

The Place of Scripture in Christian Ethics: A Methodological Study

JAMES M. GUSTAFSON

*Professor of Christian Ethics
Yale University, The Divinity School*

Ultimately for Christian ethics, a biblically informed theology provides the bases for the final test of the validity of particular judgments: For Christians these judgments ought to be consistent, consonant, and coherent with the themes that are generalized to be most pervasive or primary in the biblical witness.

THE facets of the project indicated by the title are many and complex. Indeed, this article can only seek to provide some order, while doing some justice to the complexity. Certain markings can be fixed which will set both limits and direction for the present discussion; these ought to enable the reader to avoid some possible confusions.

First, the title indicates that this study does not concentrate primarily on what might properly be called "biblical ethics." Biblical ethics would be the study of the ethics in the Scriptures. In itself this is a complex task for which few are well prepared; those who are specialists in ethics generally lack the intensive and proper training in biblical studies, and those who are specialists in biblical studies often lack sophistication in ethical thought. A comprehensive study of biblical ethics would, of

course, render an effort to develop the place of Scripture in Christian ethics easier, for one important question is the relation of biblical ethics to constructive Christian ethics. The problem here is parallel to the relation of the theology found in the Bible to constructive Christian theology.

A study of biblical ethics would include various concerns. One is the concrete moral teachings of the Scriptures—what content they give to right conduct, and to ends and purposes that are good. Biblical notions of justice, of peace, of the good life, of love, would be developed. Another concern would be the forms of moral discourse in Scripture: moral commands, laws, the examples of persons, narratives of actions that are judged to be faithful or unfaithful to God's moral will, parables and allegories, paraenetic instructions, and others. Such a study could be done without reference to uses the findings would have for constructive purposes.

The study of biblical ethics requires focus on yet another concern, namely, the theology in the Scriptures which both validates and provides content to the moral teachings. For the people of the Bible, morality was not separated from religion in the way that it has been both in theory and in practice in later developments; ethics was not separated from theology. God and his relations to men and the world were conceived in moral terms, as well as in other terms, and this makes theology an integral part of biblical ethics. Since there are *theologies* in Scripture, this analytical task is in itself complex; its use as a basis for constructive Christian ethics is even more so.

In the present study we are alert to the problems raised by the absence of a full development of what are the biblical ethics, and this absence indicates where certain assumptions and warrants that are not fully justified can be found in our proceedings.

A second marking is that our primary attention is not a critical analysis of writings in Christian ethics in order to see how Scriptures are used by various theologians and ethicists. Rather, the present modest constructive effort, makes proposals that are subject to the critical scalpels of others. Two helpful articles have recently been published. Edward LeRoy Long has provided one framework for interpretation in his article, "The Use of the Bible in Christian Ethics." David H. Kelsey's article "Appeals to Scripture in Theology" provides a pattern that is also suggestive for the

study of Christian ethics.¹ Intensive critical analysis of the ways in which Scripture is used in the literature of Christian ethics would yield the range of options from the past and provide a sturdier framework for positive proposals than that given in the present article. Some analysis of this sort is done here, but its function is subservient to other aims.

A third marking is more difficult to shape with precision. It calls attention to the fact that how an author uses Scripture is determined to a considerable extent by how he defines the task of Christian ethics. Indeed, how one defines the field and method of ethics, whether specifically Christian or more general, will make a difference in his uses of Scripture. For example, if the study of ethics is focused on the structure of moral arguments about particular acts, the question of this article would be, How is Scripture used in particular moral arguments? Kelsey's development of Toulmin's distinctions between data, warrant, and backing would be immediately applicable. If, however, one includes in ethics a concern for the formation of the moral agent, then Scripture will be used in quite a different way.² Or, if one attends to a vision of the future good, or to the ontological structure of morality, his uses of Scripture will be governed accordingly. While I would argue that the scope of Christian ethics is rather inclusive, many aspects will be left relatively unattended in the present article.³

In this paper I intend to develop the significance and the limitations of the uses of Scripture in Christian ethics. I shall also indicate some of the various points or levels in Christian ethical reflection where Scripture is used. To keep at least a backdrop of concreteness in view, I shall draw attention to a complex event which has exercised the moral passions of the American people, namely, the invasion of Cambodia by American troops from South Vietnam in the last days of April, 1970. Many articulate Christians have judged this to be morally wrong and have participated in various forms of action to express their indignation about it. Our major

1. Edward LeRoy Long, "The Use of the Bible in Christian Ethics," *Interpr.*, XIX (1965), 149-62. David H. Kelsey, "Appeals to Scripture in Theology," *JR*, XLVIII, (1968), 1-21. For a study of Rauschenbusch's use of Scripture, see J. Gustafson, "From Scripture to Social Policy and Social Action," *Andover-Newton Quarterly*, IX (1969), pp. 160-69.

2. I have developed a proposal on this point in "The Gospels and Moral Life," read at the Pittsburgh Festival of the Gospels, April, 1970, and to be published in the second volume of papers from that conference.

3. For elaboration of this see Gustafson, *Christ and the Moral Life* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1968) Chap. I, and "Theology and Ethics," *The Scope of Theology*, Daniel T. Jenkins, ed. (Cleveland: World Publishing Co., 1965), pp. 111-32.

and long-range question is this: Why do Christians judge this to be morally wrong? How does Scripture enter into their judgment? To keep the paper manageable it is confined to moral judgments about actions and does not extend to the positive determination of what alternative courses of action are morally better, or what means and ends ought to be used. Before an attempt is made to answer directly this last question, however, it is necessary to isolate the points in the decision-making and action processes where moral assessments are pertinent. These are in the assessment of the meaning of the history in which the events take place, the motives and intentions of the decision-makers, the circumstances in which it is deemed proper to act, and the consequences of the action. It is also necessary to sort out some of the more general issues in the uses of Scripture in ethics before we come to address the major question more directly. Finally, in addressing the question, it will be clear that other Christian ethicists might well wish to claim more or less than I do for the place of Scripture, but it is hoped that at least the points at which the arguments can be made will be clear.

