways must part elsewhere. I have identified postliberalism as such an ally. There are others.

Finally, we need to ensure that our churches and communities project a caring and compassionate image to the world. The Christian moral vision must be seen to result in the formation of communities of love, fellowship, and mutual concern, which can be held up as models of care to an alienated society. The theoretical justification of the Christian moral worldview will only cut so much ice. We need to ensure that it is supplemented by its actualization in the lives of men, women and communities—communities which can bear witness to the love of the Lord. Too often, the Christian moral vision is dismissed as puritanical or legalist. While I concede that such judgments lack rigorous grounding, I have a suspicion that we have too often failed to allow the *joy* of the gospel to shine through our concern for morality. If we can show that we are motivated by a passionate care for people, perhaps those outside the churches will realize that the Christian moral vision is nourished and sustained by the same love which was shown in Christ dying in order that his people might live. In a world in which many moralities are on offer, I believe we have a duty to show that the Christian vision is compellingly attractive and powerful. It is already so—our task is to allow that attraction and conviction to show forth to this nation.

NOTES

- 1 Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), p. 1. 19
- 2 For a useful discussion, see Harvey M. Conn, *Eternal Word and Changing Worlds* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984).
- 3 On the nature of Postmodernism, see Nancey Murphy and James Wm. McClendon Jr., 'Distinguishing Modern and Postmodern Theologies,' *Modern Theology* 5 (1989), pp. 191–214.
- 4 On these general themes, see Diogenes Allen, *Christian Belief in a Postmodern World* (Louisville; Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989); Thomas C. Oden, *After Modernity . . . What? Agenda for Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990).
- 5 Oden, *After Modernity*, p. 77.
- 6 The following works are helpful: Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987); Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990); Kevin Hart, *The Trespass of the Sign* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989); Christopher Norris, *What's Wrong with Postmodernism?* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1990).
- 7 See the excellent survey of Gordon R. Lewis, *Testing Christianity's Truth Claims: Approaches to Christian Apologetics* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1976).
- 8 Allen Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), pp. 25–6.
- 9 Bloom, *Closing of the American Mind*, p. 26.
- 10 For an account of the British decision to abolish the practice of sati (the preferred transcription of the Sanskrit; the alternative suttee is often entered in the older literature), see Stephen Neill, *A History of Christianity in India, 1707–1858* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 157–8. Regulation XVII of the Bengal Code (1829) declared that 'the practice of suttee, or of burning or burying alive the widows of Hindus, is hereby illegal, and punishable by the criminal courts.'
- 11 See Neill, *History of Christianity in India*, pp. 162–4. There is disturbing evidence that this practice still continues in modern India.

12 The most important writings are his *Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973); *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980); *Historie de la folie à l'âge classique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972).

13 Stanley Rosen, *Hermeneutics as Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 189–90.

14 Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1982), p. xlii.

15 Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, p. xlii.

16 Diogenes Allen, *Christian Belief in a PostModern World* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989), p. 9.

17 John Hick, *Truth and Dialogue* (London: Sheldon Press, 1974), p. 148.

18 John Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths* (London: Collins, 1977), p. 146.

19 Hugo Meynell, 'On the Idea of a World Theology,' *Modern Theology* 1 (1985), pp. 149–63.

20 Richard Rorty, *The Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), p. 166.

21 Kathryn Tanner, 'Respect for Other Religions: A Christian Antidote to Colonialist Discourse,' *Modern Theology* 9 (1993), pp. 1–18.

22 Tanner, 'Respect for Other Religions,' p. 2.

23 Tanner, 'Respect for Other Religions,' p. 2. See also John Apczynski, 'John Hick's Theocentrism: Revolution or Implicitly Exclusive?,' *Modern Theology* 8 (1992), pp. 39–52.

24 Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), pp. 9–10.

25 John Macquarrie, *Jesus Christ in Modern Thought* (London: SCM Press, 1990), p. 253.

26 I take these references from William A. Galston, 'Tocqueville on Liberalism and Religion,' *Social Research* 54 (1987), pp. 499–518.

27 John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), pp. 577–87.

28 Rawls, *Theory of Justice*, pp. 579–80.

- 29 William Waldegrave, *The Binding of Leviathan* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1978), p. 62.
- 30 B. A. Ackermann, *Social Justice in the Liberal State* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), p. 10.
- 31 *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 20/3 (Fall 1992).
- 32 Anton Szandor LaVey, *The Satanic Bible* (New York: Avon, 1969).
- 33 The definitive study remains George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth Century Evangelicalism 1870–1925* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980).
- 34 Martin E. Marty, 'Fundamentalism as a Social Phenomenon,' in *Evangelicalism and Modern America*, ed. George Marsden (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), pp. 56–70.
- 35 Carl F. H. Henry, *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1947).
- 36 Leonard E. Sweet, 'The 1960s: The Crisis of Liberal Christianity and the Public Emergence of Evangelicalism,' in Marsden, *Evangelicalism and Modern America*, pp. 29–45.
- 37 Os Guinness, 'Tribespeople, Idiots or Citizens? Evangelicals, Religious Liberty and a Public Philosophy for the Public Square,' in K. S. Kantzer and C. F. H. Henry (eds), *Evangelical Affirmations* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), pp. 457–97; quote at pp. 459–60.
- 38 Jerry Falwell (ed.), *The Fundamentalist Phenomenon* (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, 1981), p. 144.
- 39 Falwell, *Fundamentalist Phenomenon*, pp. 184–5.
- 40 Guinness, 'Tribespeople, Idiots or Citizens?,' p. 268.
- 41 William A. Galston, *Liberal Purposes: Goods, Virtues, and Diversity in the Liberal State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 277–8.
- 42 John Rawls, 'The Priority of Right and Ideas of the Good,' *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 17 (1988), p. 265.
- 43 William A. Galston, *Liberal Purposes: Goods, Virtues and Diversity in the Liberal State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990). p. 13.
- 44 Guinness, 'Tribespeople, Idiots or Citizens?,' p. 471.

