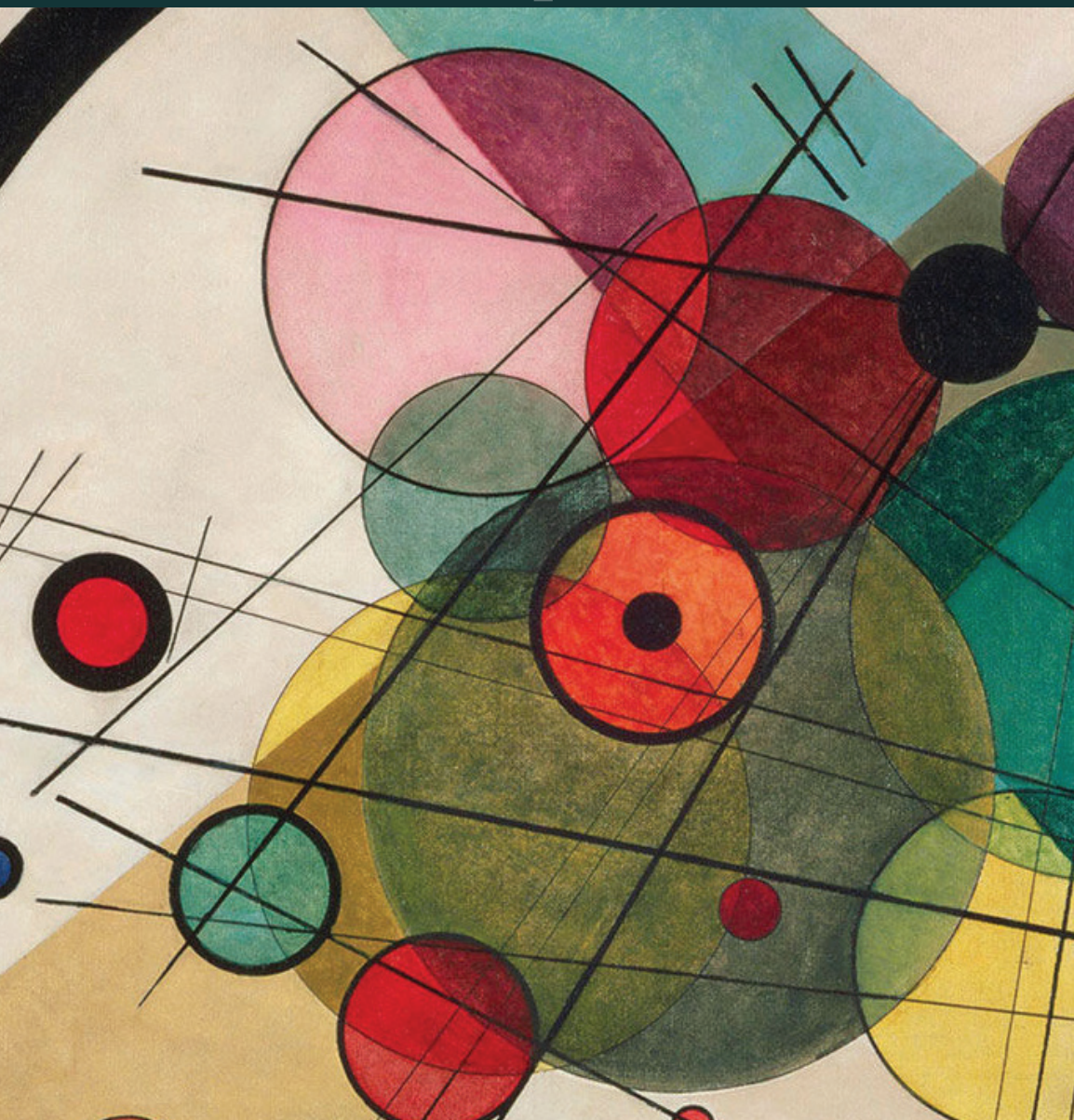


Churches and Moral Discernment



Learning from Traditions

Edited by Myriam Wijlens and Vladimir Shmaliy

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Churches
and
Moral Discernment

Volume 1

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Faith and Order Paper No. 228



**World Council
of Churches**
Publications

CHURCHES AND MORAL DISCERNMENT

Volume 1: Learning from Traditions

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Cover design, book design and typesetting: Michelle Cook / 4 Seasons Book Design

Cover image: Vassily Kandinsky, *Circles in a Circle* (detail), 1923.