The Cambodian invasion

Not all who believe the invasion of Cambodia to be a mistake would necessarily judge it to be morally wrong; even fewer would judge it to be wrong for “Christian ethical” reasons. The adjectives that would qualify the “wrong” suggest the various frameworks of interpretation that can be used in evaluating the action.

The argument is made that it is legally wrong. Persons who have defended the right of American military forces to be in Vietnam on legal grounds, in compliance with commitments, and at the invitation of a legally constituted government, draw a distinction between Vietnam and Cambodia precisely on those two points. There is a violation of the delicate fabric of international law when a power moves into the territory of another nation without invitation of its government, and without treaty commitments that require it. The observation that the move is illegal could contribute to two different sorts of arguments about its immorality. First, it is immoral for a nation to violate international law. Second, it is not possible to universalize the principle used to justify the breaking of the law. To do so would seem to legitimate the invasion of any nation

by any other nation in circumstances judged to be similar to those existing in Cambodia.

Second, the argument is made that it is a military mistake. Here the appeal is not to a legal standard, but to previous military experience of a similar sort that has not led to the intended or desired consequences. To many persons, the script used to justify this expansion of the war sounds strikingly similar to those scripts used to justify previous escalations, and the evidence suggests that *mutatis mutandi* this will fail as well. The justifications for the judgment are made largely on factual grounds: Under similar circumstances escalations have been justified, but have not led to peace. To dispute the argument, then, one would have to appeal to factual evidences which would indicate that the circumstances are different at this time and place, and therefore the desired end is more likely to be achieved. There is a moral appeal in the argument in favor of the invasion, namely, that in the long run the action will save more lives, and particularly American lives. As in all moral arguments from potential consequences, so in this one it is difficult to adduce the compelling evidence. Perhaps if saving lives is the moral imperative, it would be better simply to withdraw; this is clearly the case if the concern is primarily of American lives. And even the latter concern is subject to critical scrutiny: Does it assume that American lives have greater worth—intrinsically or even instrumentally—than Indo-Chinese lives?

Third, the argument is made that it is politically wrong. Military actions have to be seen in their political contexts and have always to be justified by the political purposes that they serve. The judgment about the political purposes involved in the Cambodia venture is made on two counts. First, it does not appear that this action is the correct means to achieve the desired political end, namely, peace in Southeast Asia. Second, even if it were the correct means, those who chose to engage in this action did not take fully into account the consequences for other political ends, such as the political responses of the Soviet Union, China, and Western European allies, and the announced intention of the administration to bring the American people back together again. Indeed, the political consequences, intended and unintended, appear to be much more complex than anything a brief paragraph suggests. The relations between a judgment that an action is politically wrong and that it is morally wrong are complex. One can seek a moral justification of the

political ends themselves: For example, is there a persuasive if not definitive moral justification for the purpose of restraining the spread of Communism in Southeast Asia? This is itself a many-faceted question. Is Communism morally evil? Or, are its presumed evil consequences sufficient to warrant the evils of protracted war to restrain it? Indeed, is revolution not morally right in much of the "third world" that has been dominated by Western political and economic interests? The question of the morality of means is asked. Are the means used proportionate to the end that is sought? If what is sought is the "well-being" of the people of the region, are there not better means than war to fulfill that end? Or perhaps one does not expect such lofty moral ends from nation-states. Perhaps they are governed in their moral codes and actions by their own national interest. If that is the case, the question can still be raised as to whether the national interest of the United States is in any crucial way threatened by events in Southeast Asia.

Fourth, an argument is made that it is economically wrong. This argument pertains to the whole military operation of which the Cambodian invasion is a part. Just as one moves quickly from what are politically correct objectives to some moral concerns, so also one moves from economic aspects. Here one confronts the arguments about the moral justifications for allocating priorities in the American economy and about the involvement of American business in the economies of the third world. Is the multibillion-dollar expenditure for the military involvement in Southeast Asia justifiable in the light of the many needs and purposes that would make for human well-being in the United States and in other parts of the world?

In each of these arguments there is an evaluative assessment of the circumstances in which action is occurring; there is no simple description of incontrovertible facts. In each there are different sorts of evaluation: Certain data are given higher valence in some arguments than they are in others; preferential evaluations of the significance of various causal factors are also involved. And, as we have shown, moral evaluations are either imbedded in the other evaluations or are operating just behind the political, military, or other arguments.

Where the ethical issues lie

Before we can turn to the place of Scripture in relation to the dis-

cussion of Cambodia, it is necessary to sort out the ways in which moral evaluations themselves apply to any historical event.

One application is to *the structure and meaning of the historical process* or wider context in which particular events take place. This can be illustrated with reference to the differences that various views of history make in the interpretation of the course of particular events. A progressive view of history, such as was in vogue sixty years ago in many circles, might interpret the events in Southeast Asia as part of the ongoing evolution of the human race, painfully breaking from the shackles of the past, but confidently moving toward a more nearly perfect future state of affairs. An alternative to this would be a Marxist view, adopted also by important Christians, that the struggle is part of a historical process of conflict between those who seek to retain their powers and exercise them in the repression of the weak and those who seek release from the bondage of oppression in their efforts to liberate themselves from colonial or other dominating powers. A third might be more radically eschatological; the future is drawing the present and the past toward itself in such a way that wars of the sort being fought are really revolutions of hope that a new day for mankind is dawning. In contrast to these three would be a view that sees the events as part of the ongoing struggle between the forces of disruption and disorder that always threaten the delicate fiber which restrains chaos and the forces that preserve the modicum of order that makes existence tolerable among men. Perspective on the more comprehensive meaning of historical events affects the evaluation of particular historical events; events are charged with different meanings from different perspectives; as a result of one's "view of history," certain features of events appear to be more salient and morally more significant than do other features. Biblical themes enter into the Christian's view of history and thus affect his judgments, as we shall subsequently see.

