



**Challenging How We Choose:  
*How the Nations Are Repressing  
Christian Ethics***

# 10

## **The Graying of Morality: *Relativism and the Law of Nature***

“Not ‘black and white’ — right or wrong!”

— Jack Ryan (Harrison Ford), in *Clear and Present Danger* (1994)

So far in this book we have looked at a variety of challenges to the Christian faith that question what Christians believe. These challenges have come from intellectual disciplines such as physics, biology, and psychology, from religious movements such as Islam and the New Age movement, and from alternative forms of Christianity such as the Jehovah’s Witnesses and liberal theology.

As important as all these challenges to the Christian faith are, arguably the main challenges to Christianity today are aimed at Christians ethics and values. It is not so much what Christians say about God that non-Christians question, as what Christians say about sex. While it seemed not very long ago that most non-Christians in the Western world

agreed with biblical morality even if they rejected the biblical message, that common moral consensus has rapidly disappeared.

In the rest of this book, then, we will be considering some of the myriad challenges to Christian ethics and values facing us on the eve of the third millennium. If we are to maintain the integrity of our Christian confession and to continue the task of reaching out with the gospel to the world, we will need to be prepared to articulate not only a Christian view of the world, but also a Christian vision for the world.

## **Christian Morality: Asset or Liability?**

It used to be that one of the undisputed evidences of the truth and greatness of the Christian faith was the majestic ethical and moral system of values which it taught. While not denying the noble moral convictions exhibited by many non-Christians, evangelists and apologists for the Christian faith have until very recently appealed to the moral power of Christianity as one of its main “selling points.”

How quickly things have changed. Ask any ten non-Christians anywhere in the Western world at random why they do not accept biblical Christianity, and probably eight of them will give answers that focus on ethical issues. Christianity, they may say, is racist, or sexist, or imperialist. Christianity, they may worry, is an intolerant religion that would deny them their sexual pleasure, their artistic freedom, or even their political rights. They may blame Christianity for the destruction of the environment or for the divisions in society. Or they may cite the moral hypocrisy of television preachers who rail against immorality and are caught in sexual scandal, or of pro-lifers who condemn abortion as murder yet support

capital punishment. While ethical criticisms of Christianity have been voiced for centuries, in the past generation such objections have become extremely commonplace, and it is hard to find anyone outside the church who will commend the Christian religion for its ethical greatness. From a great asset, Christian ethics have almost overnight, it seems, become one of its greatest liabilities.

The evangelical or conservative Christian's answer to these complaints is typically that non-Christians have misunderstood or misconstrued what Christianity really teaches about these things. Christianity, first of all, is about Christ, not about Christians. Some Christians may be racist or sexist, but Christ was not. Christians may be hypocritical, but Christ is not. Second, Christians often respond to these charges by trying to show that Christian ethical standards are really good. The Bible teaches the essential equality of men and women of all races (Gal. 3:28); unbridled sexual pleasure leads to AIDS; abortion targets the innocent, while capital punishment targets the guilty.

Such responses are sound and helpful as far as they go. Still, they often fail to convince non-Christians. Why is this? It is tempting to blame the problem on the moral corruption of non-Christians, but this explanation can only go so far. Paul, for example, while noting the moral depravity of the pagan culture (Rom. 1:24-31), points out that the wicked live immorally while at the same time "knowing the righteous judgment of God, that those who practice such things are worthy of death" (v. 31). In his view, the problem with pagans is not so much that they do not know right from wrong, but that they do wrong despite knowing better (2:1-16).

The widespread criticism of Christianity on ethical grounds in our day, then, might be worth taking more seriously. One basic reason non-Christians reject some of our standard answers to their criticisms is that the answers are simplistic. Christianity ought indeed to be centered on Christ, but the fact remains that it is not unreasonable for non-Christians to test what *we* profess by the way *we* behave. As a matter of fact, the New Testament tells us quite plainly that they will do so, and places a burden of responsibility on us as Christians to show the world the truth of the gospel of Christ by our behavior (John 13:34-35; 1 Pet. 2:9-12).

