

SCIENTIFIC AND RELIGIOUS APPROACHES TO MORALITY: AN ALTERNATIVE TO MUTUAL ANATHEMAS

by Stephen J. Pope

Abstract. Many people today believe that scientific and religious approaches to morality are mutually incompatible. Militant secularists claim scientific backing for their claim that the evolution of morality discredits religious conceptions of ethics. Some of their opponents respond with unhelpful apologetics based on fundamentalist views of revelation. This article attempts to provide an alternative option. It argues that public discussion has been excessively influenced by polemics generated by the new atheists. Religious writers have too often resorted to overly simplistic arguments rooted in literalist approaches to the Bible and the religious traditions. More historically conscious methods can avoid implausible claims about both religion and science.

Keywords: Biblical literalism; church; evolution; faith; historical consciousness; morality; religion; secularism

Many people today presume that modern science has once and for all discredited religion, faith, and theology. They believe that morality has been shown by evolutionary theory to function for the sake of the individual's "selfish genes" or for fitness advantages that accrue to smoothly functioning social groups. What we call "conscience" is simply our internalization of social norms shaped by evolutionary pressures to serve ourselves, our kin, and our reciprocating allies.

Despite the fact that religion is booming in many places throughout the world, people continue to assume the accuracy of something like the secularization thesis proposed by both Durkheim and Weber, namely, that modern progress will lead to the end of religion. Aggressive secularists believe that the traditionally strong connection between ethics and religion must be severed so that we can continue to function ethically despite the inevitable withering away of religion. We ought to see that the development of a mature, enlightened conscience is only retarded by religion. "New atheists" like Richard Dawkins (2006), Daniel Dennett (2006), and Sam Harris (2004) argue that religion is the fundamental obstacle to our attaining a truly ethical conscience.

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Some of the most vociferous new atheists assert that religion, and the Abrahamic monotheisms in particular, make religious believers much worse human beings than they would otherwise have been. They posit a sharp division between those who embrace human evolution and scientifically informed views of morality, on the one hand, and anti-evolutionary religious believers who want ethics to be grounded in revelation and zealously guarded by religious authorities, on the other hand. In biblical terms, we have a secularist version of what St. Paul called the division between the “children of light” and the “children of darkness” (Eph 5:7–14)—only that in this case it is the believers who are said to dwell in intellectual and moral darkness. Since religion corrupts conscience, the path to moral enlightenment has go over the dead body of religion.

Militant secularism of course has triggered an equally strong reaction in the opposite direction. Atheistic attacks feed grist into the mill of Christian polemicists, who use the very words of new atheists to show how evolutionary theory inevitably leads to a wholesale rejection of everything that they hold sacred and that makes their communities decent places in which to raise their families. An undisguised and unrestrained hatred of religion, they argue, must generate a cold, instrumental view of the world and even of human beings. Seeing people as no more than animals who employ morality to facilitate intergroup reciprocity destroys the objective truth of morality and leaves us, at best, only slightly better than the sex-crazed bonobos or the more aggressive chimpanzees (see Peterson and Wrangham 1997). (There are of course more positive accounts of bonobo and chimpanzee as well as human behavior, as in de Waal 1989; de Waal and Lanting, 1997; Goodall 1986.) The line from Darwin to Dawkins to Singer (1993, 2008) seems pretty clear to them.

In this article, I would like to indicate, at least in rough outline, that it is not necessary to get locked into these mutual anathemas. I do not want to do so by simply invoking Stephen Jay Gould’s NOMA proposal, which, while preferable to aggressive scientism, seeks to promote peace at the cost of begging important questions about how the world is constituted and what it means (Gould 1999). My basic tack is to suggest that since secularity and religion are both more complicated, ambivalent, and multilayered than either of these admittedly exaggerated ideal types acknowledge, we ought to be more humble, restrained, and nuanced in assessing their significance for morality. I will conclude with a sketch of how the valuable insights of both sides can be retained within what I take to be a more balanced theological synthesis based upon Christian principles.