Moral evaluations are also applied to the *motives and intentions* of those whose access to power enables them to determine the direction of events more than most persons can. If we take the common philosophical distinction between motives as "backward-looking reasons" for action, and intentions as "forward-looking reasons" for action, we can see how moral evaluations enter into the assessment of each. To assess motives we can look at the commitment of the American nation to certain moral and social values, not only for its own people, but for others as well,

which would provide justifying reasons for the action. These motives can be approached by asking on what grounds the United States is involved in Southeast Asia in the first place. Some lofty motives can be given in answer to this query: The nation is concerned with the preservation of freedom, with the rights of self-determination of peoples, with adherence to commitments made to other governments, with the credibility of the United States as a power that does not let its friends down in time of trouble. Such motives are subject to moral judgment in several respects. The consistency between national actions and the motives professed for them can be judged. One can also judge the moral worth of these motives in terms of whether those that appear to be dominant are worthy of their position, and whether other morally justifiable motives—such as social justice are not left out. One can also judge whether the consequences of the actions that are justified by these motives do not create greater harm, suffering, and destruction than are worthy of the commitments which give them warrant. For example, while it is *prima facie* laudable to keep one's commitments, the question can be raised as to whether or not the destructive consequences of keeping those promises morally outweigh the obligation involved in them.

In a similar way, we can engage in a moral evaluation of America's intentions, its forward-looking reasons for being in Cambodia and, indeed, in Vietnam. Some of those that are professed reasons are incontrovertible in their most general form: We are seeking peace. (I paraphrase the comment of an undergraduate: "Killing for the sake of peace is like fornicating for the sake of virginity.") Other intentions of a political, moral sort are more arguable: We are seeking stability in the region. One can raise questions about the moral value of stability in relation to other moral values that are imbedded in the political order, for example, justice—in terms of more nearly equitable distribution of rights, powers, economic resources.

Whenever motives and intentions are assessed, that difficult question arises as to whether the professed reasons are the real reasons for action. This points to the issue of the moral integrity of those persons who determine the exercise of powers—but further elaboration of this issue here is not possible.

Judging both the motives and the intentions of the nation involves also evaluating the circumstances in which these motives and intentions are

acted out. The question is whether or not the actual situation warrants the actions based on the given reasons. In Southeast Asia this becomes the question of whether, for example, freedom is so threatened that it warrants the exercise of American military power to preserve it. It involves the question of whether the government to which the American commitments are made is a duly constituted, popularly elected one. In short, are the conditions that America presumably seeks to rectify sufficiently threatening to the values it wishes to adhere to that there is warrant for the use being made of military, political, and economic power?

The *consequences* of the extension of the war are also subject to moral evaluation. As critics of utilitarian and “consequentialist” ethics have long pointed out, it is not easy to judge consequences of actions in moral terms in an incontrovertible way. A moral judgment about a factual state of affairs is involved, and this requires a complex process. For example, most persons would agree that it is wrong to take human lives except under extreme conditions. Does the “benefit” gained by taking lives outweigh the cost of the moral value of the lives that are taken? If the balance of the consequences is not on the beneficial side, then it is judged morally wrong to take the lives. The consequences of massive military action are many and very complex. They extend through time; this makes it difficult to say precisely when one cuts off the calculation. Lives are not only physically destroyed, but human spirits are painfully warped; property is wasted, cultures are disrupted, repercussions in the realm of politics and economics are almost incalculable. In order to make a moral assessment of various consequences, clear notions of what constitutes the “good” and the “bad” have to be developed; and the factual aspects have to be judged in relation to these notions.

Even though these points are not exhaustive, they are perhaps the most salient in our experience. Our stated task is to interpret the place of Scripture in Christian ethics. That can now be made more precise. How is Scripture used in the interpretation of the structure and meaning of the historical process of which the Cambodian events are a part? How is Scripture used in the assessments of the motives and the intentions of those persons who determine what forms of power are to be used in Southeast Asia and how these powers are to be used? How is Scripture used in the assessment of the consequences of the extension of the war?

Ways of using Scripture

The existence of a variety of materials in Scripture necessitates some general principles for clarifying a more coherent and simpler view of the message of Scripture. The use of Scripture in Christian ethics first involves the determination of the theological and ethical principles which will be used to bring coherence to the "meaning" of Scripture's witness. In a previous publication I distinguished a view of Scripture as the revelation of a morality that is authoritative for the judgments of Christians from a view of it as a revelation of theological principles that are used to interpret what "God is doing," and thus, in turn, can give clues to what man as a moral agent is to do in particular historical circumstances.⁴ If Scripture is the revelation of a morality, its application to the Cambodian invasion would require that one judge that event in accordance with moral laws, precepts, and commands given in Scripture. If Scripture is the revelation of the action of God, one applies it to the Cambodian invasion by interpreting that event in the light of an answer to the question, What is God doing in our contemporary history, and particularly in Cambodia? Here I would like to refine these types before proceeding to suggest a more constructive statement.

The most stringent use of Scripture as revealed morality can be stated in the following way. Those actions of persons and groups which violate the moral law revealed in Scripture are to be judged morally wrong. The idea of moral law becomes the principle for ethical interpretation. Two issues immediately emerge. One is the content of the moral law, and the other is the mode of its application. For Jewish religion these can be answered more simply than they can for Christians, although even in Judaism the answers are complex. The law would be the Torah, and *halachah* would provide the tradition for application. The parts of Torah that would be applicable, and the procedures for its application through Mishna, Talmud, the Codes, the Responsa, all involve judgments on the part of the learned rabbi who might come to a decision. But there would be clear biblical authority in the tradition for using biblical law, and the tradition provides a continuity of historical judgments and general procedures by which a new judgment might be made.

For Christian religion this use of Scripture is even more difficult. What

4. See, "Christian Ethics," *Religion*, Paul Ramsey, ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.; Prentice-Hall, 1965), pp. 309-25.

is the moral law that is revealed in the Bible? Torah would be an insufficient answer. There is also the “new law,” and just what that is has to be determined. If the teachings of Jesus as recorded in the Gospels are the new law, then something like the method of *halachah* might be appropriate; but on the whole the Christian theologians have not worked in this way. Further, if the new law is the “grace of the Holy Spirit written in the heart,” as it has been judged to be by both the Catholic and Protestant traditions, it can no longer be limited in its references to the moral teachings of the Scriptures interpreted to be law. It is “the life-giving law of the Spirit,” to quote Romans 8:2, a text that is persistently cited in the history of Christian ethical thought.