The rationales which we offer for our ethical judgments also often seem simplistic, especially in the light of modern developments in society and technology. For example, while it is true that those engaged in sexual promiscuity may get AIDS, it is also possible to get the HIV virus that causes AIDS from a blood transfusion (as happened tragically to the late tennis star Arthur Ashe). And what if science comes up with a way to eliminate all sexually transmitted diseases? Is promiscuity bad only because it can lead to undesirable consequences, such as disease or out-of-wedlock pregnancy?

Another reason why non-Christians may feel justified in rejecting Christian ethical standards is that there no longer appear to be any! That is, from an outsider's point of view, it now appears that almost every traditional ethical value or judgment is widely questioned inside the church as well as outside it. More generally, there does not seem to be any ethical consensus or set of standards consistently advocated by Christians.

It is true that the erosion of faith in the Bible as an infallible standard of truth and values is a major reason for the lack of an ethical consensus in the church on certain

controversial questions, such as homosexuality and abortion. It is not surprising to find evangelicals and liberals on opposite sides of certain ethical questions. However, this is not a complete explanation for the diversity of ethical beliefs in the church. Evangelical attitudes and values on a variety of ethical issues have also changed dramatically during the last half of the twentieth century. James Davison Hunter has documented a number of these changes. Disapproval of the use of tobacco products, for example, dropped among American evangelicals from 93% in 1951 to 70% in 1961, and then to 51% in 1982, while disapproval of the use of alcohol products dropped from 98% in 1951 to 78% in 1961 and then to only 17% in 1982. On other issues, such as dancing, playing cards, and attending movies, disapproval dropped from figures typically between 45-90% in 1951 to between 15-30% in 1961. While figures are unavailable after 1961, Hunter's interviews in 1982 suggest that disapproval ratings for such activities among evangelical students by 1982 had dropped almost to zero.<sup>1</sup> What these figures show is that what evangelicals consider to be moral or ethical matters itself changed dramatically between the 1950s and the 1980s.

Not only have evangelical moral judgments changed with the times, but evangelicals have become sharply divided in America over a wide variety of social and political issues. While American evangelicals are most commonly identified in the public realm with the political "right-wing," there is also a strong contingent of "left-wing" evangelicals. Thus, one will find that evangelicals with radically opposed views on such diverse issues as gun control, environmentalism, feminism, taxes, welfare, affirmative action, public education, capital punishment, and U.S. involvement in the United Nations (to name just a few).

All this is not to suggest that evangelicals do not differ ethically from the rest of the culture. While some moral judgments have changed dramatically among evangelical students, others have not changed significantly. For example, Hunter found that among students in evangelical colleges and universities, about 90% disapproved of premarital sex and about 97% of extramarital sex under all circumstances in 1963, and these figures were essentially unchanged in 1982. Meanwhile, public university students have become much more tolerant than students at evangelical institutions. For example, in 1982 only 15% of public university students disapproved of all premarital sex. Since one may assume that evangelicals comprised at least some of this 15%, it appears that while about 90% of evangelical students in 1982 thought all premarital sex was wrong, only about 10% (or perhaps even less) of non-evangelical students thought so. Also in 1982, roughly 90% of evangelical students disapproved of cheating on one's income tax, while only 44% of public university students disapproved. This last statistic shows that it is not true that evangelical morality has remained static only in matters of sexuality.

The bottom line here is that evangelicals retained certain ethical beliefs and jettisoned others during the period from the 1950s to the 1990s. In general, evangelical ethics have undergone something of a "liberalization" during this period. Evangelicals at the end of the twentieth century are likely to regard the ethical standards of their grandparents (or even their parents) in the mid-twentieth century as overly conservative, perhaps sexist or racist, and even "legalistic." This is not necessarily a bad thing; indeed, we would argue that in some ways this "liberalization" has been a healthy corrective. But the understandable result is that non-evangelicals are often mystified as to why evangelicals insist so

vehemently on certain ethical judgments as expressions of the unchanging will of God. If we are to make a case for a Christian view of life, we must come to grips with our own changing mores and do a better job of distinguishing them from God's unchanging moral standards.