ISBN: 978-2-8254-1735-5

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Preface

Myriam Wijlens and Vladimir Shmaliy

This is the first of three volumes resulting from the work of the Faith and Order Study Group 3 on moral discernment in the churches. From the 1980s onward, the topic of ethics has been on the agenda of the Faith and Order Commission. Indeed, in our times moral issues seem to be a challenge to preserving unity within different churches as well as a frequent obstacle to restoring visible unity between the churches. The topic of moral issues has been on Faith and Order's agenda with the aim "to clarify the theological inter-relation between two fundamental ecumenical concerns: the quest for visible unity of Christ's Church and the implementation of the Christian calling to a common witness and service in today's world."¹ Over the years, the Faith and Order Commission has published various studies, alone or in cooperation with other ecumenical institutions: for example, the 1990 document *Church and World*;² the 1997 published documents "Costly Unity," "Costly Commitment," and "Costly Obedience";³ and the 2005-issued document *Christian Perspectives on Theological Anthropology: A Faith and Order Study Document*.⁴

The First Phase: *Moral Discernment in the Churches— A Study Document (2006–2013)*

Following from its previous studies, the Standing Commission on Faith and Order in its 2006 meeting decided to "conduct a study of the ways in which the churches formulate and offer teaching and guidance with respect to moral and ethical issues – especially those that are or may become church-dividing,

1. Commission on Faith and Order, *Minutes of the Meeting of the Standing Commission 1986 Potsdam, GDR*, Faith and Order Paper No. 134 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1986), 28.

2. *Church and World: The Unity of the Church and the Renewal of Human Community: A Faith and Order Study Document*. Faith and Order Paper No. 151 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1990).

3. In Thomas F. Best and Martin Robra, eds, *Ecclesiology and Ethics: Ecumenical Ethical Engagement, Moral Formation and the Nature of the Church* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1997).

4. *Christian Perspectives on Theological Anthropology*, Faith and Order Paper No. 199 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2005).

e.g. human sexuality.”⁵ It undertook this study in 2007, with the working title “Moral Discernment in the Churches.” Over the course of this work, the commission clarified that its purpose was “to gain a deeper understanding of the nature of theological difference and disagreement in order to develop study material and resources that facilitate difficult conversations and theological discussions about moral issues.”⁶ The commission finalized its text, *Moral Discernment in the Churches: A Study Document* (hereafter *MDC*) in 2012 and published it in 2013.⁷

MDC is indeed a study document. It focuses not on moral questions per se, but rather on the discernment process that occurs as churches search for answers to moral questions. The purpose of the document is *not* to solve any moral issue, evaluate which moral decision is right, or impose any method of moral discernment. Rather, its purpose is to help churches understand why different conclusions on moral issues occur within and between churches.

Although the Faith and Order Commission decided to move beyond a comparative method, it has turned out to be a major challenge to find an appropriate approach for the task assigned. Indeed, discussions on moral issues are affected by factors that complicate the task of ecumenical dialogue, as stated in the “Introduction” of *MDC*:

1. Moral questions reflect deeply-held theological beliefs about sin and human nature.
2. Moral questions are often encountered within the context of personal experience and are therefore deeply emotionally charged.
3. Certainty about the rightness or wrongness of one’s own or another’s position on a moral issue – whether based on the authority of church teachings, spiritual guidance, or individual discernment – can make dialogue across lines of difference extremely difficult.
4. Churches engage in the process of moral discernment in culturally and ecclesiologically distinct ways that are often not known or understood by one another.

5. *Minutes of the Standing Commission on Faith and Order, Faverges, Haute-Savoie, France 2006*, Faith and Order Paper No. 202 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2006), 107.

6. *Minutes of the Standing Commission on Faith and Order meeting in Cairo, Arab Republic of Egypt 2008*, Faith and Order Paper No. 208 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2009), 54.