Christians have no codifications of the moral law of Scripture and its interpretations comparable to the Shulhan Arukh and the Code of Maimonides; even the codifications of law in the canon law tradition of the Catholic Church appeal heavily to the natural law tradition developed in the West, rather than to Scripture. Even Fundamentalists have highly selective⁵ ways of using biblical evidence. There are clearly ethical principles at work that govern their choices of texts to be applied to particular moral situations and that provide ways of explaining texts which *prima facie* would contravene the positions they would take.

Perhaps agreement on the primacy, if not the exclusiveness, of the “law of love” could be asserted about the Christian Scriptures, recognizing their continuity with Jewish Scriptures. “For the whole law can be summed up in a single commandment: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself,’” writes Paul (Gal. 5:14), a claim also found in other parts of the Scripture. If this were judged to be the material content of the new moral law, the modes of its application to situations like the Cambodian venture would vary markedly. For some persons it might have a pacifist application; one does not love himself by taking his own life; surely one does not love his neighbor by taking his. For others, it becomes a high-level general principle which is applied to the complexities of a

5. See the arguments in support of capital punishment developed by J. J. Vellenga in “Christianity and the Death Penalty,” *The Death Penalty in America*, Hugo A. Bedau, ed. (Garden City: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1964), pp. 123-30. (Reprinted from *Christianity Today*, IV, No. 1 [Oct. 12, 1959] 7-9.) With reference to Matt. 5: 21 f., Vellenga writes, “It is evident that Jesus was not condemning the established law of capital punishment, but was actually saying that hate deserved capital punishment,” p. 126. “If one accepts the authority of Scripture, then the issue of capital punishment must be decided on what Scripture actually teaches and not on the popular, naturalistic ideas of sociology and penology that prevail today,” p. 129.

war through the mediation of the structure and principles of just-war thinking.

A second use of Scripture as revealed morality could be stated as follows: Those actions of persons and groups which fall short of *the moral ideals* given in Scripture are to be judged morally wrong, or at least morally deficient. The notion of moral ideals becomes the principle of ethical interpretation. Three issues emerge here. The first is whether the language of moral ideals is itself warranted by Scripture. Is the language of ideals as intrinsic to the Scriptures as is the language of law? How these questions would be answered depends to some extent upon how one interprets "ideals." If a moral notion has to refer to some timeless entity, a metaphysical value, in order to be an ideal, it is safe to say that the language of ideals is more at home in Greek ethics than in biblical ethics. If, however, it refers to a vision of the future in which "The wolf shall live with the sheep, and the leopard lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion shall grow up together" (Isa. 11:6 f., NEB), the promised fulfillment might well function as a vision of the ideal future. The New Testament idea of the Kingdom of God has functioned this way in Christian ethics from time to time in Christian history, most prominently in the social gospel writers.

The theological doctrine that qualifies the use of the language of ideals is eschatology. Whether an ethicist uses the vision of an ideal future is governed by his eschatological views. If he finds a warrant for the language of ideals within those views, then *how* that vision is used is also determined to a considerable degree by his eschatology. The double problem of the use of Scripture which we pointed out previously confronts us again: One part of the problem is the significance of the eschatological context within the Scriptures for understanding properly the biblical visions of ideal futures; the other is the authority that the biblical eschatological context has for the use of those visions in constructive Christian theological ethics.

The second issue that emerges in the use of the language of ideals is that of their material content. The biblical imagery in Isaiah, as well as elsewhere, suggests harmony between natural enemies, the resolution of struggles in idyllic peace—a theme often portrayed in Christian art. The social gospel writers did not hesitate to find consistent with the biblical vision of the coming Kingdom of God almost all values that were

judged to promote human welfare: peace, love, justice, harmony. They courageously developed these in terms of ideals and goals for the society of their own time. Clearly, there is a deep and broad gulf between the ideal of universal peace as part of the biblical vision of the fulfillment and any war, including the Cambodian venture.

The third issue is the mode of application of a moral ideal to the Cambodian or any other historical situation. If the basis for using an ideal is that reality ought to be conformed to the ideal in all human actions and states of affairs, a condemnatory verdict on the Cambodian venture is clear. If, however, the use of the ideal leads to the reckoning of *compromises* that men can live with, or *approximations* with which they can be satisfied, then a sliding scale of judgment has been introduced. The adoption of a more realistic view of the possibilities of political and moral achievement under the conditions of historical finitude and corruption leads to such applications. How much compromise with the ideal do the conditions of history, the particular circumstances, require? What degree of approximation of the vision of the ideal future ought one to strive for under the political, social, and military conditions of our time? To give warrant for a judgment against the Cambodian venture one has to indicate, in this mode of thought, that the compromises are too great, that the present approximations are insufficient to merit moral approval of the policies of the government.

A third use of Scripture as a revealed morality would be stated as follows: Those actions of persons and groups are to be judged morally wrong which are similar to actions that are judged to be wrong or against God's will under similar circumstances in Scripture, or are discordant with actions judged to be right or in accord with God's will in Scripture. Here the method is roughly one of analogy, and it has its share of difficulties. One is the problem of providing persuasive evidence that the circumstances of, for example, a political and military situation in our time are similar in any significant respects to the circumstances in biblical times. A second is the problem of determining which biblical events will be used for purposes of an analogical elucidation of the moral significance of present events. Some prior ethical commitment is likely to determine this choice. For example, one might choose the account of the "liberation" of the Hebrew people from bondage in Egypt as the biblical narra-

tive most applicable to present history. This choice might be made on either one of two separate grounds or on a combination of them. First, it might be judged that the Vietnamese and Cambodian people are like the Hebrew people of old and that American power is like the power of Egypt. With more refined intervening steps provided, we might conclude that intervention in Cambodia is morally wrong just as repression of the Hebrews in Egypt was morally wrong. Second, we might judge that the crucial moral issue of our time, and of biblical times, is that of liberation from oppression and repression. A general moral and biblical theme, namely, liberation, is judged on theological and ethical grounds to be central to Christian ethics. On the basis of this judgment one could turn to Scripture to find the historical events which reveal and elucidate this theme, and in turn use these events as analogies for events of the present time which seem to elucidate the same theme.