## **Moral Absolutes: Black and White?**

At the root of the problem of contemporary ethics is the phenomenon of moral relativism. The basic idea of moral relativism is that there are no moral judgments that apply to all human beings. What is morally wrong for one person may be morally permissible or even right for someone else; what is unethical in one situation may be perfectly all right in another.

It comes as no surprise to most Christians to learn that such thinking is widespread in the general American culture. What many may find surprising is that a majority of Christians embrace some form of ethical relativism as well. More than two-thirds of both Catholics and Protestants in a 1994 George Barna survey accepted the statement that "there are no absolute standards for morals and ethics." Of those professing a personal commitment to Jesus Christ and reliance on Christ for their salvation, 64 percent agreed with the statement. Only when Barna used eight specific criteria to narrow the sample of "evangelical Christians" (including adherence to biblical inerrancy, belief in a personal God and a personal devil, acceptance of evangelistic responsibility, and other criteria) did the number of moral relativists drop below a majority: some 40 percent of such evangelical

Christians agreed with the statement affirming no absolute moral standards. Barna also found that moral relativism is significantly higher among younger people.<sup>2</sup>

There is something rather paradoxical about this moral relativism among evangelicals. Earlier we cited studies showing that even in the 1980s evangelical college students disapproved of certain sins (such as adultery or tax cheating) in overwhelming numbers — between 90 and 97 percent saying such acts were always wrong. Yet we are also told that between 40 and 70 percent of young evangelicals are moral relativists. Clearly, there is something not computing here. Nor is the answer that the evangelical college students tend to be more conservative and absolutist than other young evangelicals. A 1994 National Opinion Research Center survey found that 85 percent of American evangelicals thought extramarital sex was always wrong, and nearly 12 percent thought it was almost always wrong. Thus, 97 percent of evangelicals thought extramarital sex was always or almost always wrong. What is more, the same survey found that 92 percent of mainline Protestants also thought extramarital sex was always or almost always wrong. The number was significantly less for those with no religious affiliation — about 80 percent — but still far higher than we would expect if most Americans were really moral relativists.<sup>3</sup>

Part of the problem here may be that the surveys ask different kinds of questions. People are more comfortable expressing the opinion that a specific behavior is wrong than affirming that there is a universally binding moral code or law to which all people are subject in all areas of life. Even the most liberal humanist, if asked about certain behaviors (such as child molestation or genocide) would likely affirm that such behaviors were wrong. What many find objectionable is the idea that such specific judgments are part of a larger

system of morality that applies to everyone. This may explain why one survey found most Americans judging certain behaviors to be always or nearly always wrong, while another survey found that a large majority of Americans do not believe in absolute moral standards.

Another possible explanation is that most Americans, evangelicals and non-evangelicals alike, believe that *for them* extramarital sex and other behaviors would always (or almost always) be immoral, yet are not prepared to extend that judgment to everyone else. Or, as many often put it, they are “personally convinced” that doing such things would be wrong, but do not believe there are any absolute standards available to serve as the basis for making such judgments universal.

The two explanations are mutually compatible and may both be right. Behind this paradoxical affirmation of specific moral judgments and denial of universal moral absolutes is a fundamental confusion about morality. Unless there is some universal standard of moral right and wrong, there is no rational basis for concluding that such specific behaviors as adultery or tax cheating are always, or even almost always, wrong. Moral *convictions* are therefore being replaced by moral *preferences*. We are developing into a society in which most people choose to avoid certain behaviors, and prefer that others also avoid them, but which cannot bring itself to reject such acts *on principle*. To do so would be to undermine what Americans in particular have long held as their most precious (and even sacred!) value — their *freedom*. Liberty has always been an obsession of the American people, but in the twentieth century it was increasingly expanded in scope and elevated in status, until by the twentieth century it seems to have become the chief of all virtues. In such an ethical climate, holding the personal opinion that certain acts are wrong for oneself is fine, but

affirming that they are wrong for everyone on the basis of a universal moral standard is regarded as an affront to the principle of liberty. Thus, in the interests of liberty, we have made peace with *libertinism* — the philosophy that an individual's freedom to do as he or she pleases is the highest moral value.