RELIGIOUS FAILURES

I find myself most impatient with fellow religious believers who make sweeping claims about people who do not share their own religious

commitments, so I will start with them. For starters, it makes no sense to say that a person who is not committed to a particular religion, or even someone who is opposed to religion, cannot be morally trustworthy. A person might hold this view if he or she simply has never interacted with trustworthy people whose fundamental convictions differ from their own. This is possible, but unlikely, as communities are becoming increasingly pluralistic. It is more likely that the perspective of people holding this exclusivist bias reflect the influence of indoctrination, conformity, obedience to a religious authority, and other contextual factors.

Whatever the actual causes of this bias, it is clearly not the case that religion is necessary for morality either as a social institution or as a matter of individual moral virtue. Nelson Mandela, for example, was one of the greatest moral exemplars of the twentieth century but he describes himself as not very religious (Mandela 1995). Nor does it seem the case that people can only be motivated by fear of punishment. While many believers are taught as children that they must be good if they want to avoid punishment, it is also possible to grow into more mature and other-regarding motivations. Hume (1779/1994) was right to say in Book XII of the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* that appealing to a heavenly reward and hellish punishment can encourage religious egocentrism. Moreover, on a theological level, claiming that people will be bad unless they are bribed or threatened amounts to a religiously based way not only of denigrating people but also their Creator, in whose image, they believe, we are created. What de Waal calls the “Veneer Theory” is actually a form of gnostic heresy (de Waal, Macedo, and Ober 2009).

Monotheists of this ilk claim that we must accept divine revelation to know right from wrong. Dr. Laura Schlesinger and her co-author Stewart Vogel (1999), and their Christian counterparts, maintain that without the absolute moral rules given in Biblical law, our consciences will be controlled by hedonism, subjectivism, and selfishness. Why would anyone submit to a demanding set of standards like the Ten Commandments? One answer, of course, is simply that God has given them to us. Schlesinger takes great personal comfort in the moral framework provided by the religion to which she converted. She regards her former self as lost in a sea of relativism and her present self as now standing on the firm ground of religion. At the same time, she fails to understand that all Biblical texts, including the Ten Commandments, come out of specific historical contexts, have been the subject of centuries of intense interpretive debates among rabbis, scholars, and religious teachers, and continue to be subjected to multiple and contested interpretations—sometimes leading to a consensus and sometimes not (see, for example, Barton 2003; Niditch 1993; and especially Miller 2009).

The single most important contribution of modern thought to religious traditions has clearly been its discovery of historical consciousness (see

Bernard Lonergan's famous essay, "The Transition from a Classicist World View to Historical-Mindedness," in Ryan and Tyrell 1974, 1–10). One can place any movement within western religion by how it understands its own history and historicity. Historical consciousness above all helps us understand the complexity of religious texts and the meanings given to them by their communities. The application of historical consciousness to religious texts and concepts often generates a fear that it will relativize and dilute the strength of religious authority. Yet failing to recognize the significance of its historical context leads to a false absolutism that itself is a betrayal of truth and so, for this reason, ironically, also a significant failure of religious trust. Contrary to its stated attitude, religious fundamentalism thus reflects a lack of true faith.

Consider, for example, the fifth commandment "Thou shalt not kill." While this norm is announced in Exodus 20:13 (along with Deuteronomy 5:17), the chapters that follow list numerous occasions in which the taking of a human life is not only permissible but even required, for example, in the case of witches (Ex. 22:18) and children who curse their parents (Ex. 21:17). We are appalled at the list of transgressors it identifies as deserving of death penalty, but this is because we are educated people from the developed world living in the twentieth century and not peasants living in a Palestinian village 2500 years ago.

The redactors of the Exodus text understood "killing" to refer to murder, as subsequent chapters develop important distinctions between the licit and illicit taking of human life. This is the part that literalists like Schlesinger find edifying and supportive of their own law and order ethic. Yet the Bible itself contains a history of ongoing and sometimes revisionist interpretation of its own earlier texts. Their casuistic enterprise continued within Exodus, and within later Biblical books, and then in centuries of rabbinic and theological commentaries that followed.