The primary question in the use of Scripture for moral analogies is that of control. If present events are in control, then one first responds to these events and then on the basis of that response seeks biblical events that are similar to the present ones. The predisposition is to seek those events which will confirm one's present judgments. Thus, the choice of the exodus would be more congenial for a negative judgment on present repression of a small power by a great power than would some of the prophetic interpretations of the role of a great power in chastising a lesser power for its violation of God's ways for the nations. The biblical materials would be chosen on the basis of their affinity for a present moral judgment arrived at perhaps independently of biblical considerations. Biblical support could be found for the opinions one has formed on independent ethical bases.

If Scripture is in control, then one is faced with the persistent question of which events are most nearly consistent with certain central tendencies of the biblical, theological, and moral witness. One would have to decide whether the Hebrew wars of conquest of Canaan were "truer" to the central themes of biblical morality than was the liberation accomplished by the exodus. (I have been told that the Calvinists in South Africa used the analogy of the chosen people's right to the land of Canaan to justify their expansion into the territory of the Africans in the nineteenth century.) Some theological and ethical principle would have to be judged as normative for the whole of scriptural witness; this would in turn de-

termine which events would be used as analogies normatively proper to current events, and thus as the basis for judging the moral rightness of present actions.

A fourth use of Scripture is looser than the first three. It could be stated as follows: Scripture witnesses to a great variety of moral values, moral norms and principles through many different kinds of biblical literature: moral law, visions of the future, historical events, moral precepts, paraenetic instruction, parables, dialogues, wisdom sayings, allegories. They are not in a simple way reducible to a single theme; rather they are directed to particular historical contexts. The Christian community judges the actions of persons and groups to be morally wrong, or at least deficient, on the basis of reflective discourse about present events *in the light of* appeals to this variety of material as well as to other principles and experiences. Scripture is one of the informing sources for moral judgments, but it is not sufficient in itself to make any particular judgment authoritative.

The obvious problem with this use is its looseness. The questions that were raised about what is in control are also pertinent here. It would be very easy to make a judgment on the basis of feelings or prevailing cultural values and then find *some support for it* in the variety of Scripture's texts. The maintenance of any objective authority for the moral witness of the Scriptures is difficult if one recognizes the variety of norms and values present there and also the historical character of the occasions in which these emerge. Thus some efforts at generalization are necessary in order to bring some priorities of biblical morality into focus. The generalizations that are most nearly consistent with certain theological, ethical statements that appear to be more at the heart of the matter in the development of biblical religion would be used. Informed in a general way by biblical faith and morality, as well as by other relevant beliefs and moral commitments, one might judge the Cambodian venture to be wrong and proceed to cite biblical norms and values as corroborative evidence for one's judgment. We admittedly have less than absolute certitude that the judgment is biblically authorized, both because of the variety of material contents in the Scriptures and because of the looseness of the way in which it is used. The necessity for appeals to the continuing tradition of Christian morality beyond the closing of the canon is taken

for granted, and the fact that biblical morality is in many ways inapplicable, and in other ways wrong, is accepted.

Each of the ways in which the morality in the Scripture is used can be given theological justification. Thus no sharp line can be drawn between primarily moral and primarily theological uses of Scripture in Christian ethics. But attention to some of the basically theological uses of Scripture in Christian ethics, which subordinate its ethical content to its theological importance, helps us to see the range of opinion. I have argued elsewhere that the most significant alterations in Christian ethics in midtwentieth century took place not as a result of the reassessment of the liberal and optimistic interpretation of human nature but as a result of the introduction into ethical thinking of the idea of a "God who acts," or a "God who speaks" in particular historical circumstances. Without further elaboration of that, it should be clear that biblical theology provided a framework for the interpretation of the historical events in which men and nations were involved; and out of this interpretation came certain assessments of the moral significance of events, certain clues about how they were to be judged, and what persons ought to do in them. The primary question became not How ought we to judge this event? nor even What ought we to do in this event? but What is God doing in this event? What is he saying to us in this event? Three articles published by H. Richard Niebuhr during World War II have titles which illustrate this: "War as the Judgment of God," "Is God in the War?" and "War as Crucifixion."⁶

The inspiration of a biblical understanding of an active God has to be specified by asking two sorts of questions. First, who is this God who acts? What do we know about him as "subject" or "person" or about his "nature" which will give a clue to the sorts of things he might be doing and saying? Second, what sorts of things has he said and has he done? What does he wish to accomplish by his acting? What do we know about his actions?

Insofar as Scripture provides "data" for answering these questions, we are again faced with the task of formulating generalizations based upon a variety of materials.⁷ Here we shall only indicate some of the

6. Respectively in *The Christian Century*, LIX (1942), 630-33, 953-55, and LX (1943), pp. 513-15.

7. For a critical analysis of the work that has been called biblical theology, see Brevard Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970).

themes that have been used in theological ethics. The theme of liberation currently finds wide usage with reference to the struggle both of black people in the United States and of colonial peoples of the world. "Jesus' work is essentially one of liberation," writes the articulate and influential James H. Cone, in his *Black Theology and Black Power*.⁸ This becomes a warrant for both an evaluative description of the situation of black people in America, and a normative direction for the activity in which Christians ought to be engaged. The themes of crucifixion and resurrection are used by another influential contemporary theologian Richard Shaull of Princeton. These terms provide a theologically warranted framework for interpreting the present course of events in a world of revolutions; the old orders must die in order for new life to be born, a life of hope and justice for all who are oppressed.⁹ As does the liberation theme, so the crucifixion and resurrection theme provides a way of describing and evaluating the events of our times, and a normative thrust for the actions of Christians. They ought to be involved in the destruction of oppressive forms of life in order for new life to come into being. Jürgen Moltmann's highlighting of the theme of hope as central to biblical theology; Paul Lehmann's development of God's doing humanizing work; H. Richard Niebuhr's more complex view of God's creative, governing, judging, and redeeming work; each provides a theological ground upon which is constructed both an interpretation of the significance of events and a positive normative thrust with reference to what Christians ought to be doing. James Sellers, in his very suggestive *Theological Ethics*, takes the theme of promise and fulfillment to be central to the biblical witness. Traditional Lutheran theologians have used gospel and law, and orders of creation; Barth offers an interpretation of the God of grace who is yet the commander as a biblical theological foundation.