The other side of the coin is the notion that moral absolutes must be rejected because they are inseparable from intolerance. Where liberty is the greatest virtue, intolerance is the worst vice. Moral relativism has gained a near-consensus hold on our culture almost entirely because such relativism has been equated with toleration. It is widely assumed that to make moral judgments at all about other persons' conduct is to be "intolerant" or "judgmental" or "divisive." It is further assumed that such intolerance means that those making the moral judgments are calling for the disenfranchisement, if not the extermination, of those whose actions are judged to be immoral. And so, in the interests of pluralistic, multicultural peace and harmony, we are encouraged to drop all talk of moral absolutes.

There are at least four serious problems with the moral relativistic stance that has permeated our society. The first, mentioned earlier, is that if moral relativism is true, *there is no basis for criticizing or condemning any specific acts*. If there are no universal standards by which everyone's actions are to be measured, there is no rational grounds on which to condemn the killing of six million Jews and millions of other innocent human beings by the Nazis in the 1930s and 1940s. Nor is there any reasonable basis for denouncing any other horrible conduct that comes to light, whether it be the reportedly widespread incidence of sexual assault of women in the U.S. military or the continuing

practice of drug dealers selling cocaine and other addictive drugs to children. If there are no universal standards of right and wrong by which human behavior is properly evaluated, all anyone can say is that they would *prefer* that such things did not happen.

Second, if moral relativism is true, then *there is no rational basis for law*. If enough people are so inclined, they can band together to pass and enforce legislation that criminalizes certain unwanted behaviors. Such legislation, however, will merely be the imposition of their preferences on those who do not share them. Moreover, if there are no universal moral standards, there is no universal standard for determining which behaviors should be criminalized and which should not. Which behaviors are criminalized, and which people are judged to be criminals, will therefore have to be decided by the group that is most successful in getting their preferences imposed as legislation. In short, if there are no moral absolutes, then might makes right.

To the absolutist claim that moral relativism provides no basis for law, it is commonly said that liberty should be the basis of law. That is, the law should be designed to maximize the individual liberty of every person under the jurisdiction of the law. The law should impose itself on individuals only to the extent necessary to prevent them from infringing on the liberty of others. While not all advocates of this “libertarian” view of law are moral relativists, it is one common approach favored by relativists.

There are some serious problems with the libertarian view of law, even if it is not linked to moral relativism. One such problem is that libertarianism cannot account satisfactorily for various laws designed to protect children, such as laws forbidding the selling of alcohol to children or laws against consensual sexual relations between adults and

children. The standard libertarian explanation is that children are not yet competent to make such decisions for themselves, but there is much arbitrariness to this claim. Thus in many states 17-year-olds are judged incompetent in such matters, but not 18-year-olds. Even if this judgment were accepted, on libertarian grounds it seems the law ought to permit consensual sex between a father and his 18-year-old daughter.

The merits of the libertarian theory of law, then, are certainly debatable. But what should be noted here is that it assumes liberty as a universalizable basis for law. In other words, libertarianism assumes that respect for the liberty of others is a universal moral imperative. This leads us to a third problem for moral relativism, namely, that *moral relativism cannot serve as a basis for society without being self-refuting*. If we advocate moral relativism as the basis for protecting individual liberty, we are presupposing that respect for individual liberty is an absolute moral standard or universal principle. If we insist that everyone should be tolerant of everyone else's choices (on the grounds that there are supposedly no moral absolutes), then we are implicitly presupposing that tolerance is a moral absolute. In short, moral relativism as a guiding principle is itself a disguised form of moral absolutism.

The result is that as many people in our society have embraced moral relativism, they have developed a new set of "absolutes" by which they judge actions, assess school curricula, discriminate in employment, and evaluate public policy or legislation proposals. As William D. Watkins rightly says, these are "the new absolutes" which many unwittingly have adopted even as they profess to hold to a "live and let live" philosophy of moral relativism.

