GOING AS FAR AS WE CAN GO: THE JESUS PROPOSAL FOR STRETCHING GENES AND CULTURES

by Philip Hefner

Abstract. The Christian perspective on morality is examined under the rubric of "being like Jesus" and the "Jesus proposal for morality." The Peace People of Northern Ireland are examples of this proposal. Among the features of Christian moral thinking that are emphasized are: Jesus' concern for the future, the transformation that the future requires, human nature interpreted in terms of how it can undergo transformation, and self-giving love as the core of this transformation. Attention is given to the ways in which Jesus both radicalized and relativized the moral conventions of his day. Dialogue with sociobology comes into play when Jesus is viewed as a proposal for cultural evolution and a kind of biocultural mutation. Gerd Theissen's scholarship on Jesus' moral perspectives is given special attention.

Keywords: future; Jesus; love-command; Northern Ireland; Peace People; self-giving love; sociobiology; solidarity-in-empathy; Gerd Theissen; transformation.

THE PEACE PEOPLE OF NORTHERN IRELAND

Mairead Corrigan was a secretary in Belfast, Northern Ireland, at the Guinness Brewery and a volunteer working to improve the lot of children in her city. Betty Williams was a mother, married to a merchant marine, who worked in Belfast as a waitress at night and an office assistant during the day, even after her children were born. Ciaran McKeown hailed from Londonderry, the father of four and a journalist. On 10 August 1976, two of Mairead's young nephews and a niece were killed in a shoot-out and

Philip Hefner is Professor of Systematic Theology at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, 1100 East 55th Street, Chicago, IL 60615-5199. This paper was delivered at the Forty-fourth annual meeting of the Institute on Religion in an Age of Science, Star Island, New Hampshire, 26 July–2 August 1997.

[*Zygon*, vol. 34, no. 3 (September 1999).]
© 1999 by the Joint Publication Board of Zygon. ISSN 0591-2385

car chase involving members of the Irish Republican Army and the British troops. Within days, Mairead, Betty, and Ciaran, who were previously unacquainted with one another, started the movement against violence and for reconciliation between Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland that came to be called The Community of Peace People. In December of 1977, Mairead and Betty received the Nobel Peace Prize.

I mention Mairead, Betty, and Ciaran because they are all Christians—Catholics deeply serious about their Christian faith—who exemplify what I believe is the essence of Christian moral behavior. I want to sketch three aspects of their action in order to lay the groundwork for more theoretical comments that follow: (1) the environment of hostility in which the Peace People worked, (2) the image of Jesus in their lives, and (3) their commitment to benefit other people and to make the changes necessary for that benefit to take hold.

The Environment of Hostility. First, we should note the context in which the Peace People carried out their action in late 1976 and the following years. It was one of extreme hostility and threat. When, on the day after the children's funeral, a dozen women, both Protestant and Catholic, began a march to the cemetery, singing hymns and praying in honor of the children, onlookers carried placards reading "Whores!" and "Traitors!" As more women joined the march to the cemetery, some were physically attacked. One day in December 1976, Betty Williams tried to show hospitality to those who disagreed with her by inviting two IRA supporters, women, to her home for tea and conversation. Twenty minutes after the guests arrived, Betty was lying on the floor of her living room, beaten and covered with bruises. Her guests shouted as they left, "Now tell the newspapers how violent we are!"

The Image of Jesus. Second, it is important to note how these founders of the Peace People, particularly Mairead and Ciaran, related their work to Jesus. Mairead attended Catholic schools, and she spent many hours every week, from the time she was fourteen, working in the Legion of Mary. She describes the purpose of the Legion in her own words: "to better the life of each individual, to teach the basic principles of Christianity, to help one have a better knowledge and a better understanding of the faith, and to help others" (Deutsch 1977, 31).

Her work for the Legion of Mary was serving children, mostly in the poor sections of the Catholic ghetto. By the time she was nineteen, she supervised as many as one hundred fifty teenagers who provided day care and recreational activities, as well as special services for handicapped children. The city of Belfast offered virtually no public facilities or services for children at that time. Mairead describes the place of Jesus Christ in her life:

You can't be much of a believer if you can imagine Christ resorting to violence in response to that kind of provocation [that the Catholics received from the Protestants]. And I knew that I did not believe in violence. . . . A while later, the Legion of Mary organized visits to the prisoners at Long Kesh. We tried to remind them that they were Christians and that violence was not the way of Christ. Christ, we told them, came before everything else—before political ideas and even before our country. . . . One day I asked one of these men: "How can you, as a Christian, take a human life? Christ himself said that we must forgive and turn the other cheek." (Deutsch 1977, 34–35)

