Christian Ethics in Jewish Terms: A Response to David Novak

Stanley Hauerwas

That Jews now think it important to understand Christians on Jewish terms may indicate some extremely important changes have or are occurring in Christianity itself. At least it is my impression that until very recently Jews have rightly regarded Christians primarily as a "problem". What Christians might mean when they say God is "Trinity" has not seemed important given the challenge of Jewish survival in a world dominated by Christians. For Jews to engage in a Jewish theological assessment of Christian theological convictions may be an indication that the world is no longer a Christian world.

Of course, many Christians, particularly in America, continue to think this is a "Christian society" or, if America is becoming less Christian, they should do all they can to stem the perverse tide of secularism. Though I have reason to regret developments such as abortion that may be the result of "secularization", I represent that part of the Christian tradition that has thought the attempt by Christians to rule through state agency (that is, what has been called Constantinianism) to be a mistake. Accordingly, representative theologians of "mainstream Protestant Christianity" regard my call for Christians to recover our status as "resident aliens" as a sectarian retreat from the Christian responsibility to "serve" the world.¹

But why should Jews be interested in what seems to be an internal Christian debate? Moreover, what does such a debate have to do with understanding how Christians think about ethics? The short answer to the second question is "everything". And that answer, I hope to show, makes clear why Jews should care about how Christians understand the relation between church and world. For example, the concept of natural law in Christian theological ethics is not just a "given", but has a quite different content and

¹ Stanley Hauerwas
Duke Divinity School, Duke University, Durham, NC 27708, USA

© Blackwell Publishers Ltd 2000. Published by Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 108 Cowley Road, Oxford OX4 1JF, UK and 350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148, USA.
function depending on how Christians understand their relationship to the societies in which they find themselves.

For Christians, our “ethics” cannot be abstracted from our conviction that Jesus Christ is God’s messiah—very God and very man. The church may have decisively rejected Marcion, but that doctrinal result may well have hidden from Christians that we continued in our politics and ethics to live as if the law, and the materiality of our faith that the law represents, can be left behind. Ironically, docetic Christologies that fail to acknowledge the full reality of Jesus’ humanity—a humanity that is unavoidably Jewish—are often implied in natural law accounts of Christian ethics that separate what is required of Christians from the salvation into which we have been incorporated through the work of Jesus Christ.

Therefore, David Novak’s recognition that Christians are not antinomian is an extremely welcome Jewish reading of Christian ethics. Christians do share with Jews the conviction that our relationship to God has been determined through God’s gracious gift of the law. Karl Barth, for example, begins his reflection on ethics in the Church Dogmatics with the claim:

As the doctrine of God’s command, ethics interprets the Law as the form of the Gospel, i.e., as the sanctification which comes to man through the electing God. Because Jesus Christ is the holy God and sanctified man in One, it has its basis in the knowledge of Jesus Christ. Because the God who claims man for Himself makes Himself originally responsible for him, it forms part of the doctrine of God. Its function is to bear primary witness to the grace of God in so far as this is the saving engagement and commitment of man.  

Barth’s christological understanding of the law obviously names the difference between Jews and Christians, but it also makes clear that our differences about the law cannot be characterized by the familiar contrast: “Jews are a people of the law, Christians are a people of grace”. Protestant Christians often characterized Judaism as legalistic—not because they knew anything about Judaism, but rather as part of their anti-Catholic polemic. In effect, Protestants were attempting to make Catholics the Jews of Christianity and they did not mean that characterization to be a compliment. Yet as Novak makes clear, the very need for forgiveness and atonement for sins indicates that the keeping of the law for Jews is part of a larger covenantal reality that renders the charge of legalism a gross misrepresentation.