The use of biblical theological concepts to provide an evaluative description of historical events requires that further moves be made to determine how a particular event is to be judged and what ought to be done in those circumstances. These moves can be made in two ways or in a combination of them. One such move is from the built-in, normative

8. (New York: The Seabury Press, 1968), p. 35.

9. See, for example, Shaull's article, "Christian Theology and Social Revolution (I)," *The Perkins School of Theology Journal*, XXI (1967-68), 5-12.

content of the evaluative-descriptive terms to the basis both for moral judgment on the events and for prescriptions or guidelines for action in them. If, in Lehmann's ethics, one discerns what God is doing to make and keep human life human, whatever is not in accord with the human is judged to be wrong, and the prescriptions or guidelines for further action would be whatever is in accord with the human. The second move is a methodological one. In Lehmann's case, for example, the method for discerning both what is morally wrong and what one ought to do is akin in crucial respects to what philosophers designate as moral intuitionism; the judge and actor is sensitive to what God is doing, and in his theonomous conscience he perceives what is wrong and what he ought to do. In the case of others, however, the move from the evaluative-descriptive enterprise to the moral judgment and the prescription for action might involve a more elaborate and rational process of practical moral reasoning. The normative elements in the concepts used for the evaluative description are lifted out in statements of moral principles and values, and their application both to the judgment and to subsequent action is developed according to methods of rational moral argumentation.¹⁰

How the various biblical theologies of ethics use the morality or ethical teachings found in Scripture is contingent upon methodological choices that can be given both theological and philosophical justification. For example, within Barth's theological ethics, it is the command of God, heard by the moral agent, that determines whether something is right or wrong. But this command is not a capricious one; it is likely to be in accord with the moral teachings of the Decalogue and of Jesus. These moral teachings provide "prominent lines"; they are not unexceptionable rules or laws of conduct, nor are they moral ideals. They are coherent with the revelation of God in the Scriptures; and thus, if one's judgment is not in accord with these prominent lines, it is doubtful whether one is really hearing God's command. More intensive analysis of this issue is not in order here.

The place of Scripture in judging the Cambodian invasion

In the light of the previous analyses, both of the points at which one makes moral judgments and of the ways in which Scripture has been

10. I have developed these issues in "Two Approaches to Theological Ethics," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, XXIII (1968), 337-48.

used to make them, brief constructive proposals can now proceed. Certain possibilities are ruled out, at least for simple application. For example, use of proof-texts, either as the sole basis for making the judgment or in literalistic support of arguments made on other grounds, is not defensible. To cite the command "Thou shalt not kill" is not sufficient to defend the judgment that the invasion of Cambodia is morally wrong. Indeed, it is better to begin, not with the application of a particular text to a particular problem, but rather with a look at Scripture's more pervasive significance.

First, in the largest dimensions, Scripture has informed the moral ethos of Western culture, and particularly that of the Christian community. Even when the actual determinative moral ethos is not in accord with the more objectively normative elements of the wider ethos, the latter remains as a point of critical judgment on the former and on particular events. This affirmation involves not only a historical appeal, that Scripture has informed the approvable moral values of our culture and religious community, but also a theologically normative appeal. The biblical witnesses testify to religious communities' developing understanding of what God's purposes for man and the world are; with a significant measure of confidence in the Scriptures as a developing revelation of God's purposes, the Bible ought to inform the moral ethos of the culture and the church. The moral ethos of church and culture is always in a process of development or change in the light of new historical events and of unfolding awareness of the meaning of biblically informed morality for new issues. Indeed, the contributions of biblical tradition are not only unfolded, but often revised and judged wrong in the light of historical developments; for example, the inferior status of women, the acceptance of slavery, and the support of capital punishment. In this large dimension, then, one's appeal is not directly to Scripture as a verbal basis for supporting a judgment that the Cambodian invasion is morally wrong, but rather to the moral values of the culture and the church which have been and ought to be informed by Scripture.

Second, Scripture provides data and concepts for understanding the human situation, both in terms of its limits and its possibilities. The biblically informed moral judge is not taken aback at the presence of moral evil in the world; he is not surprised that the technical and other achievements of a nation tempt it to pride, that its accumulation of many

forms of power tempt it to arrogance, that its activities which are destructive of human well-being are rationalized by appeals to unexceptionable moral values and ends; such as, freedom and peace for men. Nor is he surprised by his own faulty moral judgments, past and present, for they are in part a result of his finitude: His limitations of time, place, knowledge, insight, sensitivity, and imagination all prohibit him from achieving that position of the "ideal observer" who can judge events as God himself could judge them. They are also a result of his sin: His bondage to nationalistic loyalties, his pride in the achievements of himself and his nation, his failure to consider the purposes of God, his longing to make secure what sustains his good life even at heavy cost to others, all keep him from hitting the moral mark.