Reflecting more generally, she says:

If someone tells us that the Church teaches this or that, or that our grandfather said this or that, we accept it whole. But if we stop to evaluate a lot of our old ideas and concepts, we find that they're myths, that they're false; and that bigotry has created the fear and the hatred that divides our people. We'll never find the solution to the problem of Northern Ireland until we try to change ourselves every day, to criticize ourselves. (Deutsch 1977, 42)

Ciaran is a product of Catholic schools but also a university graduate, and he describes his philosophy of life in these words:

I was interested in politics, not because I was a Catholic but because I had developed a profound belief in respect for humans and human life. Life is the only thing we have. I've never found a case in which a person had the right to take another person's life. With me, this is a very deep conviction, in terms of value. My philosophic beliefs coincide completely with and are included in my religious beliefs. We are all created by God and therefore we have no right, in the spiritual sense, to kill.

Except for Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr., whom I've never really read, I was most influenced by Christ. It's always astonished me to find no mention of Christ when I read the history of philosophy. (Deutsch 1977, 72)

Commitment to People and to Change. These three figures in the Peace People's movement demonstrate in their lives the high priority of working for the benefit of other people, regardless of ideology, gender, or social class, and they also recognize that their commitment to people requires change in social forms and in attitudes. Each of them has a sense of what basic human nature is and that change must take place if that basic human nature is to be actualized.

The Jesus Proposal

Morality happens in the particular and in the concrete and yet is described and inculcated in the general and in the abstract. Moral theory without reference to the concrete is empty. Concrete instances of moral attitude and behavior, however, seldom embody all that the theory entails. Furthermore, concrete instances are so varied that the selection of any concrete example betrays a theoretical bias.

I have begun my discussion with Mairead Corrigan, Betty Williams, and Ciaran McKeown because their moral behavior in the events of 1976

and 1977 in Northern Ireland represents what I consider to be the essential character of Christian moral belief and teaching, and because their behavior encompasses several facets that are of practical and theoretical interest.

In order to explain what I mean when I say that their action embodies the essence of Christian morality, I must ask you to walk with me through a considerable amount of historical and theoretical explanation.

"I Want to Be Like Jesus." This is basically what Mairead Corrigan told the prisoners at Long Kesh prison in 1976. Father Philip Berrigan, who was, with his brother Daniel, a leader of the anti-Vietnam War protests, said it very succinctly in his autobiography: "I learned that Jesus died for the sake of the world, and we're supposed to do the same" (Berrigan 1970, 78). The simplism of it may be offensive, but no matter how simple or sophisticated the Christian—Mairead left school at age fourteen, Philip Berrigan had a full education for the priesthood—the image of Jesus is the template for Christian moral behavior. The earliest Christians could inculcate the imitation of Christ in a relatively small group of converts who underwent strenuous periods of preparation before they were baptized. After the accession of Constantine as Emperor of the Roman Empire in the early fourth century, the Jesus proposal was thought to be the primary preserve of elite monastic communities. In the Reformation of the sixteenth century, Protestant leaders insisted that the Jesus proposal was best observed by ordinary laity, in their family lives and in their daily occupations. Whatever the historical and societal context, however, normative Christian moral behavior has held itself accountable to Jesus. Catholic moral theology and Protestant ethical thinking have elaborated almost as many maxims for implementing the Jesus proposal as the Jewish rabbinic tradition has formulated for obeying the Torah and the Muslim jurisprudence tradition has set forth in the Shariya for submitting to Allah. But the driving force is not the teaching or the casuistry, no matter how well-intentioned those might be. The driving force is a historical human person, Jesus of Nazareth, as we know him from the record his earliest followers constructed and from the subsequent interpretations of that record.

The Jesus Proposal for Moral Behavior. Jesus was concerned primarily that his contemporaries be attentive to the presence and will of God in their lives and that they submit to whatever was required to follow the will of God both in their attitudes and in their everyday behavior. A number of key features of Jesus' teaching and acting present themselves for understanding Jesus and his proposal.

1. Jesus' personal worldview focused on the future. In technical theological terminology, we call this an *eschatological* point of view. Jesus believed that God is in the process of fulfilling God's own will for the creation and its human creatures. Humans (and the entire created world) are

defined, therefore, by what they are becoming and what they will become when God's will is finally brought to fruition. It is within this framework of an unfolding world and its future that Jesus' proposals for morality must be placed and interpreted.

2. Jesus believed that humans cannot respond adequately to the call of God's future unless they are willing to be transformed, and he believed that this change is possible and that God will support it. Jesus' prophetic preaching and judgment are largely aimed at exhorting his hearers to give heed to God's call and to submit themselves to the necessary transformations. His substantive moral teachings and his personal example are proposals for understanding the required transformations and presenting concrete examples of what the transformations entail.