As social, political, and economic conditions changed, both the Jewish and Christian traditions understood the need for re-interpreting the fifth commandment (in the Catholic tradition; the Protestant enumeration regards it as the sixth commandment). In the Middle Ages, scholastics debated whether the use of crossbows amounted to murder and today we argue over the morality of employing weaponized drones (or, as the government calls them, "unmanned aerial vehicles" [UAVs; see Lin 2011; Winright and Allman 2012]). Sometimes changing interpretations were for the better, as with the passage of an international treaty banning land mines, but at other times it is worse, as when early modern Europeans and colonial Americans revived the teaching that demanded the execution of witches (see Stack 2006).

Capital punishment is another case in point. Many conservative believers of course also invoke the Bible to justify their support of capital punishment. They invoke standard passages (Ex. 21:12, Gen. 9:6, Deut.

19:11–13) to prove that God himself established the death penalty and that therefore we have no right to do away with it. Rejection of the death penalty is for them yet another bit of evidence for what you get when you reject God. Those engaged in proof texting of this kind fail to recognize both the highly selective manner in which they select their favorite texts and the way in which doing so takes them completely out of context—both their immediate textual context and their larger historical context in the history of ancient Near Eastern civilizations.

Yet adherents to this view do not also insist on applying commands to execute adulterers, blasphemers, or children who curse their parents. The Israelites were like all other ancient near eastern people in taking it for granted that some serious transgressions ought to receive the ultimate punishment. As social contexts changed, so did interpretations of these texts—sometimes quite dramatically. Even before the dawn of modern historical consciousness, Rabbinic analysis of capital punishment slowly added so many conditions for rendering a sentence of execution that it became effectively eliminated as a judicial option (for a recent discussion, see Berkowitz 2006). In the Catholic tradition, Pope John Paul II, himself nearly assassinated in 1981, gradually came to the conclusion that while the death penalty made sense in pre-modern contexts as the only effective way of protecting society from its most harmful members, it is now hardly ever necessary as a means for protecting the common good and so its use ought to be curtailed except in all but the most unusual circumstances (see John Paul II 1995; Holland and McCarron 2007). The very conservative Catholic Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia (2002) thus found himself in the awkward position of publicly dissenting from Catholic teaching on this matter.

This changing interpretation of the fifth commandment exemplifies the general point that the meaning of a text for a community is not frozen in time but rather changes as that community itself changes. This is made abundantly clear in Judaism and Christianity. It also explains why these traditions can be so contentious, as different streams of interpretation come into conflict with one another about how to interpret the meaning of the relevant texts, themes, and convictions for the present day.

It is crucially important to understand that Christian theology in particular regards constructive change as a positive development of the Christian churches' understanding of their own tradition. As noted above, one can see even within the Bible an enormous growth of moral understanding from earlier to later textual material. Exodus presents the conquests of a fearsome warrior God who favors the Hebrews above all other people, and even orders the destruction of Canaanite villages to clear the way for Israelite settlements. Yet as time moves on Israelites come to recognize that God cares about the "nations" and desires peace for all

people. God comes to be envisioned as a shepherd, a lover, and loving mother. In the New Testament, Jesus develops the ethics of the prophets to the point of commanding that we love and show compassion to out-group members, and not only strangers, but even our enemies. The first letter of John goes so far as to describe God as Love (I John 4:8).

The same pattern of development is displayed even more dramatically in the post-biblical historical tradition. John Henry Newman understood doctrine as the Roman Catholic Church's way of identifying and clarifying the deeper meaning of what is already present, in inchoate form, in the Bible (Newman 1845/2012). Just as we sometimes best understand the meaning of some event or period in our own lives in retrospect, and after we have benefited from more life experience, so the Christian community believes it comes to a better understanding of some aspects of the truth of the gospel as it grows and matures through the opportunities availed by lengthy historical experience. The Catholic Church tends to be conservative, to the extent that she is committed to preserving what is good in her tradition. As a result, at times institutional leaders have to be pushed to avail themselves of new information and insights (see Noonan 2005). On occasion, it takes a considerable amount of time and pressure for the Catholic Church to come around. This is true of the Galileo affair, but also in its renunciation of anti-Semitism, slavery, and the Inquisition.