7. World Council of Churches, *Moral Discernment in the Churches: A Study Document*, Faith and Order Paper No. 215 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2013). Published as Appendix 1 of this book. Also accessible at <https://archive.org/details/wccfops2.222>.

These difficulties arise at all levels in churches and communities: between individuals, within churches, and between churches. Although all churches have basically the same sources, how they engage these sources and the authority they give them differs greatly. But people are not always aware of this (see *MDC*, Introduction).

For this reason, *MDC* presents a descriptive account of possible factors behind the similarities and differences in the moral discernment process. The document describes sources churches use when engaging in moral discernment and presents possible causative factors for when they arrive at conclusions that differ – not only from other churches but also from their own previous moral decisions. *MDC* is intended as a tool to help churches become aware of (1) how they engage in moral discernment, (2) what sources and factors influence that process, and (3) how different sources and factors operate in discernment processes of other people and churches. A deeper knowledge of one's own tradition or others is a necessary prerequisite for dialogue on moral topics.

The publication of *MDC* was not easy. Orthodox members of the Faith and Order commission wished to add an addendum that stated that the document “could be used in Orthodox theological schools and academic circles” but expressed some “concerns regarding the whole study process. The Orthodox read the text in ways that do not reflect their tradition” (*MDC*, “Orthodox Addendum”). The addendum mentions, in particular, the methodology used and the way the sources are presented in relation to each other. The addendum explicitly recommends that *MDC* be presented to the 2013 WCC assembly as a preliminary work in a more extensive study and that moral discernment be placed on the agenda of Faith and Order in the future. The Roman Catholic Church added a footnote to this addendum expressing that Catholics would share similar concerns, but would endorse it be presented to the WCC 2013 as a preliminary stage of a study that Faith and Order might continue in the future.

The Second Phase: Churches Engaging in Moral Discernment (2015–2021)

In light of the difficult birth of the 2013 *MDC*, as well as considering that the topic evokes very strong emotions, the Faith and Order Commission approved the proposal presented by its newly composed 2015 Study Group on moral discernment to undertake two projects. Both projects would allow for a faithful description of what occurs in a certain tradition and would also provide for a certain emotional distance from the project, allowing for a fruitful conversation. Two large projects were initiated.

The first project was entitled Church Traditions. The aim was to present self-descriptions of traditions as they engage in a moral discernment process. With the help of *MDC*, scholars reflected on and presented how their own tradition engages in a moral discernment process. These scholars were either members of the Faith and Order Commission or persons selected after consultation with members of their tradition who are on the commission. The scholars shared reflections about their own tradition, but these reflections nevertheless presented the personal views of the authors. The study group received 14 studies and is pleased to present them in this volume. They are from the following traditions: Eastern Orthodox, Syriac Orthodox, Coptic Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Old Catholic, Lutheran, Reformed, Anglican, Historic Peace Churches, Baptist, Methodist, Disciples of Christ, and Pentecostal. The study group received the studies by (1) listening to them attentively, (2) asking questions to understand the discernment process as described, and (3) engaging in dialogue to grasp where the similarities and differences between the different traditions lie. The method was again merely descriptive. The purpose was not at all to be normative. The study group presented its initial findings at the Faith and Order Commission meetings in 2017 and 2019.

The second project of studies undertaken, entitled Historical Examples, focused on discernment processes that took place with changing views on specific moral topics within different traditions over the course of history. The criteria for selecting the topics included that the change had to have occurred in the past and that that change is no longer debated. It was felt that examples from history might allow for a more objective and less emotional discussion. A major purpose was to learn from the past for the future.

Hence, the Study Group invited authors of the studies to shed light on the process behind modification or change in a position on a moral issue. The following questions were posed to the authors: What triggered engagement in a process of reconsidering a moral position? How did that process evolve? How was the argument built? What elements played a role? How did it come about? Who was involved in the decision-making? What authority did these persons have? And since change does not come overnight: What helped the tradition avoid a division as the change occurred over a certain period of time? The commission suggested that the authors use *MDC* as a guide in responding to these questions. Again, the method was analytical and descriptive, not normative. The project received 19 papers from different traditions on different topics. They will be presented in volume two. The introduction to that volume will provide more information about the topics chosen.⁸

8. Myriam Wijlens, Vladimir Shmaliy, Simone Sinn, eds., *Churches and Moral Discernment, volume 2: Learning from History*, Faith and Order Paper No. 229 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2021) forthcoming.