3. Apparently, therefore, Jesus believed that human nature is defined by its future at the hands of God, and that the present state of humans is such that they can appropriate that future. What I have referred to in my title as "stretching" our human nature is close to the center of Jesus' basic belief.

4. The behavior that best positions us to attend to the future and to undergo the transformations that this requires is self-giving love on behalf of the world, especially for the well-being of other persons. We call this the love command, and it constitutes Jesus' proposal for moral behavior. Talk about future possibilities and undergoing transformation means, for Jesus, taking a certain stance on the importance of one's fellow human beings and committing oneself to their welfare.

More Particulars about Jesus

I said earlier that Jesus' prophetic message exhorts people to attend to God's will and the transformations this requires. Jesus preached about the coming of God's kingdom, but he did not preach it as judgment, in the mode of John the Baptist, but rather as the demand and the chance for personal and social transformation.

I also said that in his substantive preaching and personal example, Jesus focused on interpreting this transformation and making concrete proposals for the shape it should take. In this preaching and example, Jesus assumed that his hearers had a measure of autonomy over their environment (to use the terminology of Gerd Theissen). Theissen summarizes this autonomy with the observation that Jesus' proclamation expresses an unusual degree of freedom over "three fundamental dimensions in our social relationships—the in-group and outsiders; those in highest positions and those beneath them; tradition and the present" (Theissen 1985, 93).

a. In-group and outsiders. The in-group is epitomized by the family, with whom we are to be in solidarity, while the outsiders are most vivid to us in the form of our enemies, whom we conventionally reject. "Jesus

reverses the relationship. He calls on his followers to break with the family (Luke 14:26; Matt. 8:21f.) but to love their enemies (Matt. 5:43ff.)" (Theissen 1985, 93).

b. The hierarchy of "above" and "below." In contrast to the way others relate in this dimension of life, Jesus' followers are to be servants of all (Mark 10:41ff.); the first will be last (Matt. 19:30).

c. With respect to tradition, Jesus devotes most of his teaching to reinterpreting it in new ways for people of his own time.

I have appended to this article a compendium of Jesus' teachings that illustrate this freedom vis-à-vis the insider/outsider relationships, hierarchy, and tradition. The important thing to note at this point is that these concrete instances of teaching carry what I call Jesus' proposal for "stretching" our genes and cultures. They define what it means to "go as far as we can go."

It is evident from this compendium that Jesus links behavior and inner disposition, just as it is clear that his teaching went against the grain of life in his day, as it does in ours. It proposes a solidarity and empathy that crosses every conceivable humanly contrived effort to categorize and separate persons. His teaching covers a broad range of behaviors and attitudes: kinship, honesty, relations between sexes and social classes, law and order, the place of children and women, service to the needy, relations between ethnic groups, and more. He relativized existing moral codes and at the same time made them more radical. For example, while we are free from oath-taking, since all our conversation should be trustworthy, the intention of oaths is even more radically valid than any of us can possibly actualize in our conversations. The result is that all must practice humility and at the same time recognize that transformation is possible.

The outcome of Jesus' preaching and example was death on a cross. He did not become a martyr because he taught things that no one had ever thought of before. He had points of contact with nearly all of the various parties of social thinking and action in his time: the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Zealots, Hellenistic cynics, and more. As Theissen puts it, "In his dying Jesus is a 'martyr' to the human inability to live with one's fellow human beings—not only on a personal level, but also in the context of social structures and conflicts. It is this same inability against which his preaching is directed" (Theissen 1985, 103–4).

Jesus' proposal was quite naturally embroiled in the long-term social and political conflicts of his part of the world, in the social class conflicts between rich and poor, in the social and economic tensions between city and country, and in the social and cultural differences between Gentiles and Jews (Theissen 1985, 101–2). He devoted himself to stretching the genes and cultures of his time and place in each of these four areas of conflict between persons. The verdict of history was that stretching would require his death. Morality figured large in both Jesus' life and his death.

Christian belief in the Resurrection is a statement that this stretching of genes and cultures bespeaks a true insight into human nature, and that that truth did not die with Jesus of Nazareth.

The Gist of the Jesus Proposal. It is time to give as succinct a statement as possible about what the Jesus proposal for morality is about and how it can point toward dialogue with sociobiology. The Jesus proposal focuses on behavior that is best suited to serve us in actualizing our most important possibilities for the future. This includes transformative behavior that will bring about the changes that are necessary if we are to appropriate our most important future possibilities. That is the first facet of the proposal. The second is the judgment that such behavior has to do with other people; behavior that opens us to our most important possibilities is social and communal in nature. The third facet is constituted by the force with which this behavior toward other people aims at solidarity with all persons, regardless of their status, ethnicity, gender, or religion, including the obligation to empathize with others and thus extend oneself in action that will benefit others. This solidarity-in-empathy-and-service is what I call the love-command (see Meisinger 1996).