The conflicts among Christians make any attempt by Jews to assess Christianity particularly challenging just to the extent Jews must try to avoid being misled by the misrepresentations Christians make of one another. To think that Jews are to the law as Christians are to grace is, as I suggested above, the result of a later hardening of positions occasioned by the Protestant Reformation. Justification by grace through faith was a central motif of the Lutheran side of the Reformation. But it would have never occurred
to Luther that justification made the Decalogue, for example, any less authoritative for Christians. After all, it is Luther who says in his *The Large Catechism* that “anyone who knows the Ten Commandments perfectly knows the entire Scripture”.3

The New Testament obviously includes, particularly in the letters of Paul, an ongoing critique of the law. Paul says that those in Christ have “died to the law” so that they might “belong to him who has been raised from the dead”, and so “bear fruit for God” (Romans 7:4–6; Galatians 2:19). Now that Christ has come, those who still try to keep the law (by being circumcised or by maintaining ritual purity) cut themselves off from Christ and lose his benefits (Galatians 5:2–6). Yet as Bruce Marshall maintains, these New Testament passages are not “against the law itself, but against treating the law and its observance as the way to salvation”, which is not incompatible with Jews who understand “their obedience to the commandments as acts of gratitude and thanksgiving to God for his electing love towards the Jewish people, and not as a means to salvation or to some other end”.4

The purpose of the law for Christians, as Barth suggests, is for our sanctification. The difference between Christians and Jews is not about the role of the law, but rather our different understandings of sanctification. Jesus has become for us the new law making it possible for us to be his disciples. Discipleship, at least for us, is not a denial of the role of the law, but rather names the way the law serves to make us manifestations of God’s gracious election. What becomes crucial for us Christians, therefore, is how the law helps us see the interconnection between our worship of the one true God, truth-telling, honoring parents, sharing goods, and rejoicing in our neighbor’s good fortune.

This account of the role of the law in the Christian life may seem extremely odd from a Jewish perspective. After all, it is the Christians who have thought they can pick and choose between the moral, the ceremonial, and juridical law of the Old Testament.5 Indeed, those very distinctions cannot help but suggest that Christians presume a freedom from the law that is incompatible with Judaism. That we differ about which laws are to be obeyed, as well as how to obey the laws we both agree should be obeyed, is without question. But I think it is crucial for Jews (and I must say for many Christians) to understand that the Christian selectivity about the law is not because we are against the law, but because we believe God’s election of us, the gentiles, to participate in God’s promise to Israel means the law has a purpose—a purpose that we believe is inherent to the law—to which we must be faithful.

For example, nothing distinguishes Christians and Jews more dramatically than our understanding of the status of the family. Put simply, Christians in order to be Christian do not have to have children. We must acknowledge we are children by appropriately honoring our parents, but to honor parents does not mean we must make them grandparents. The stark fact of the matter is that Jesus was neither married nor had children.
That fact does not explain why Christians do not have to be parents, but it does indicate our conviction that what God has done through the life of Jesus makes the existence of the church not only possible but necessary. Christians are not obligated to have children because we believe God, through the cross and resurrection of Jesus and the sending of the Holy Spirit, has made us a people who live through witness. In other words, the church grows through the conversion of the strangers who often turn out to be our biological children.

I do not want to leave the impression that Christians are anti-family or anti-child. The exact opposite is the case. Rather it means that we understand the church to be the agent of our salvation in a manner that makes possible the faithfulness marriage requires as well as the capacity to welcome children into the world. Christians, like Jews, are “naturally” sexually attracted to one another, and such an attraction must be tested by the church to discern if such an attraction should be called a marriage—that is, whether this couple’s union will manifest to the world the Christian commitment to lifelong fidelity. For Christians, those called to marriage bear the burden of proof. The single person does not have to justify her or his existence, but if called to marriage, one test of the calling is their willingness to be open to children. Although Christian and Jewish understanding and practice of the fourth commandment—particularly in a liberal culture—may appear quite similar, our “similarity” may well hide quite different understandings of the end of the law. At the very least it means, contrary to Novak, that family identity is not at the core of our identity as Christians.

This, I think, helps explain why I find Novak’s account of natural law at once illuminating and problematic. Christians have developed, particularly after Kant, similar accounts of natural law which I find even more problematic exactly because they are Christian. My problem with such accounts is how they may occlude Novak’s contention that “theology entails ethics as ethics presupposes theology”. I am not suggesting that Novak’s account of the Noachian law is Kantian, but only that there may be a tension between his contention of the inseparability of theology and ethics and his claim that the Noachian laws may “be taken to be a universal requirement” of human reason. Though I am suspicious of appeals to universal human reason generally, my deeper concern about Novak’s construal of the Noachian law as natural is how that account of the law may abstract the law from the law’s purpose to form a holy people. As a result, obedience to the law can invite a far too punctilious account of the moral life, that is, may separate the law from its function to make us a people of virtue.