45 Galston, *Liberal Purposes*, p. 316, notes 31–2.

46 Max L. Stackhouse and Dennis P. McCann, 'Public Theology after the Collapse of Socialism,' *Christian Century*, Jan. 16, 1991, pp. 45–7.

47 Reinhold Niebuhr, *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic* (New York: Meridian, 1957), p. 16.

48 Lesslie Newbigin, *Truth to Tell: The Gospel as Public Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991). p. 49.

49 Guinness, 'Tribespeople, Idiots or Citizens?,' p. 471.

50 Jacques Ellul, *Violence* (New York: Seabury Press, 1969), P. 28.

51 See Alister E. McGrath, 'The Challenge of Pluralism for the Contemporary Christian Church,' *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 35 (1992), pp. 361–73; idem, 'The Christian Church's Response to Pluralism,' *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 35 (1992), pp. 487–501.

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54 *The Barmen Theological Declaration*; Arthur Cochrane (ed.), *Reformed Confessions of the Sixteenth Century* (London: SCM Press, 1966), p. 334.

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56 Allen, *Christian Belief in a Postmodern World*, p. 1.

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60 This danger is stressed by Paul Ramsey, *Who Speaks for the Church?* (Nashville; Abington Press, 1967).

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¹Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), p. 1.

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³On the nature of Postmodernism, see Nancey Murphy and James Wm. McClendon Jr., 'Distinguishing Modern and Postmodern Theologies,' *Modern Theology* 5 (1989), pp. 191–214.

⁴On these general themes, see Diogenes Allen, *Christian Belief in a Postmodern World* (Louisville; Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989); Thomas C. Oden, *After Modernity . . . What? Agenda for Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990).

⁵Oden, *After Modernity*, p. 77.

⁶The following works are helpful: Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987); Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990); Kevin Hart, *The Trespass of the Sign* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989); Christopher Norris, *What's Wrong with Postmodernism?* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1990).

⁷See the excellent survey of Gordon R. Lewis, *Testing Christianity's Truth Claims: Approaches to Christian Apologetics* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1976).

⁸Allen Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), pp. 25–6.

⁹Bloom, *Closing of the American Mind*, p. 26.

¹⁰For an account of the British decision to abolish the practice of *sati* (the preferred transcription of the Sanskrit; the alterative *suttee* is often encountered in the older literature), see Stephen Neill, *A History of Christianity in India, 1707–1858* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 157–8. Regulation XVII of the Bengal Code (1829) declared that 'the practice of suttee, or of burning or burying alive the widows of Hindus, is hereby illegal, and punishable by the criminal courts.'

¹¹See Neill, *History of Christianity in India*, pp. 162–4. There is disturbing evidence that this practice still continues in modern India.

¹²The most important writings are his *Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973); *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980); *Historie de la folie à l'âge classique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972).

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- ¹³Stanley Rosen, *Hermeneutics as Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 189–90.
- ¹⁴Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1982), p. xlii.
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- ¹⁶Diogenes Allen, *Christian Belief in a PostModern World* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989), p. 9.
- ¹⁷John Hick, *Truth and Dialogue* (London: Sheldon Press, 1974), p. 148.
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- ¹⁹Hugo Meynell, ‘On the Idea of a World Theology,’ *Modern Theology 1* (1985), pp. 149–63.
- ²⁰Richard Rorty, *The Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), p. 166.
- ²¹Kathryn Tanner, ‘Respect for Other Religions: A Christian Antidote to Colonialist Discourse,’ *Modern Theology 9* (1993), pp. 1–18.
- ²²Tanner, ‘Respect for Other Religions,’ p. 2.
- ²³Tanner, ‘Respect for Other Religions,’ p. 2. See also John Apczynski, ‘John Hick’s Theocentrism: Revolution or Implicitly Exclusive?,’ *Modern Theology 8* (1992), pp. 39–52.
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- ²⁷John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), pp. 577–87.
- ²⁸Rawls, *Theory of Justice*, pp. 579–80.
- ²⁹William Waldegrave, *The Binding of Leviathan* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1978), p. 62.

³⁰B. A. Ackermann, *Social Justice in the Liberal State* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), p. 10.

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³²Anton Szandor LaVey, *The Satanic Bible* (New York: Avon, 1969).

³³The definitive study remains George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth Century Evangelicalism 1870–1925* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980).

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³⁵Carl F. H. Henry, *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism* (Grand Rapids; Eerdmans, 1947).

³⁶Leonard E. Sweet, 'The 1960s: The Crisis of Liberal Christianity and the Public Emergence of Evangelicalism,' in Marsden, *Evangelicalism and Modern America*, pp. 29–45.

³⁷Os Guinness, 'Tribespeople, Idiots or Citizens? Evangelicals, Religious Liberty and a Public Philosophy for the Public Square,' in K. S. Kantzer and C. F. H. Henry (eds), *Evangelical Affirmations* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), pp. 457–97; quote at pp. 459–60.

³⁸Jerry Falwell (ed.), *The Fundamentalist Phenomenon* (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, 1981), p. 144.

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⁴⁶Max L. Stackhouse and Dennis P. McCann, 'Public Theology after the Collapse of Socialism,' *Christian Century*, Jan. 16, 1991, pp. 45–7.

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