Up to the middle of the twentieth century, the Roman Catholic Church was the bitter opponent of modern human rights and democracy, but she is now their global advocate. This dramatic development shows how important it is to understand Catholic institutional practices and policies (and, indeed, those of any Christian church), in the present as well as in the past, within a broad historical perspective. A properly historical framework, even as interpreted from with Christian faith, must freely admit the community's errors and sins as much as her progress. It suggests that there is always ample warrant for honest criticism that can trigger creative growth (see Sullivan 2003).

Two applications of this theme pertain to the question of whether, the new atheists insist, knowledge of evolution, including the evolution of morality, necessarily undermines any religious conception of the conscience. One pertains to conscience, and the other to the acceptance of biological evolution. Conscience has been an important category for Christian ethics since its inception. The Catholic Church has long regarded conscience as the "subjective norm of human morality" (Catechism 1997, par. 1778–1792) in the sense that each person is ultimately accountable for acting in light of what he or she believes is true. In Catholic moral theology, an unbelieving person sins if he or she verbally professes belief in Christ with a false mind.

At the same time, from around the time of Constantine's legitimization of Christianity within the Roman Empire, Christian authorities typically held

that the state must support the one true religion in order to protect people from spiritual danger. This view became entrenched with the challenges presented by the Protestant Reformation and then even more so by the French Revolution. Yet over the course of the 19th and early 20th centuries, the Roman Catholic Church gradually came to understand that true respect for a person's religious conscience could only be maintained in societies in which the state protects the liberty of each person to choose his or her own faith. Theologian (and now pope) Joseph Ratzinger interpreted the Second Vatican Council as teaching that, "Over the pope as the expression of the binding claim of ecclesiastical authority there still stands one's own conscience, which must be obeyed before all else, if necessary even against the requirement of ecclesiastical authority." Each person's conscience stands as the "supreme and ultimate tribunal" that present a kind of claim that is prior to that of any "external social groups, even of the official church" (see Ratzinger in Vorgrimler 1969).

The teaching of religious freedom was formally declared at the Second Vatican Council's 1965 "Declaration of Religious Freedom," *Dignitatis Humanae* (see Murray 1966). This document represented a fundamental development of Catholic insight into the dignity of the person. It did not come out of the blue, but rather from a growing historical awareness that religious liberty could provide a condition for the growth rather than diminishment of mature faith.

The Roman Catholic Church went from defensiveness, fear, and even occasional paranoia to a more open, cooperative attitude to the modern world. She seeks to preserve reverence for each person's conscience and our responsibility to live according to the truth as we understand it. It also differs from modern autonomy in understanding the Christian conscience as needing to be formed by the loving care of a faith community.

This openness to the modern world was also reflected in Catholicism's gradual acceptance of the fact of biological evolution. Curial authorities for decades worried about the possible implications of Darwinian thinking for human dignity as well as for the authority of Scripture. Pius XII's 1950 encyclical *Humani Generis* acknowledged current scientific research into the influence of evolutionary forces on the human body (Pius XII 1950). John Paul II went much further in acknowledging the overwhelming amount of evidence for biological evolution that has accumulated since the 1950s (see John Paul II 1996, 1997; see also Caruana 2009). At the same time, he insisted on distinguishing theories of biological evolution, and legitimate forms of methodological reductionism, from ontological naturalism, determinism, and fatalism. These distinctions can accommodate the nonliteral character of Biblical accounts of creation and our support for both human dignity and individual moral responsibility.

All this suggests, against the new atheists, that the Roman Catholic Church is not fairly characterized as a static institution bent on safeguarding

a fixed and crystal clear body of truths revealed once and for all in the Bible. What is true of Roman Catholic institutions also obtains in varying ways to many other Christian traditions. Christianity is an extremely complex historical movement that has all the flaws, and beauties, that come with being human. Catholic faith sees this very human institution as a context within which grace invites us to grow in love of God and love of neighbor. Christian belief in the Incarnation affirms that God is present in and through our humanity, despite all its flaws and weaknesses. This means that God works in and through our mirror neurons, our genes, basal ganglia, in-group affiliations, and all the other evolved capacities that constitute our humanity.