And finally, the third volume of this series will consist of a concluding report by the Faith and Order Commission about its findings from these two projects.⁹

The Current Volume

The current volume includes 14 self-descriptions of different traditions regarding moral discernment. They are preceded by an introduction that attends to the ecclesiological aspect of the self-descriptions. The different self-descriptions are presented for study: to reflect upon and provide awareness of how processes of moral discernment are envisioned by the respective traditions. They invite the reader, as well as churches, to study them, reflect on the moral discernment of their own tradition, and learn how others engage in moral discernment. The hope is that necessary prerequisites are fulfilled, allowing for constructive conversations within traditions. This will prevent divisions over moral issues and provide solid ground to engage in fruitful ecumenical dialogues that appreciate and attribute appropriate relevance to moral issues.

The reader may already be informed that several members of the study group experienced a surprise in engaging in these two processes. While the self-descriptions published in this first volume reveal differences in how traditions engage in moral discernment, when they are considered in combination with the examples from history we find that this does not always lead to different outcomes. Indeed, despite differences in process, the outcome of moral discernment – that is, the moral position itself – might be very similar if not the same. By the same token, the historical studies reveal that similarities in how churches engage in moral discernment might not necessarily lead to the same or similar outcomes. Hence, the studies in the two volumes make for interesting reading.

As co-chairs of the study group on moral discernment in the churches since 2015, we would like to express a word of gratitude in particular to the members of the study group for their engagement and to the authors of the studies who assisted us in these projects. A special word of thanks is to be expressed to the staff members of the Faith and Order Commission, Rev. Dr Dagmar Heller (2015–2018) and Rev. Dr Simone Sinn (since 2018). Without their expertise, invaluable advice, and enthusiasm, the work accomplished would not have been possible.

9. Faith and Order Commission, *Churches and Moral Discernment, volume 3: Facilitating Dialogue to Build Koinonia*, Faith and Order Paper No. 235 (Geneva: WCC Publications), forthcoming.

Introduction

Rachel Muers and Kristina Mantasasvili

Moral Discernment and the Faith and Order Commission

Since at least the early 1980s, the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches (WCC) has recognized the importance of engaging with issues of moral discernment in the churches. Moral and ethical issues are often the cause of disunity and division within and between the churches; moreover, processes of moral discernment affect and reflect core aspects of the life of each church and of the life the churches share. The collection of papers presented here is offered as a new contribution toward deepening mutual understanding among Christian communities, as they seek together in faith the unity to which Christ calls them.

In pursuance of its mandate to “serve the churches as they call one another to visible unity,” the Faith and Order Commission has undertaken numerous studies related to moral discernment in the churches, most recently *Moral Discernment in the Churches* (2013, hereafter *MDC*).¹ *MDC* was “seen as a report on the first stage of a study process that is called to continue.” At its first meeting in Caraiman (Romania) in 2015, the current Commission on Faith and Order appointed a study group to continue work on moral discernment processes in the churches and to identify uniting and dividing factors.² Responding to specific needs identified following the *MDC* process, the study group was asked to pay particular attention to the role and nature of authority in moral discernment.

The aim of the study group’s work, which is reflected in this collection of papers, is a modest one: it is to serve the churches by enabling them to

1. World Council of Churches, *Moral Discernment in the Churches: A Study Document*, Faith and Order Paper No. 215 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2013). Published as Appendix 1 of this book. Also accessible at <https://archive.org/details/wccfops2.222>.

2. World Council of Churches, Commission on Faith and Order, *Minutes of the Meeting at the Monastery of Caraiman, Busteni Romania*, 17–24 June 2015, Faith and Order Paper No. 222 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2015), 92.

better *understand* each other's *processes* of moral discernment, and the wider issues that might be raised by a consideration of these processes. The aim is therefore not to investigate or resolve differences between churches that might arise from the *outcomes* of moral discernment processes – that is, from the decisions reached on particular moral issues. The group has also not sought at this stage to identify substantial shared ground, even in relation to the processes for moral discernment. Rather, following the commission's discernment, the group aims to enable conversation and mutual listening about how these decisions are made.