Where the Jesus Proposal Intersects with Sociobiology

Intersection 1: A Focus on the Nature of Human Nature. The Jesus proposal for moral behavior, as I have sketched it in very broad strokes, enters into conversation with sociobiology quite naturally in that both Jesus and sociobiology are concerned with the nature of human nature. The Jesus proposal attends to human nature first of all from the perspective of what that nature *can become*. This constitutes a view of human nature as something that is in the process of becoming and that can indeed become something different from what it is now. The Jesus proposal also focuses on what human nature is in the present and how present human nature can change, because it is concerned to reflect on what is necessary for there to be transformation from the present state to the future. This concern, which I have called eschatological, is multidimensional, and its dimensions include the evolutionary, the biological, the cultural, and the religious.

We might say that Jesus is concerned, morally speaking, with an "ought" that implies an "is." Christian doctrine describes this "is" as our being created in the image of God—destined to become what God intends, and capable of that becoming. We *are* the creatures who can become new creatures, and we *ought* to become what is possible for us. In concrete terms, our human nature *is* capable of self-giving love, and it *ought* to actualize that possibility of love.

Christian theology, therefore, will want to ask sociobiology whether it can approach human nature from the point of view of what that nature can become—as well as what it has been and is now—and whether the

science is interested in such a perspective. That such a challenge has promise of being fruitful is underscored by reference to William Irons's recent article on the theme "Morality, Religion, and Evolution" (1996). He writes that the "central tenet of sociobiology is . . . that human beings are bundles of inclusive, fitness-maximizing mechanisms, shaped by a history of natural selection" (p. 394). The emphasis on inclusive fitness and adaptation under the conditions of natural selection suggests that scientists will respond affirmatively to the challenge, since both of these concepts are future-laden—they deal very much with what the human creature can become.

Although sociobiologists frequently speak about the future prospects of the human community, they often seem to concentrate more strongly on how we got to be the creatures we are rather than on what our possibilities are. However, this should not be allowed to hide the fact that concern for the future of human possibilities is not alien to the sociobiological enterprise. Irons goes on to describe the "sociobiological tenet": it is "the idea that human beings have a wide range of specific, evolved, psychological adaptations—including a number of moral sentiments—which maximized inclusive fitness in ancestral environments and which, in current environments, have a profound effect on behavior" (Irons 1996, 394). This idea, then, includes a theory both of how we got to be the way we are and of what might possibly happen in our current environments.

The Jesus proposal will be most interested in discussing with sociobiology this matter of the human future. At the same time, it will want to discuss the human evolutionary past in ways that do not close off the richest possible future. With this, I have just stated one of the prominent biases of the Jesus proposal, a preferential option for promising possibilities.

Intersection 2: A Focus on Social Interaction. Irons characterizes the sociobiological concern in a way that is useful for our consideration:

> Most of the discussion concerning commitments, indirect reciprocity, and moralistic strategies is concerned with strategies for establishing cooperation. That is, the discussion is concerned with means of preventing the separate, and potentially competing, interests of unrelated individuals from making cooperation unfruitful for some members of the group, and thus leading to the breakup of cooperative groups. (Irons 1996, 395)

I link this directly to Theissen's judgment that the cause for Jesus' martyrdom was "the human inability to live with one's fellow human beings" (Theissen 1985, 103–4). The Jesus proposal for morality and the sociobiological tenets about morality will in this sense be talking about the same thing—humans in social interaction. One could have gotten the impression from the earliest sociobiologists, in the 1970s, that individuals in their specific genetic composition constituted the horizon of research. Now it is clear, especially with the advent of game theory methods in this field and the growth of evolutionary psychology, that persons in social relationship is a major agenda for study among the sociobiologists.

Intersection 3: What Is the Social Interaction For? Irons speaks of the purpose of morality as the undergirding of cooperation that will enable larger cohesive groups to be formed. Larger groups are not good simply in themselves, however; they are also successful adaptations to the environment. What makes them successful? Richard Alexander argues forcefully for the view that the formation of larger groups is adaptive in intergroup competition, including warfare between groups. Larger groups can compete better, hence they are favored by the selection processes.