Scripture also provides a vision of human possibilities. It gives clues to what God is enabling, as well as requiring, man to be and to do. It not only becomes a basis of confidence in the community of faith that the unknown future is in the care of a Being who is ultimately benevolently disposed toward his creation, but also provides a vision of what the human future ought to be and can be in the care of the God of love, of justice, of peace, of hope. Biblically informed vision sees in the longings for peace and justice that are found in protests against the Cambodian invasion, and in the aspirations of oppressed people in the world, a thrust toward the future, not with the illusion that the Kingdom is coming, but with the confident hope that present moral and social evils will no longer be tolerated. This scriptural faith disposes the Christian community toward moral seriousness, toward profound dissatisfaction with those events that are destructive of human life and value, toward aspirations for a future which is more fulfilling for all God's creation; and thus toward negative judgment on events which are not consistent with the possibilities that God is creating for man.

Third, and perhaps this is simply a specification of the second, Scripture provides an account of the sorts of human actions and events which the morally and religiously serious communities of the past have seen to be in accord, and out of accord, with the purposes of God for man. Certain generalizations about God's prevailing aspirations and purposes for human life can be formulated on the basis of the scriptural witness. In the light of these generalizations, present events can be judged to be more or less in or out of accord with those purposes. One need not appeal

to strict analogies between events recorded and interpreted in Scripture and events of the present, but rather one can appeal to theological affirmations that are informed and governed by the biblical witness. The purposes of God, as gleaned from the Scriptures, provide not only a reason for being morally concerned about the Cambodian invasion but also the basis for moral values and principles in the light of which the events in Cambodia can be judged.

Fourth, the Scriptures provide a variety of types of discourse which express the purposes of God as these were understood by the religious communities, and passages can be used as corroborating evidence (but not proof-texts) for the judgments made in the light of the more general theological and ethical principles that are used. Certain moral laws or precepts given in both Testaments can be used as concise specifications of the more general intent derived from Scripture and can be brought to bear upon the judgment of particular events. One would not judge the Cambodian invasion to be morally wrong simply because it violates the love commandment; the love commandment is a specification of a moral precept consistent with the biblical understanding of God's will for men, and thus it has a theological backing which is also biblically based. Similarly, one might find that certain narratives of events in which writers understood the judgment of God to be present are applicable to the present historical occasion by way of a rough analogy. But the use of such narratives would be governed by their consistency with the generalizations about God's purposes that are gleaned from the whole of the Scriptures. Other forms of discourse could function in a similar manner—parables, wisdom sayings. The appeal to these would not be on the basis of their absolute authority, but both as informing sources of judgment and as corroborations of judgments informed by a variety of appeals.

The procedures I am proposing are not *sola Scriptura* in character. In judging the Cambodian invasion to be morally wrong, one is informed by, and appeals to, many other bases than Scripture: to the accounts of what is happening; to an assessment of the motives, intentions, and consequences of what goes on there; to general ethical principles upon which most persons might agree without recourse to biblical backing for them. Indeed, the Scriptures are not used as the exclusive source of backing, warrants, and data (to use Kelsey's pattern of analysis) for the moral

judgments of the Christian community on the Cambodian invasion. Ultimately for Christian ethics, a biblically informed theology provides the bases for the final test of the validity of particular judgments: For Christians these judgments ought to be consistent, consonant, coherent with the themes that are generalized to be most pervasive or primary to the biblical witness. But this is not to suggest that the judgments are solely derived from the Scriptures; rather, there is a dialectic between more intuitive moral judgments and both scriptural and nonscriptural principles and values (recognizing that these latter two are not mutually exclusive); there is a dialectic between principles of judgment which have purely rational justification and which also appeal to the tradition expressed in Scripture and developed in the Christian community.

This dialectical process is necessary for several reasons. First, there is a variety of theological and ethical themes in the Scriptures themselves; and thus while theological and ethical themes can be formulated to provide the dominant principles of interpretation for the whole of Scripture, the variety itself must not be lost sight of. Biblical theology and ethics, for example, are not exclusively a theology and an ethic of love; thus love cannot become the single principle used to judge events and actions even within Scripture.

Second, on theological grounds, themselves backed by Scripture, it can be affirmed that the moral responsibility of men, and particularly of men who acknowledge God as Lord, is to judge what God is enabling and requiring men to do under the natural, historical, and social conditions in which they live, not simply to apply biblical morality from an ancient time in a casuistic way. Thus there is awareness of novelty both in the forms of moral evil that exist and in the opportunities for rectifying them. These aspects of novelty have to be taken into account in making a judgment. While the American invasion of Cambodia is not unlike many previous invasions in the history of the world, it is not the same as any other previous invasion in its character.

Third, the process of making a moral judgment about an event is undertaken with reference to principles and values that are widely shared with others outside the Christian community. These principles and values have their own status with practical, if not ultimate theoretical, independence from theological grounds and are properly appealed to in support of a judgment against the Cambodian invasion. The inferences drawn

from these principles—the sorts of principles that a rough use of “natural law” has always acknowledged in the Christian tradition (and probably in Scripture itself)—are usually consistent with those drawn from Scripture. There might be however, very special claims made upon those who seek to judge events within the framework of biblically informed Christian ethics: In the ethics of discipleship to Jesus Christ, for example, there is a weight of obligation to be willing to suffer and to die for the sake of the needs of the neighbor, or for the sake of the cause of witnessing to the requirements of peace, justice, and love in the world. There is a heavy pull toward the pacifist position, not only because of the primacy of love, but also because of many sayings, actions, and implications from varieties of literature in the New Testament.

In arriving at a moral judgment about the Cambodian invasion, Scripture, informing one’s particular analysis of that event, would be used at the various points, indicated earlier in the paper, that moral judgments are made. A brief rehearsal of these points in relation to subsequent developments in the paper will provide at least the outlines of a fuller account.

First, Scripture informs the terms, concepts, or categories that one uses to give an account of the structure and meaning of the historical process of which the Cambodian invasion is a part. How this is done depends upon what theological principles are used (a) to provide generalizations about what the biblical meaning of human history is (or what those meanings are—to suggest pluralism in Scripture), and (b) to decide which biblical accounts (precepts, narratives) are pertinent to the particular historical situation in which we now live. Choices made about the meaning of biblical theology are crucial for the interpretation of history. For example, if the theology is one of a struggle between God and the devil in history, and if God is judged to be on the side of Americans, and if the devil is identified with revolutionary forces in the world, then one gets a different account of the meaning of present history from what is derived if God is identified with the revolutionary forces in history, and the devil, or the powers of sin, are identified with American action. Or, if the crucial biblical theme is crucifixion and resurrection, and American action is identified with the powers of recalcitrance and oppression that are being crucified, a particular interpretation of the meaning of our present history is forthcoming.