The American people may say they accept the notion that a truth claim or a moral claim is relative, but they do not behave as if this is true. . . . The conflicts raging throughout America on such issues as abortion, euthanasia, homosexuality, feminism, race, and the public role of religion are over the emergence of new absolutes seeking to replace the old ones which used to dominate our country.<sup>4</sup>

In the course of working out these new absolutes in public life and public institutions, it has become increasingly apparent that those championing these absolutes are themselves extremely intolerant of those who oppose them. We therefore have universities and even seminaries where all religious and moral viewpoints are welcomed except those which overtly claim to be true! We have a society in which it is divisive to call left-wing politicians or thinkers “liberals” but perfectly acceptable to refer to all conservatives as “right-wing extremists” or “the lunatic fringe.” We have a culture in which the in-your-face tactics of the extreme gay-rights group ACT-UP are viewed as expressions of an oppressed minority’s free speech rights, while the generally peaceful picketing of abortion clinics by pro-life Christian men and women is regarded as reprehensible violations of women’s rights. We have an unwritten rule that no form of “family” life or structure can be scorned except the “Leave It to Beaver” or “Father Knows Best” traditional father-mother-children family. We have public schools in which stories about witches may be posted in the classrooms, but not the Ten Commandments.

We must, then, recognize a fourth problem with moral relativism: *it is an unstable basis for toleration of diverse viewpoints and lifestyles.* True toleration must be grounded in a genuine, undisguised moral absolutism. Only on the basis of universal

standards of respect for all human beings can a workable “pluralism” be maintained.

Moreover, these absolute standards must go beyond a mere libertarianism that makes individual freedom the only moral value. A moral philosophy based on individual freedom from moral restraint is vacuous and self-defeating. An authentic moral absolutism must recognize responsibility as well as freedom, and hold people accountable to do right.

Assuming that the state should extend political toleration to people of diverse religious and moral beliefs and practices, minimally a true pluralistic approach to toleration must allow people of conviction the freedom to *challenge* the morality of others. A society that is tolerant of everything except “intolerance” is a society that is turned in upon itself. Only by admitting that there are moral absolutes and by allowing free and unfettered discussion and debate about what those absolutes are can a society truly be free.

## **Traditional Values: Backwards or Forwards?**

If we insist that there are moral absolute standards to which all people are accountable to God, and on the basis of which human society should be ordered, we must be prepared to specify clearly where those standards are to be found and what they are. In the past twenty years or so, a common approach to defining those standards has been to appeal to what are called “traditional values.” Many Christians, in fact, both Catholics and Protestant evangelicals, couch their appeal to moral absolutes in these terms. These values are often expressed in single words, such as God, country, family. By returning to these values, it is urged, we can restore America’s greatness.

Perhaps the best known advocate of traditional values is Bill Bennett, who headed the Department of Education and the National Endowment for the Humanities under President Ronald Reagan and the Office of National Drug Control Policy under President George Bush. Bennett's most famous book, *The Book of Virtues*, is probably the bestselling work championing traditional values. The subtitle, *A Treasury of Great Moral Stories*, indicates that the book contains mostly stories, but there are also poems, as well as didactic passages teaching moral concepts. The passages are drawn from an amazing variety of sources: the Bible, yes, but also Aesop's fables and Grimm's fairy tales, Hans Christian Andersen and Martin Luther King, Jr., Plato and Aristotle, Lincoln and Washington, Dickens, Emerson, Frost, Longfellow, Shakespeare, Tolstoy, and Twain. There are Christian, Jewish, Greek, Roman, Hindu, Confucian, Taoist, and Native American stories. The chapter titles express in single words the values these passages illustrate or explain: self-discipline, compassion, responsibility, friendship, work, courage, perseverance, honesty, loyalty, and faith. These are, as Bennett calls them, *virtues* — character traits that should be part of any child's moral education, aspects of a maturing, well-grounded moral being. Bennett argues that character education and development must come before resolving such ethical "issues" as nuclear war or abortion: "First things first."<sup>5</sup>