It is at this point that the Jesus proposal will want to enter most vigorously into discussion with sociobiology. The instrumentalism of social solidarity will come to the center of this discussion and undergo rigorous examination. The Jesus proposal argues that social solidarity-in-empathy-and-mutual-service, community characterized by self-giving mutual love, is instrumental, finally, to only one thing: the attainment of our full human possibilities. The aim of social solidarity is cooperation not for the sake of better competition but rather for the enhancement of every person.

Here, sociobiology and the Christian faith will need to examine each other's concept of "is" and "ought" as they apply to human beings and human community. Christian faith will reveal a preference for a view of human nature that does not put first priority on fulfillment by victory in competition with rivals. Rather, it will place highest priority on a view that understands that the human desire for excellence and high accomplishment is most profoundly extended to better ways of promoting the welfare of each and all—as Pierre Teilhard de Chardin put it in his description of peace, the sublimation of the forces that make for war into the ways of peace (Teilhard de Chardin 1959, 153). We recognize that peace, in both the Hebrew *shalom* and in the Greek *eirene*, refers to wholeness and belonging. Social solidarity-in-empathy is a high energy phenomenon, and it calls forth the best and the brightest of human accomplishment—but energy and accomplishment sublimated to reciprocal welfare, not conquest through successful competition.

Intersection 4: The Nature of Religion. Irons interprets religion as "a means of communicating the commitments that serve as the psychological mechanism for establishing indirect reciprocity. The end result is that human beings display a unique form of sociality in which they are able to form very large, intricately cooperating groups based on reciprocal altruism" (Irons 1996, 396). Christianity and, I suspect, a number of other religions will want to bring up the question of human possibilities. The Jesus proposal will certainly, as Irons suggests, work for establishing indirect reciprocity and cooperating groups. But it will also display its preferential option for focusing on what the reciprocity and those groups can become. In the process, religion will insist that it is as concerned for the possibilities of human community as for its formation of community in the first place.

Ronald Green (1988) assigns much of what I have described as the Jesus proposal to all religion. He describes a "deep structure" of religion, which is its basic contribution to moral thinking. Three elements constitute this deep structure: the "moral point of view," which is empathy; an ideology that demonstrates that empathy and serving love do not work against an individual's self-interest; and both ideology and mechanisms for reconciling persons with their own moral failure and that of others. Green's own study is cross-cultural and multireligious, including traditional African and Chinese religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Hinduism.

Green's study calls for serious discussion with sociobiologists concerning human nature and the aims of religion with respect to that nature.

An Excursus on the Aim of Religion. This may be the place to note that Christianity expresses a concern for the true nature of religion both in its conversation with the world external to itself and in its internal exhortation to its own adherents. There is a kind of double image to Christian morality—some call it a double standard, even. For centuries, in whatever society they have found themselves, Christians have supported the common wisdom of their peers when it works for the basic orderliness of life that enables men and women and children to sustain their bodies, raise their families, get an education, and carry out honest work. In New Testament times, Saint Paul endorsed a moral code that was probably borrowed lock, stock, and barrel from the Stoics and widely approved in the Hellenistic world of his day. Saint Thomas and the popes supported the common moral wisdom of the Middle Ages, and Martin Luther urged respect for the princes of Germany and condemned subversion of the social order. In all of these eras, the common moral wisdom promoted family solidarity, respect for laws and authority, honesty and hard work, and charity for the less fortunate.

At the same time, Christians insisted that the common wisdom was not enough, as an expression either of the full range of innate human possibilities or of the kind of human living that God had created humans for, to live in the image of God. In witnessing to this possibility and to this image of God, Christians have taught and lived in ways that not only challenged the common moral wisdom but also threatened to break society apart.

Both of these strands of teaching and living, however—that which is supportive of the common moral wisdom and societal order and that which calls for something more—have been justified by invoking the *nature* of human nature.

Evolutionary Reflection on Jesus

Gerd Theissen (1985) argues that Jesus can be interpreted in an evolutionary manner under three rubrics: mutation, protest against selection, and adaptation. By presenting in his life and teachings an alternative set of

proposals for how humans are to live with one another, Jesus is a kind of mutation on the biocultural scene. The image of "mutation" is an alternative to the view of Jesus as an absolute manifestation of eternal truth. As a mutation that has become a proposal for the future of cultural evolution and is thus a candidate for being a successful adaptation, Jesus takes on an intelligible status for our consideration, particularly in the context of conversation with sociobiology. The concept of mutation can be applied to Jesus' followers as well.

The substance of his mutation is his protest against the necessity of putting persons to death on the grounds of their being nonviable for society's purposes. Ideas and cultural forms can be put to death, but persons need not be. Jesus' message is that all persons can make their contribution to the evolutionary process and be taken up into the future of human possibilities. This is the nonviolent option that Jesus represents.