SECULARIST FAILURES

I would now turn to turn to secularist failures, the other side of the dichotomizing tendency that I mentioned at the beginning of this presentation. My main point here is that while they seem like polar opposites, the new atheists actually mirror a lot of the same problems one sees in religious literalists.

Before going further I would like to make a few distinctions in the meaning of the word *secular*. First, “secular” in the late Roman Empire and throughout the Middle Ages referred to the temporal realm and the goods proper to it. “Secular” was not opposed to sacred but rather distinguished from the eternal. “Religious” lived in cloistered communities and “secular” clergy lived in the midst of the temporal society.

Second, the modern period came to speak of the state as “secular” when it ceased favoring one religion over another. Adopting a “secular” notion of government in this sense did away with the state as advocate of a particular religion. Charles Taylor adds that the movement to separate state and church became associated with the further claim that government ought to be neutral in matters of morality and religion (Taylor 2007).

Third, we can also speak of “secular” in terms of “secularism” as a social decline in religious belonging and believing. Taylor traces three states in the growth of “secularism:” first, the replacement of an “enchanted” view of the world with a “disenchanted” scientific view of the world; second, the decline of personal participation in communal religion and its replacement with an individual search for authenticity; and third, the widespread assumption that religion is simply one among many options regarding how individuals choose to structure their private lives. We are now living in a “secular age,” Taylor argues, that no longer regards God as the foundation of the moral and social order, but rather as what allows some people a path to self-fulfillment in their private lives. Secularism can be seen as simply a neutral description of the current state of affairs or as a normative position (exemplified in the new atheists) that actively promotes this decline and

rejects any appeal to the sacred or transcendent, particularly in public life. Normative secularism at best tolerates religion, as long as it is confined to the private sphere where it can die quietly.

One can be a strong supporter of church-state secularity without also accepting normative secularism. At times, religious dualists have wanted to separate the sacred precincts of religion from the world and its wicked ways. This movement, though, implicitly denies that the world is God's good creation and open to divine grace. A more expansive view of divine love as embracing all of creation sees the world itself as sacred, and regards sacraments and prayer as ways of calling our attention to its sacred character (see Cooke 1994; also Schmemmann 1997).

New atheists share with Biblical literalists like Schlesinger an understanding of faith as a fixed set of ahistorical Biblical beliefs about the world that grounds certain moral norms. They find it outrageous that one would hold that belief in God is necessary for morality. This claim, repeatedly refuted by new atheists, is actually not a matter of Christian faith. Traditions of Christian natural law, for example, acknowledge our natural cognitive ability to grasp basic human values and moral norms without the aid of religion (see Finnis 2011; Porter 1999). They also recognize the persistence of human moral responsibility to the common good.

There is no reason for the new atheists to reduce Christian faith to believing a system of "supernatural beliefs" or a collection of truths delivered by a "supernatural being." God is anything but a "supernatural being" who occasionally intervenes in this world. Terry Eagleton puts this well: "God is the reason why there is something rather than nothing. . . Not being any sort of entity in the world himself, however, he is not to be reckoned up alongside these things, any more than my envy and my left foot constitute a pair of objects. God and the universe do not make two" (Eagleton 2009, 7–8).

More broadly, the attempt to separate this world (the natural) from the next (the supernatural) is a form of dualism, not Christianity. Christian faith does not divide the realm of nature from the realm of grace, but rather sees the former as existing within and through the latter. As the great theologian Karl Rahner, SJ, put it, creation is the condition of the possibility of divine self-communication. Creation is grounded in God's desire to communicate with human beings so that we can share in divine love. Creation does not exist apart from grace. The process of biological evolution is thus one through which "the cosmos becomes conscious of itself through humanity" (Rahner 1978, 191).