Of course, it is hard to argue with such virtues, and Bennett has undoubtedly made valuable contributions to the moral education of adults as well as children. Indeed, we are unlikely to find anyone who is willing to argue on behalf of laziness and cowardice or against compassion and loyalty. But that very fact should alert us to the reality that the advocacy of these virtues is not an adequate response to moral relativism. Relativists can

all too easily say that how these virtues are expressed will vary from person to person and from culture to culture, so that there are still no absolute standards by which expressions of such virtues as Bennett names are to be judged. So, for example, it may be argued that because the courageous person will walk away from some fights but in other situations stand and fight, there are no absolute moral laws that dictate how these virtues are to be lived out in practice.

The traditional values approach to moral absolutes, then, must specify actual moral principles governing behavior, in addition to character traits, if it is to serve as an effective antidote to moral relativism. And so traditional values advocates commonly appeal to moral standards of the past — those standards that served as a moral consensus prior to the sexual, artistic, and political revolutions that are usually traced to the turbulent period of the 1960s. These traditional values would include the permanency of marriage and its strictly one man, one woman composition, the sanctity of all life from the unborn to the elderly, the responsibility of the state to protect its innocent citizens from harm, the responsibility and authority of parents to raise their children, and so forth. On the basis of these traditional values, conservatives in America oppose liberal divorce laws, same-sex marriages, and gay rights; abortion and euthanasia; gun control measures and rehabilitative models of criminal justice; and, typically, children's rights advocacy and government controlled public education. A flood of books, mostly by conservative Roman Catholics and evangelical Protestants, have been published in the past 25 years promoting a traditional values agenda roughly along these lines.

While we believe that there is a great deal that is right about this conservative cultural agenda, its appeal to traditional values is problematic in light of the moral relativism rampant in our society. There are at least two reasons why this is so.

First, *traditions by their very nature are pluralistic and constantly changing*. There is no one, unified, unchanging set of “traditional values” out there that merely needs to be recovered and reinstated in society. For example, there is no such thing as *the* traditional family. Setting aside the flawed pro-homosexual arguments for same-sex marriages and other alternative lifestyles, it is undeniable that in many cultures throughout history polygamy has been quite traditional, while in the Western, Judeo-Christian tradition monogamy has been the traditional norm for nearly two thousand years. By definition “tradition” is a human, historical phenomenon, a constantly moving and developing and changing stream of experience and thought. While tradition may *attest* to an absolute moral law, it cannot be the *source* of that law. You cannot establish a fixed point of reference by pointing to a flowing river.

Second, *some traditional moral judgments have proved themselves to be false*. We have learned the hard way in the West that it is never right for one human being to buy, sell, or own another human being. We have discovered that there is no good reason for separating the races, and have abandoned the practice of allocating separate restrooms, separate sections in movie houses, and separate schools for “the coloreds.” Even those of us who are still uncomfortable with interracial marriages almost universally recognize that there are no good *moral* objections to such unions. These changed perspectives and

practices represent genuine moral advances — but they are inexplicable on a consistently “traditional values” rationale.

The call to respect moral absolutes is often confused, by both critics and advocates, with a call to a return to the values of the past. Where generations of the past had a firmer grasp of and respect for moral absolutes, the values of the past can be a helpful guide. But moral absolutes, while true for all people, have never been acknowledged by all people. Moral absolutes are standards for people of all generations, even if past generations did not yet realize them or if today’s relativistic generation rejects them. If moral relativism is to be answered, the standard of moral absolutes will have to be found somewhere else than in a call to return to “traditional values.”