In this particular volume, the focus is on how different church traditions describe, in their own terms, their processes of moral discernment. The studies are offered as an invitation for the churches to listen attentively to one another, to consider others' self-descriptions in the light of their own ecclesial self-understanding, and to use this as a starting-point for conversation and dialogue that might lead them deeper into their shared faith and calling.

Approach and Aims of This Study Process

With the approval of the commission, the study group on moral discernment has commissioned various papers from experts from different church traditions. For the set of papers published here, the authors were asked to describe how their own tradition arrives at moral decisions, focusing on giving an account of the sources of authority and the ecclesial structures involved in moral discernment. Interim findings from this process were presented to the whole commission in 2017, and following this, additional papers were commissioned to ensure a wider representation of church traditions. Despite this additional work to broaden the range of traditions included, it is important to recognize that the papers presented here still do not provide an exhaustive account of the various church traditions nor of their moral discernment processes.

It is also important to recognize that the self-descriptions found in this volume do not fully reflect the complexity of communal moral discernment in practice. A second and more extensive part of the study group's work focused on specific historical examples of moral discernment processes in churches that led to shifts in attitude and practice on moral questions. It is hoped that the two parts of the study, taken together, will not only provide deeper insight into the life, faith and experience of church communities as they engage in moral discernment, but will also enable insights into the relationship between churches' ecclesial self-understanding and the practice of moral discernment in particular historical situations.

Overall, the process undertaken by this study group is somewhat unusual, when compared to other work by the Commission on Faith and Order. The group has concentrated on collecting and presenting specific and detailed examples – whether of how particular church traditions understand their moral discernment processes, as in this volume, or of how moral discernment processes work out in practice, as in the second volume of this project. This approach – primarily descriptive rather than normative, allowing both differences and common ground to become apparent – was chosen deliberately, as appropriate to the current stage of the churches’ shared work on moral discernment. The aim at this time is to help the churches to listen to one another better, in this particularly contentious area of church life – as a necessary step on a long road toward discerning what can be held in common or what is not divisive or unity threatening. The focus is on hearing from fellow-Christians – those of earlier generations, as well as contemporaries from different traditions – about how they respond in practice to the call of Christ: how they interpret their situations, how they engage in processes of moral discernment, and how they reach and implement decisions.

Themes and Issues Emerging

What can be learned, from the papers presented here and from the study process of which they form a part, that might help the churches as they call one another toward visible unity? First, one key overall finding from the ecclesial self-descriptions in this volume, when seen in the context of the wider picture of church division and disunity over moral issues, is that different sources and ecclesial structures for engaging in moral discernment in different churches do not provide a sufficient explanation for the different moral conclusions reached. Churches that understand and structure moral discernment in similar ways can reach very different conclusions on a given issue. In other words, in order to understand why and how Christians reach different conclusions on moral issues, one needs to look not only at the “theory” – as presented in this volume – but also at how it is put into practice in specific contexts.

This does not, of course, mean that the ecclesial self-descriptions presented in this volume are irrelevant to understanding our differences or for seeking unity. On the contrary, listening to how each church tradition describes this core aspect of its life is a crucial first step toward understanding how conclusions on moral issues are reached, and hence why possible differences arise and why some become divisive and others not. Moreover, these self-descriptions

illuminate key areas of commonality and difference, not only on moral discernment processes but on related theological and ecclesiological issues.

While considering sources of authority for moral discernment, several of the papers highlight and articulate the complex relationship between what in this volume Steven R. Harmon calls “theological” and “ecclesiological” sources – that is, between the sources that “function in a pattern of authority for the practice of the church as well as its faith,” and the “socially embodied efforts” of the church to discern and live out that pattern in a given situation.³ These aspects of authority are often hard to separate, especially for those traditions that emphasize, as Metropolitan Vasilios and Kristina Mantasavili put it, that the various sources of authority “[take] meaning and [make] sense only inside the community of the church.”