Focusing on the cognitive state of holding certain beliefs also misses the fact that faith is first of all a matter of belonging to a community and secondarily a matter of accepting certain defining claims made by that community as true. Christianity is a way of life, not a theory about the world. This is a point that is consistently lost on new atheists

like Dawkins when he talks about the “God hypothesis” as offering an explanatory account of the world (Dawkins 2008; Stenger 2009). Much of the plausibility of religious faith comes from the lives of its members and the quality of its community life, not from the inherent plausibility of its truth claims. This is likely a factor in why the Pentecostals and Mormons are growing so rapidly.

Faith, like marriage, family and deep friendship, is fundamentally a matter of love and loyalty, not simply a form of cognitive assent. Genuine faith includes cognitive processes but they take place within the context of a more holistic human response to the sacred—*affective, social, cultural, psychological, and spiritual*, as well as intellectual. The centrality of community for religious faith is supported by Paul Bloom (2007, 2012), Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell (2010; also Lin and Putnam 2010) and Robert Bellah (1999, 2011), among others. This is not to say that faith is irrational—that, as Harris puts it, it puts “reason in exile” (Harris 2004, 11 ff.). Nor is it to say that religion is just a matter of social functioning, but rather that, because of the way we are constituted as social beings, religious people tend first to find faith in the midst of important relationships and then seek to understand the deeper meaning of these relationships. This is why theology is defined as faith seeking understanding, not understanding seeking faith. This is also why Christian faith is much better understood in terms of its liturgy, sacraments, music, art, and architecture than in terms of its creeds and dogmas. These non-verbal, symbolic experiences get more deeply into the human psyche, and better capture the mysteries of faith, than do doctrines and their theological elaboration.

Defining Christianity in terms of the beliefs found in the Bible, understood a-historically, both as found in the text and then as Christians throughout time have interpreted them, can generate a lot of confusion. This approach leads Sam Harris, for example, to think that Christianity requires one to believe God literally wrote the Ten Commandments, that we ought to kill people who do not accept our beliefs, that we can own and beat slaves, etc. (see Harris 2004, ch. 3). Instead of treating religions with a sense of historical context and complexity, Harris accumulates horrors from the worst said and done by religious people and then blames all of them on religion. This is equivalent to taking all the dumb comments and cruel deeds done by scientists and then saying this is the effect of science. Terrible acts have been done in the name of science, or by people who have used the findings of science, but we do not rush to condemn science because of them. When it comes to science, we observe the truth of the medieval axiom – abuse of a thing does not prohibit its proper use. We ought to do the same for religion.

I make this statement, of course, from the perspective of a believer who sees the goodness, beauty and wisdom of my own tradition. This does not

mean that I cannot see the same traits in other religious traditions. In his debate with Andrew Sullivan, Harris makes the judgment that “religious moderation is the result of not taking religion all that seriously” (Harris 2007). Actually, it depends on what one means by “religious moderation.” Harris’ judgment would be accurate if the phrase means watering down your beliefs so that you don’t offend anyone. But religious moderation can also come from respect for the intelligence and good will of people who think differently from you, and from a deep conviction that God works in everyone’s life and in every community. So in fact the *more seriously* we take the universality of divine grace, the more our views will be “moderate” in the sense of inclusive, open, and respectful. Such an attitude does not, to my mind, amount to “cherry-picking” Scripture, as Harris charges; in fact, it goes to the very core of Scripture as the revelation of divine love. Nor will it do to insist that fundamentalist literalism is the only orthodox way of interpreting Scripture. Harris is willing to put himself in the bizarre position of insisting that the Catholic attitude to Scripture is exemplified in Pope Leo XIII’s 1893 encyclical *Providentissimus Deus*, which for some reason he thinks supersedes all of the revolutionary changes in Catholic thinking on this topic accomplished in the twentieth century (Harris 2007; cf., inter alia, Ricoeur 1974; Harrington 2005).