## **Natural Law: From Above or Below?**

If “traditional values” are not necessarily true moral absolutes, then where or how do we determine what the true absolutes are? Many advocates of a return to traditional values argue that those values were expressions of an immutable moral law. William Watkins, for example, in his book *The New Absolutes* argues that there is “a universal moral law,” which all people know whether they have read the Bible or not. This moral law is “embedded in the nature of things” and “transcends culture.” The universality of religion, law, and moral rationalizations attests to the reality of this transcendent moral law.<sup>6</sup>

Likewise Bill Bennett champions a “natural law” theory of ethical absolutes. One of the works excerpted in his *Book of Virtues* is C. S. Lewis’s little classic *The Abolition of Man*.<sup>7</sup> Lewis wrote to combat the trend, already discernible in English education in the

1940s, away from absolute moral truths. He argued that a universal morality could be discerned in all cultures, despite their superficial differences about what was appropriate behavior. A universal moral law inherent in the nature of the world and of ourselves is attested in all of the great religions of the world. Perhaps anxious to show that he was not writing from a parochial perspective, Lewis referred to this moral law as the *Tao*. In Chinese philosophy and religion the Tao is “the Way,” that is, the way things are, the way of nature. Lewis takes up this term and argues that all cultures recognize this Tao (whatever name they may call it) and seek to follow it.<sup>8</sup> From this Tao all of the major religions and moral philosophies of the world have given expression to the Golden Rule or some variation on it, as well as other basic moral principles of courage, honesty, and love. To deny the reality of this universal Tao is to take civilization down an unprecedented path of self-destruction. It means to deny that we are Man — that is, to deny that we are a unique race of beings with a transcendent purpose that can be realized only in the context of the universal moral law. This is what Lewis meant by the title *The Abolition of Man*.<sup>9</sup>

The concept of a moral law of nature certainly provides a rational starting point for the belief in moral absolutes. The difficulty comes in moving from that premise to any conclusions about the specific *content* of the moral law. Here, Lewis and many other advocates of natural law are sometimes less than clear.

One approach to natural law ethics that is frequently used, and is illustrated by both Lewis and Bennett, is to examine the writings of disparate cultures and religions in search of common moral principles or ideals. In so doing, they find that most or all cultures value honesty, loyalty, kindness, faithfulness in marriage, respect for elders, and so forth. We

might call this doing natural law *from within*: looking at what beliefs within human societies have usually been regarded as basic moral values and treating those as fixed points of reference for the development of moral judgments.

There are several difficulties with this approach. We have already pointed out that all cultures develop over time, making extraction of a pure, unchanging moral standard from the streams of moral tradition problematic. To do so one must have some principle of selectivity by which those ideals that are moral absolutes are isolated from attitudes or values that, while wrong, happen to have dominated most societies (such as the inferiority of women to men). It turns out that *one has to know what to look for* before surveying the field. Works like those by Lewis and Bennett present an idealized view of human values based on what its most “noble” representatives have said. But this makes the approach somewhat circular. This is not to deny that the major philosophies and religions of the world do attest to the moral law, but only to caution that one does not really “discover” that law by comparing those various philosophies and religions. Natural law ethics cannot be conducted as a value-free, morally neutral science! There is no stance outside of a moral framework from which one can “objectively” examine human expressions of values in order to arrive at the moral law.

A second approach that is sometimes taken is to study human nature and human behavior in the context of the world in which we live, and to determine what behaviors are beneficial and what behaviors are harmful to human beings or to the human race as a whole. This is an approach favored in naturalistic or humanistic ethics. On this view, the moral law is ultimately not *prescriptive* (telling us what to do) but *descriptive* (telling us how what we

do will affect us). We may call this doing natural law *from below*: looking at how behaviors affect the lives of human beings here on earth and developing guidelines or recommendations for future conduct.

It should be immediately apparent that such an approach to ethics cannot and will not relate our ethical beliefs to a truly absolute moral standard. Indeed, such naturalistic ethics assumes that there are no moral absolutes and that we are free to do whatever suits us, as a race if not as individuals. Ultimately, naturalistic ethics cannot escape moral relativism. But as we have already seen, moral relativism leaves no reasonable basis for moral judgments or law and is at bottom an irrational position.