Second, Scripture informs the principles by which one judges the motives given for the justification of the American invasion. If, for example, one judges that the desire to protect American lives is morally insufficient to justify the extension of the war, various appeals that are biblically supported or derived might be cited. The special concern for American lives might be judged immoral because it violates a pressure toward the equal valuation of all human beings in the sight of their Creator and Redeemer, or it violates the principle of love of enemy (with the implication that one cannot easily justify killing persons who are the objects of one's love).

Third, Scripture informs the principles and values used to judge the intentions and goals of the invasion in a process similar to the way it informs judgments of motives.

Fourth, Scripture informs the principles used to assess the particular circumstances for which reasons are given as sufficient justification for the invasion. If the circumstances at the time of the invasion were judged to be a threat to the freedom of the Vietnamese and Cambodian people, an interesting and complex issue is opened. Part of the argument about it would be more or less factual—is their freedom really being more threatened by the presence of North Vietnamese and Viet Cong military forces than it is by the presence of American and South Vietnamese ones? But other issues which bear more directly on moral concerns are also raised. What sort of freedom are the Americans seeking to defend? What is the place of that sort of freedom in a scale of values that are pertinent to Southeast Asian culture as well as to a scale of values that might be more valid in the West? Should there be assessment not only of threats to freedom, but also of the destruction of life and property, of Cambodian village culture, and of self-determination.⁷ Or another line might be taken: Were the circumstances desperate enough to warrant the illegality and immorality of invasion? Scripture could not be used to provide texts which would “prove” that the invasion was wrong, but it could provide (to use Kelsey's terms) data, warrants, and backing for the principles and values that could counter the assessment of those circumstances that were used to justify the actions.

Finally, with reference to the judgment of consequences, one would ask whether the consequences are consistent with the understanding of the fulfillment of human life that a scripturally informed theology would

support as being in accord with God's purposes for men. Scripture alone is clearly insufficient as a ground for assessing the consequences, for many historical developments have intervened since biblical times to enlarge the scope of the Christian community's understanding of what human life is meant to be, and particularly under the circumstances of the times in which we live. But one could give biblical data, warrants, and backing for the position that the consequences occurring are not in accord with those ends of man which Scripture and the general moral values of mankind both support.

Conclusion

The suggested constructive procedure is more in accord with what I stated earlier to be a looser use of Scripture than its use as moral law, moral ideals, or the source of moral analogies. Indeed, it can incorporate elements of each of these within it. It has the problems of the looser use; these ought to be fully acknowledged. The principal problem is to determine how decisive the authority of Scripture is for one's moral judgment. Only the two extremes are absolutely precluded: It does not have the authority of verbal inspiration that the religiously conservative defenders of a "revealed morality" would give to it, nor is it totally without relevance to present moral judgments. Within the broad spectrum between the excluded extremes, a number of other judgments are crucial in determining both its authority and how it should be used. Some of these judgments are theological in character: They depend upon choices about what theological themes are central to Scripture's understanding of God's work, God's purposes for man, and the human condition. Other judgments determine what moral principles and values are most consistent with the theological framework developed in relation to Scripture. Still others are philosophical in character: How we use Scripture is determined to some extent by our framework for interpreting the tasks of ethics as a discipline of thought. If it is focused on the assessment of consequences, Scripture will be used differently from the way it will be used if its function is to provide unexceptionable rules of conduct. Another question of the authority can be approached by asking whether there is a "method of ethics" in the Scripture, and if there is, whether the Christian ethician in the present is bound to its use. The answer I have suggested to the first is that there are several methods of ethics in the Bible; how they will be

used is determined by what methods are judged to be consistent with one's theological principles as well as by judgments made on philosophical grounds.

The outcome of this paper on the question of authority of Scripture can thus be stated succinctly, but indefinitely. Scripture *alone* is never the final court of appeal for Christian ethics. Its understanding of God and his purposes, of man's condition and needs, of precepts, events, human relationships, however, do provide the basic *orientation* toward particular judgments. Within that orientation many complex procedures and appeals are exercised, and there is room for a great deal of argumentation. The most decisive justification for this looser use of Scripture can be stated as follows: The vocation of the Christian community is to discern what God is enabling and requiring man to be and to do in particular natural, historical, and social circumstances. Its moral judgments are made in the light of that fundamental ought, or demand. Thus Scripture deeply informs these judgments in ways I have outlined, but it does not by itself determine what they ought to be. That determination is done by persons and communities as finite moral agents responsible to God.



Copyright and Use:

As an ATLAS user, you may print, download, or send articles for individual use according to fair use as defined by U.S. and international copyright law and as otherwise authorized under your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement.

No content may be copied or emailed to multiple sites or publicly posted without the copyright holder(s)' express written permission. Any use, decompiling, reproduction, or distribution of this journal in excess of fair use provisions may be a violation of copyright law.

This journal is made available to you through the ATLAS collection with permission from the copyright holder(s). The copyright holder for an entire issue of a journal typically is the journal owner, who also may own the copyright in each article. However, for certain articles, the author of the article may maintain the copyright in the article. Please contact the copyright holder(s) to request permission to use an article or specific work for any use not covered by the fair use provisions of the copyright laws or covered by your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement. For information regarding the copyright holder(s), please refer to the copyright information in the journal, if available, or contact ATLA to request contact information for the copyright holder(s).

About ATLAS:

The ATLA Serials (ATLAS®) collection contains electronic versions of previously published religion and theology journals reproduced with permission. The ATLAS collection is owned and managed by the American Theological Library Association (ATLA) and received initial funding from Lilly Endowment Inc.

The design and final form of this electronic document is the property of the American Theological Library Association.