All the papers presented here recognize the Holy Spirit, scripture, and tradition as core common sources for moral discernment that are intrinsically connected, forming the heart of moral discernment in the churches. It is striking that the work of the Holy Spirit, guiding the church into unity, truth, and holiness in the process of moral discernment, is often not referred to explicitly when churches give detailed accounts of how these processes work; some exceptions include Cecil M. Robeck’s discussion of the relationship between the Holy Spirit and scriptural authority in Pentecostal tradition, and the account of Quaker moral discernment processes in Rachel Muers’s paper. It is important, however, to see dependence on the Holy Spirit as a foundation for the whole moral discernment process – in the interpretation of scripture, the continuation of tradition, and the faithful response to a given historical situation.

The work in this volume, continuing a theme that has been significant throughout the Faith and Order Commission’s work on moral discernment, emphasizes the importance of scripture as a primary source for moral discernment. The approach to reading scriptures, however, varies significantly between different churches and in some cases even within the same confessional tradition. Different interpretations of scripture, and different approaches to interpreting scripture, on a given moral issue can exist within one church tradition without this being church-dividing. The study process offers limited evidence that specific interpretive approaches – such as the use of historical-critical methods, or giving particular authority to the early church’s interpretation of scripture – are associated with specific outcomes of moral discernment processes.

3. Morag Logan similarly considers in her paper the relationship between “*what* has authority” and “*who* speaks with authority.”

Again, all of the papers indicate the use of at least some kind of “tradition” (small “t”) as source for moral discernment.⁴ For example, for some churches scripture and the writings of the early fathers are inseparable as sources, but these different writings still carry different weights. In addition to the scriptures and early church writings, various churches also accord significance to the history and wisdom of their own confessional inheritance (e.g., decisions of synods of a church through the ages, or the writings of key figures in the history of that confessional tradition – see Bernd Oberdorfer’s discussion of the significance of Luther’s writings and of the Augsburg Confession for Lutheran approaches to moral discernment). It is important to note in all this that “tradition,” as a source in moral discernment, includes not only doctrinal texts or writings on specific moral issues, but also liturgical tradition, church history, and many other forms. Given that the whole church is the subject of tradition, tradition is also closely linked to the “sense of the faithful” (see the example of the Roman Catholic Church discussed in Josef Römelt’s paper), and to the capacity for moral discernment that is formed in every faithful Christian through their participation in the life of the body of Christ. It is worth paying close attention to what is said in this volume about tradition, because in the study group’s wider work on historical processes of moral discernment, different views of tradition have been found to play an important role. The moral norms, at various levels, that are appealed to, revised, or developed in a moral discernment process are all carried by tradition – sometimes confessionally specific and sometimes shared with other churches.

In the initial discussions leading to this study, taking up the issues raised by the *MDC* process, the question of the relationship between ecclesial structures and moral discernment came to the fore. How do factors such as the structure, the composition of decision-making bodies, or how representation is exercised⁵ affect the moral discernment of a church? The papers presented here do not allow for drawing firm conclusions about how these factors affect the *outcomes* of moral discernment processes. They do, however, provide important insights into how the churches go about relating the “sources” of moral discernment to

4. The papers received indicated that there has not been universal reception of the outcome of the discussions in the Faith and Order Commission, which led in 1963 to a distinction between Tradition (with capital “T”), tradition (with small “t”) and traditions. See Patrick C. Rodger and Lukas Vischer, eds, *The Fourth World Conference on Faith and Order, Montreal 1963*, Faith and Order Paper No. 42 (London: SCM Press 1964), 50, para. 39. See also the discussion in Shahe Ananyan’s paper in this volume.

5. On “representation,” see for example Rebecca Todd Peters’s account of the various forms and levels, and the importance, of representation in moral discernment processes in a Presbyterian church in her contribution in this volume.

specific questions – and how moral discernment processes relate to wider questions of ecclesiology.