Jesus and his followers wager that life lived in commitment to solidarity-in-empathy—pursuing the nonviolent enhancement of one's fellow human beings—is a viable adaptation to the reality system we know as evolution—physical, genetic, and cultural.

Theissen's discussion is provocative, even though it faces the difficulty of translating terms like "mutation" and "adaptation" from biological meanings into cultural and religious meanings and employs somewhat confusing language that often seems to pit Jesus' culture against the biology of natural selection.

I would rather cast the discussion in the terms I have already used, of human possibilities and their realization. Sociobiologists do in fact give attention to human possibilities, but not usually as an intrinsic element of their scientific research. Richard Dawkins, for example, in his influential book, *The Selfish Gene*, describes in detail the genes' predisposition toward their own self-interest in survival, hence the term "selfish." He concludes his book, however, with a somewhat inconsistent expression of hope that there is more to human possibility than selfishness. He puts it eloquently:

> We can see the long-term benefits of participating in a "conspiracy of doves," and we can sit down together to discuss ways of making the conspiracy work. We have the power to defy the selfish genes of our birth and, if necessary, the selfish memes of our indoctrination. We can even discuss ways of deliberately cultivating and nurturing pure, disinterested altruism—something that has no place in nature, something that has never existed in the whole history of the world. We are built as gene machines and cultured as meme machines, but we have the power to turn against our creators. We, alone on earth, can rebel against the tyranny of the selfish replicators. (Dawkins 1976, 215)

Ironically, these words could be put in the mouth of Jesus, with no distortion to the New Testament descriptions of Jesus. Dawkins rejects biology as a basis for morality, arguing instead that even though we are born selfish, we can teach our children to learn generosity and altruism (Dawkins 1976, 3). His point seems to be that biology may describe significant

aspects of how we became what we are, but that biology cannot do justice to describing human possibilities for the future. The concept of "meme," for which Dawkins is justly celebrated, turns out to be the chief instrument for overcoming our selfish biology.

The late Donald T. Campbell (1975, 1976) elaborated this view, prior to Dawkins, by saying that our biology predisposes us to be sexual competitors while our complex urban culture requires that we be altruists. Campbell understood that traditional religion was, in fact, a major source, if not *the* major source, for inculcating the necessary altruism. Dawkins and Campbell, and perhaps also Richard Alexander (1987), espouse, therefore, a kind of "culture against biology" argument. In using the term "conspiracy of doves," Dawkins suggests the Jesus proposal against the selfish gene. Campbell explicitly invoked the traditions of Judaism and Christianity as bulwarks against the dominance of genetic competition, which he believed would destroy our complex human civilizations.

Ironically, Theissen rejects the notion of "culture against biology." His concepts of Jesus as "mutation" and as opposing "selection" argue that our biocultural evolution can be transformed by culture to flow in a channel different from its flow up to this time. Theissen builds explicitly on the work of Ralph Wendell Burhoe (1972, 1976, 1979) and Eugene d'Aquili (1978). Although he was deeply influenced by Campbell, Burhoe developed a theory of how trans-kin altruism, carried by religious traditions, is essential if the higher primate in us is to become a genuine human being. Theissen and Burhoe face a difficult task, that of explaining how the selfish gene can be transformed into the conspiracy of the doves, but their proposals have the merit of being nondualistic.

The "culture fulfilling biology" versus "culture against biology" debate is actually, I would suggest, a debate about the possibilities of being human as well as a debate about the "is" of human nature. Dawkins, Campbell, and others, including George C. Williams (1988, 1994) and Sarah Blaffer Hrdy (1988), describe human nature as fundamentally dualistic, our selfish biology set against our altruistic culture, including our religion. Burhoe and Theissen represent a quite different, wholistic view of human being. The dualistic view has difficulty explaining how altruistic culture could survive as a successful adaptation, since it contradicts the selfish biological evolutionary process that has produced us. The wholistic option understands human nature to be a complex reality that includes both our genes and our cultures, related in our brains. This wholistic position argues for a genuinely *biocultural* approach to understanding human life.

If the biocultural view is accepted, then my metaphor of "stretching" comes into play. Culture stretches our biology in order to realize possibilities that our culture can envision as fulfilling for us. The Jesus proposal presents the option of human community that I have called solidarity-in-empathy-and-service, commitment to the welfare of all human persons.