This leaves only one option for establishing an understanding of moral absolutes on the basis of a universal moral law. Such a law must be understood as coming not from a consensus of human societies (from within) or from a pragmatic cost-benefit analysis of human behaviors (from below), but from God — the One who created the human race and who knows better than we how we were designed to live and what is best for us. This is doing natural law *from above*. The human race must be viewed, not as an autonomous society of beings who can chart their own destiny and purpose, but as a society of beings who have been created for a purpose and whose moral choices are weighed in light of that transcendent purpose. Our moral standards must be determined neither democratically from within or scientifically from below, but *theologically*.

The theological approach does not negate all value or truth to the approaches from within or below. If there is a God, it is reasonable to think that most human societies will have some idea, if hazy, of what he expects; and it is certainly reasonable to think that what

God wants for us is what is ultimately in our best interests. But the perspectives from social consensus or scientific analysis have no absolute foundation unless they are framed by the theological perspective that *morality is ultimately given, not discovered*. It is only this transcendent perspective that can prevent the other perspectives from floating away on the seas of moral relativism.

If the moral absolutes that are to govern our lives are given by God, this still leaves the obvious question of how he has given them to us and where we will find them. In theistic (God-oriented) natural law ethics, it is understood that the moral law is in some way implanted or incorporated into our inner being. All of us in our hearts know that marriage should be for life, that human life is sacred, that honesty is not only the best policy but is the right thing to do. If some of us are morally blind, we have each other and the witness of society at large that these moral absolutes are true and binding on each and every one of us. Thus, natural law that acknowledges the divine origin of the moral law contends that ultimately that moral law is inescapable: we know it whether we want to admit it or not.

While we would completely agree that the moral law is universally attested in society and in every human heart, it is also true that our perception of that moral law has been distorted by our desire and practice of neglecting, ignoring, and rebelling against that law. As universal as the moral law is, human violation of that law is also universal. Even though almost all of us can see that to be the case, the universality of human violation of the moral law — what used to be called man's inhumanity to man — makes it hazardous to try to learn the specific content of that moral law from our own hearts or from the witness of society. We can and do know that such a moral law exists, and we may have a general idea

as to what it entails, but this knowledge is not sufficient as a basis for resolving moral disputes.

We need, then, a more direct and definitive expression of the moral law than can be gained from introspection or from a consideration of the world's great moral stories and maxims. In short, we need to hear from God himself. It is the Christian claim that God has in fact spoken, and that he has given us a definitive expression of the moral law in the Bible.

As soon as we point to the Christian revelation as the definitive expression of the moral law, many people — even many Christians — become nervous. By what right or reason should Christians regard the Christian faith as providing the standard for all peoples of all cultures? Why should the call to follow the way set forth by Jesus be regarded as an absolute claim on all people? This is the question we will consider next.

## Notes to Chapter 10: The Graying of Morality

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<sup>1</sup>James Davison Hunter, *Evangelicalism: The Coming Generation* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 58-60.

<sup>2</sup>George Barna, *Virtual America* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1994), 84-85, cited in William D. Watkins, *The New Absolutes* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1996), 28.

<sup>3</sup>Glenn H. Utter and John W. Storey, *The Religious Right: A Reference Handbook*, Contemporary World Issues (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 1995), 87.

<sup>4</sup>Watkins, *New Absolutes*, 44.

<sup>5</sup>William J. Bennett, *The Book of Virtues: A Treasury of Great Moral Stories* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), 12.

<sup>6</sup>Watkins, *New Absolutes*, 247.

<sup>7</sup>Bennett, *Book of Virtues*, 263-65.

<sup>8</sup>There is a distinct religion known as Taoism, for which the Tao is a central concept, but Lewis was not endorsing or referring specifically to this religion.

<sup>9</sup>C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York: Macmillan, 1947). If the publishers want to release the book under a more politically correct and marketable title, they could probably do no better than to entitle it *The Tao of Ethics*. Not only does this reflect Lewis's actual message and wording in the book, it would capitalize on the recent popularity of books with such titles as Fritjof Capra's *The Tao of Physics* and Benjamin Hoff's *The Tao of Pooh*!