Focusing on cognitive claims, and even more sharply on claiming to know with certainty things that can’t be known, leads Harris to pose intractable divisions between religions and their stubborn certainties. Yet his simplistic dichotomies ignore two complexities. First, people can disagree on some particular beliefs while continuing to have deep agreement on other important matters. Imams of the Philippines disagree with Catholic bishops about the divine status of Jesus, but they can agree that peace must be based on respect for human rights, economic development, and inter-religious collaboration (see Phan 2010, 344–347). Again, this is not a failure of conviction, but rather a deep commitment to the conviction that we do God’s will when we build justice and peace.

WHERE TO GO?

We must not attempt to freeze religion into a body of doctrines but rather be open to empirical, historical, and social realities and especially to the complex ways in which these change over time. Sometimes these changes amount to deterioration and, at other times, they amount to creative development. Christianity has had, and will continue to have, its pendulum swings; Catholicism in particular is currently in the midst of a significantly rightward swing (Allen 2009, 55 ff.). Catholic absolutists see only the positive side of the arch, and new atheists see only the negative. Both perspectives are seriously flawed, and each is the mirror opposite of the other.

This article has concentrated on two extreme views that oddly turn out to resemble one another in some important ways. From the side of theology, an alternative to both extremes seeks to take seriously scientific insights into human nature without attempting to “naturalize” our understanding of human life, at least if by “naturalism” one refers to a family of approaches that share an “ambition to model the study of man on the natural sciences” (Taylor 1985, 1). There is little doubt either that we are in significant ways the products of biological evolution or that the sciences are critically important sources for understanding our humanity. Yet we possess emergent cognitive and affective capacities that have enabled us to develop cultures that inspire us to ask questions of moral meaning and to develop spiritual aspirations that cannot be addressed solely in terms of biological functioning (see Haught 2003; John Paul II 1997; Pope 2007; Deane-Drummond 2009).

The sciences offer critically important insights about both human behavior and our place in the world. As such they constitute a valuable source for moral reflection, but certainly not the only or even the primary source. Theology cannot be naturalistic because it is based on the religious belief that our deepest needs and most noble desires can ultimately only be satisfied by God. There is a concern that the attempt to live in relation to a transcendent ground of moral goodness leads one to ignore or perhaps even denigrate all insights that come from living in an “immanent frame,” as Taylor (2007) calls it. This concern is appropriate for some views of piety and theology, but not for others. An Incarnational religious perspective is highly non-dualistic and in fact underscores openness to the world in all its complexity and multidimensionality. It also positively values our concrete embodiment. Theology in this vein has to be engaged with the natural and human sciences, including those that are concerned with moral development, neuroscience, and moral psychology.

We ought thus neither “naturalize” nor “supernaturalize” the conscience. By “naturalize” I mean reduce the conscience to nothing more than an odd human way of pursuing inclusive fitness, facilitating social cooperation, or manipulating others to serve our interests. The conscientious person experiences some important moral claims as having a kind of non-negotiable absoluteness that give conscience a unique and irreducible position as “subjective norm of moral judgment.”

We can take seriously the inherent dynamics of conscience without undermining the irreducible status of moral claims. The attempt to “supernaturalize” conscience reflects a desire to undergird the strengths of its claims by saying not only that every moral choice is always, at the same time, also a choice about our response to the divine, but also by claiming that the conscience is a reflection of our soul, not our body. This spiritual status protects the conscience from reductive elimination, but it is based on a false separation of a soul located “in” but unaffected by the

body. A more adequate view, in Thomistic terms, understands the soul as the “form” of the body and so as intimately related to and affected by it. A theological ethic based on this integrationist approach to soul and body is open to scientific studies of how brain processes underpin moral experience, understanding, judging, and deciding.

Conscience in this approach is best understood as the core of moral identity. It is always subject to fallibility and self-deception, socially and communally rooted, and in need of habituation and education. The mature and authentic conscience results from a long process of proper formation and functions with sufficient relevant information. The literalist’s reading of the Ten Commandments belies a lack of historical consciousness and an inability to see moral complexity. The new atheists’ ridicule of the Ten Commandments belies a failure to appreciate the hermeneutical challenge presented by classic texts embedded within ongoing traditions. From a theological standpoint, we can better understand the Ten Commandments as presenting ancient wisdom that each of us is called to interpret and appropriate within our own lives and communities.

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