I have no reason to object to Novak’s use of the Noachian law as a means to understand the status of Christians. If Christians—from a Jewish perspective—obey the law of Noah, so much the better. But I think Novak’s further suggestion that a natural law “ethic” should become the location for the recognition of our commonalities as well as a basis for our negotiation of a
secular society is problematic. Such a strategy, I fear, tempts Jew and Christian alike to assume that our ethics can be separated from our most basic theological convictions and practices. Christians do not have beliefs about God from which certain ethical implications may follow; rather we believe that the right worship of God is our morality. Crucial for our understanding of the Decalogue is not just the authority of the individual commandments, but why the so-called moral commandments are inseparable from the command to worship God on the Sabbath. Of course, Novak’s account of the three basic Noachian laws—the prohibition of idolatry, bloodshed, and sexual immorality—suggests at a formal level that the worship of God and ethics cannot be separated. But everything then depends on what God is worshiped and how. That the Jewish and Christian Sabbaths turn out to be different days is not irrelevant for understanding our respective “ethics”.

As I suggested at the beginning, Christians in the West are just beginning to learn to live the way Jews have had to live since Christians took over the world by making Caesar a member of the church. Put simply, we must learn from the Jews how to survive in a world that is not constituted by the recognition, much less the worship, of our God. In the process Christians may not only learn from the wisdom Jews have hewn from their struggle to survive Christianity, but we may even learn that our destiny is inseparable from the destiny of the Jews. I am convinced, however, that Christians cannot learn that lesson if, in an attempt to appear tolerant, we pretend that our ethics can be divorced from the conviction that God through Jesus’ life, death and resurrection has made us nothing less then heirs of Abraham. Accordingly, I believe Jewish theological readings of Christianity must face the challenge that the existence of Christianity is not a mistake, but rather one of the ways God desires to make His covenant with Israel known to the nations.

That Christians must now struggle to understand our Jewishness is not necessarily good news for Jews. I cannot offer an account of natural law that will insure that Jews and Christians really share far more than we disagree, or that will give us a common strategy to survive the challenges of an increasingly unfriendly social order. That we share much is no doubt due in part, as Novak argues, to our common humanity; but even more important, I believe, is the conviction that we share God’s election. Sustained by that conviction we should therefore pray that God will make us capable of sustaining the slow and hard work of friendship through which we hopefully can discover that we are in fact commanded by the same God. For I believe that through the law God intends nothing less than to make us His friends and, therefore, friends with one another.

Bibliography


NOTES


3 For a recent attempt to provide a commentary on the Ten Commandments in accordance with Luther’s claim, see Will Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas, *The Truth About God: The Ten Commandments in Christian Life* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1999).


5 Aquinas provides a wonderfully clear account of these distinctions in his *Summa Theologica*, translated by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1948), I–II, 99, 3. These distinctions do not mean that, for example, the moral and...
ceremonial law are “completely different” realities. For instance, Aquinas observes that “Wherefore to worship God, since it is an act of virtue, belongs to a moral precept; but the determination of this precept, namely that He is to be worshipped by such and such sacrifices, and such and such offerings, belongs to the ceremonial precepts. Consequently the ceremonial precepts are distinct from the moral precepts.” *Summa Theologica* I–II, 99, 3, 2. Aquinas provides an extensive discussion of the ceremonial and juridical law in the Old Testament, carefully trying to discern in what ways the law prefigures Christian practice. For example, he suggests that baptism corresponds to circumcision, the Eucharist to the banquet of the paschal lamb, and the sacrament of orders to the consecration of priests. *Summa Theologica* I–II, 102, 5.

Aquinas’ account of natural law is often interpreted in a manner quite similar to Novak’s understanding of natural law, that is, as an attempt to articulate the minimal requirements to sustain human community as well as the basic principles from which specific obligations can be derived. The problem with such accounts of Aquinas’ “ethics” is how the natural law is abstracted from his account of the virtues with the result that the theological account crucial to understand Aquinas’ understanding of the natural law is ignored. The natural law was not Aquinas’ attempt to provide a morality common to all humans, but rather natural law was his attempt to provide an exegetical principle for discerning those aspects of the Old Testament law still incumbent on Christians. For an account of Aquinas’ understanding of natural law along the lines I am suggesting, see John Bowlin’s *Contingency and Fortune in Aquinas’ Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 93–137.