There is some scientific basis for the Jesus proposal. We have interdisciplinary support for the notion that all of nature is interrelated on planet Earth—evolution has placed us in solidarity with all our human brothers and sisters and with the rest of nature as well. We know from neuropsychological and human development studies that beneficent human interaction is necessary for adequate growth in infancy and childhood (see Hefner 1994). The primatologist Frans de Waal describes morality on an evolutionary continuum in his path-breaking study *Good Natured: The Origins of Right and Wrong in Humans and Other Animals* (1996). On this continuum, empathy and community concern appear as distinctive human contributions to morality, building upon sympathy and other elements of morality that are found in other primates (de Waal 1996, 211).

This trajectory of scientific knowledge, although I have described it inadequately and only impressionistically, would suggest that the Jesus proposal for solidarity-in-empathy, with its practice of altruism, is not totally alien to our human nature, biologically understood. Rather, it stretches that nature, through intensified cultural means, in directions that do indeed reveal the fragility of the biocultural fabric when it is stretched so far. That Jesus and many others have been martyred in the cause of this love is testimony to the fragility of the stretched fabric.

However, it is in the stretching that the new can appear. The Peace People of Northern Ireland were the first to establish a strong nonviolent movement in their country in the last half century, under the conditions of extraordinary stretching of the biocultural fabric. Yet, in the stress of their efforts, new possibilities emerged that were recognized by thousands of their fellow countrymen and women.

The Peace People Revisited, and Other Examples

We see now how Mairead Corrigan, Betty Williams, and Ciaran McKeown exemplify the Jesus proposal. They appeared as a surprising mutation in their world of Belfast in 1976. They insisted that human solidarity was more than party spirit or even national identity, and that such solidarity required both nonviolence toward all and work for the improvement of all people's lives. They stretched the genes and cultures of Northern Ireland to the breaking point. It is yet to be seen whether their proposals are viable adaptations in their own setting. Their lives were and are a wager, or, as Theissen puts it:

> Each of the great creative mutations discloses a new sphere of life, whether through the development of new organs or through the development of new modes of behavior which makes it possible to inhabit new ecological niches. Creative mutations are improved structures of adaptation to the reality around and embrace more of it than was possible for previous forms of life. . . . Like all forms of life, human beings are attempts to find adequate structures for adapting to reality-in-itself. All life can be regarded as a hypothesis aimed at forming a better picture

of the transcendent reality behind our limited life. Each mutation is a new hypothesis, which possibly takes the process of adaptation one jump forward. (Theissen 1985, 111–12)

We could present other examples of this Jesus mutation: Saint Francis of Assisi, in twelfth-century Italy, and Ida B. Wells, the African American who perhaps more than any other single person in the post-Civil War period stood in solidarity with the victims of lynching and poverty. Martin Luther King Jr. also comes into view, and many others.

I close, however, with the testimony of a sixth-century desert monk, Dorotheus of Gaza, who presented the Jesus proposal for morality in diagrammatic form:

Suppose we were to take a compass and insert the point and draw the outline of a circle. The center point is the same distance from any point on the circumference. Let us suppose that this circle is the world and that God himself is the center: the straight lines drawn from the circumference to the center are the lives of humans beings. Let us assume for the sake of the analogy that to move toward God, then, human beings move from the circumference along the various radii of the circle to the center. But at the same time, the closer they are to God, the closer they become to one another, and the closer they are to one another, the closer they become to God. (Bondi 1989, 25)

This is one person's attempt to describe a mutation in biocultural evolution as if it were a part of the way things are, an adaptation that will prove viable in being selected for by the reality system in which we live. It is a fit representative of the Jesus proposal that underlies the fundamental Christian view of morality.

Appendix: The Jesus Proposal for Morality (Theissen 1985, 94-95)

It could be said that in the preaching of Jesus the most elementary social ordinances are upended. However, independence from preexisting social ties is also promoted in the ways in which Jesus relates external behavior and motivations. Only external behavior is subject to social control. Jesus puts the accent on motivation (which is not controllable) in both ethical and religious demands, but in doing so he arrives at consequences that in fact affect external behavior.

On possessions, Jesus teaches that we should be ready not just to give up material objects; what matters is the inner freedom from them, which overcomes cares with which concern for existence fetters us, from which we often try to free ourselves by acquiring possessions (Matt. 6:25ff.).

On adultery, he teaches that one commits adultery not only by sleeping with another but also by even wanting to do so (Matt. 5:27f.).

On aggression, he teaches that the guilty person is not just one who kills but also one who hates another (Matt. 5:21ff.).

On honesty, he teaches that each of our words should be as true as though it were sworn on oath. Thus, special oaths are unnecessary (Matt. 5:33f.).

Jesus' teaching on religious conduct displays the same inner independence:

On purity, he teaches that there are no intrinsically pure and impure objects but only inward attitudes that make something pure or impure (Mark 7:15).

On prayer, he teaches that many (outward) words are superfluous, for God already knows in advance what people need (Matt. 6:7ff.).

One should not give in order to make an impression on others. Rather, the left hand should not know what the right hand is doing (Matt. 6:2ff.).

People should not practice ritual fasting because others expect it, but secretly, where only God can exercise "control" over human conduct.

The Sabbath may be broken if one can be of help to others and there is an urgent reason for doing so. There is no need to justify such breaches of the Sabbath with profound arguments.

The person who ventures on such independence of social control can also arrive at new evaluations of individuals and groups. Jesus himself is not content that what is really important should be only a matter of motivations, but that there be social consequences; he goes directly against conventional social judgments.

The conventional view is that children are less important than adults. But Jesus says, "Suffer the children to come to me, for theirs is the kingdom of God" (Mark 10:14). Conversely, adults must become children in order to enter the kingdom (Matt. 18:3).

The conventional view of tax collectors and prostitutes is a low one. But Jesus says to the pious, "Tax collectors and prostitutes will enter the kingdom of God before you" (Matt. 21:31).

Foreigners and unbelievers are conventionally despised. Jesus proclaims that many foreigners will eat with the patriarchs of Israel in the kingdom of God, and the native Israelites will be excluded (Matt. 8:11f.).

In the conventional view, impotent men are despised. Jesus says that there are eunuchs from birth, eunuchs by human hand, and eunuchs "for the sake of the kingdom of God." In this way, he clearly goes against the derogatory view of eunuchs.

Independence from traditional norms is a persistent feature of the preaching of Jesus. This independence can work in two directions: it can lead to making norms more radical, or to relativizing them. The characteristic feature of the preaching of Jesus is that we find both of these side by side, indeed even in connection with the same norms. Jesus radicalized norms by putting greater stress on external behavior—divorce is categorically excluded, for example—or by extending the demand to inner motivation, as when, for example, erotic fascination by another is identified as adultery. The same norms are again relativized by the way in which Jesus had easy contact with people who did not observe these norms (cf. the story of the

"woman who was a great sinner," Luke 7:36ff.) or assessed them in a different way from society—for example, when he promised prostitutes entrance to the kingdom of heaven before the pious.

References

Alexander, Richard. 1987. *The Biology of Moral Systems*. New York: Aldine de Gruyter.

Berrigan, Philip. 1970. *Prison Journals of a Priest Revolutionary.* New York: Crossroads.

Bondi, Roberta C. 1989. *To Love as God Loves*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press.

Burhoe, Ralph Wendell. 1972. "Natural Selection and God." *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 7 (March): 30–63.

———. 1976. "The Source of Civilization in the Natural Selection of Co-adapted Information in Genes and Culture." *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 11 (June): 263–303.

———. 1979. "Religion's Role in Human Evolution: The Missing Link between Ape-Man's Selfish Genes and Civilized Altruism." *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 14 (March): 135–62.

Campbell, Donald T. 1975. "The Conflict between Social and Biological Evolution and the Concept of Original Sin." *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 10 (September): 234–49.

———. 1976. "On the Conflicts between Biological and Social Evolution and between Psychology and Moral Tradition." *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 11 (September): 167–208.

Dawkins, Richard. 1976. *The Selfish Gene.* Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press.

d'Aquili, Eugene. 1978. "The Neurobiological Bases of Myth and Concepts of Deity." *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 13 (December): 257–75.

Deutsch, Richard. 1977. *Mairead Corrigan Betty Williams*. Woodbury, N.Y.: Barron's.

de Waal, Frans. 1996. *Good Natured: The Origins of Right and Wrong in Humans and Other Animals*. Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press.

Green, Ronald. 1988. *Religion and Moral Reason*. New York: Oxford Univ. Press.

Hefner, Philip. 1994. "Can Nature Truly Be Our Friend?" *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 29 (December): 507–28.

Hrdy, Sarah Blaffer. 1988. "Comments on George Williams's Essay on Morality and Nature." *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 23 (December): 409–11.

Irons, William. 1996. "Morality, Religion, and Human Evolution." In *Religion and Science: History, Method, Dialogue*, ed. W. Mark Richardson and Wesley J. Wildman. New York: Routledge.

Meisinger, Hubert. 1996. *Liebesgebot und Altruismusforschung*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht.

Teilhard de Chardin, Pierre. 1959. *The Future of Man.* New York: Harper and Row.

Theissen, Gerd. 1985. *Biblical Faith: An Evolutionary Approach*. Philadelphia: Fortress.

Williams, George C. 1988. "Huxley's Evolution and Ethics in Sociobiological Perspective." *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 23 (December): 383–407.

———. 1994. "Ruminations on Ruse and Religion." *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 29 (March): 37–43.