An example of how the careful study of churches' self-descriptions, in relation to moral discernment processes, can advance understanding on wider ecclesiological issues can be seen by considering the commonly used distinction between hierarchical, synodical, and congregational churches. On first appearance, for example, the Orthodox and the Roman Catholic Church could be seen as hierarchical, and the churches of the Reformation tradition as synodical. This use of the term "hierarchical" derives from the term *hierarchs* – that is, bishops only – whereas, in this understanding "synodical" refers to including at least some form of representation of all the faithful. The "hierarchical" understanding also seems to be a top-down decision-making structure, while the synodical understanding is flatter in its decision-making structure, given the place in decision-making of a body with a significant number of members of equal standing. A closer look at the papers presented here, however, reveals that this is a rather simplified description. As discussed in several of the papers (Metropolitan Vasilios and Kristina Mantasavili; Stephen Meawad; Mor Polycarpus A. Aydin; Shahe Ananyan), in the Orthodox churches bishops themselves meet in synods and search for a consensus. In the Anglican churches and some other Protestant churches, although there is an involvement in the synodal⁶ process of clergy and laity, nevertheless, bishops hold a particular responsibility for teaching the faith, including on moral matters – as discussed in Jeremy Worthen's paper. Synodical, hierarchical and congregational elements can sometimes all be found within one church's structure and processes. This example, identified by the study group in its analyses of the papers, is included here to illustrate how careful attention to ecclesial self-description can help to avoid generalization and stereotyping of the other – both of which are particularly dangerous when considering issues around moral discernment.

It is striking how many of the papers in this volume, in describing a church's approaches to moral discernment, make detailed reference to its history and the contexts in which it has been found. For example, Theresa Hüther discusses how the Old Catholic Church's history has shaped its distinctive emphasis on the conscience of the faithful and their right to participate in moral decision-making, and Kristina Culp considers the continuing implications of the origins of the Disciples of Christ in a movement for church unity and reform. Such insights into how history shapes ecclesial self-understanding, in relation to moral discernment, help to remind the reader again that moral discernment is

6. *Synodal* refers to the process followed, in contrast with *synodical*, which refers to the structure.

a living and socially embodied process that cannot be understood in abstraction from the particular communities that undertake it.

Understanding one another's moral discernment, then, is connected to the larger task of understanding one another's life and faith – as it really is, in all its complexity. It is hoped that the papers in this volume, by enabling a deeper understanding of where churches' moral decisions are coming from, will serve the churches as they call one another to visible unity and listen to one another in wisdom and charity. Taken together, the papers allow readers to appreciate the churches' shared commitment to moral discernment, grounded in their common faith and calling.

1. Approaching Moral Questions from the Conscience of the Church

Metropolitan Vasilios and Kristina Mantasavili

Sources of Orthodox Christian Ethics

When speaking of the ethics of the Orthodox Christian tradition, we often do not realize that the organized manuals of moral science at our disposal today, limited as they may be, are the combination of several elements of Christian faith, cultivated and gathered throughout the centuries.

The first and main source of Christian ethics is, naturally, the revelation of God contained in the holy scripture, as the recording of God's revelation and the sacred Tradition.¹ The relationship of Christian ethics to the revelation is direct. Thus, just as through the revelation, through ethics the human being is gradually and inductively educated by God,² – both as a single person and as part of humanity as a whole. St John of Damascus, in his work *An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, starts this exposition from the creation, continues with the fall, and highlights the unity of humankind through the incarnation of *logos*, which signified the restoration of human nature. He starts from the nothing and proceeds to baptism, which is the personal acceptance of the revelation of God and the incorporation with the church, where, through the sacrament of the eucharist and the Holy Spirit, the new human is featured as new ethos and deed.³ Therefore, we can only properly view the content of the divine revelation

1. Παναγιώτου Χ. Δημητρόπουλου, Ὁρθόδοξος Χριστιανικὴ Ἠθικὴ (Αθήνα: 1970), 17 (Panagiotis Ch. Dimitropoulos, *Orthodox Christian Ethics*, Athens 1970).

2. Γεωργίου Ἰ. Μαντζαρίδη, Χριστιανικὴ Ἠθικὴ Ι (Π. Πουρναρά: Θεσσαλονικὴ, 2008), 75–79 (Georgios I. Mantzaridis, *Christian Ethics I*, P. Pournaras: Thessaloniki 2008).

3. “The remission of sins, therefore, is granted alike to everyone through baptism, while the grace of the Spirit is proportional to the faith and the struggle of purification that precedes it. Now, however, through baptism we receive the first gift of the Holy Spirit, and the rebirth with baptism becomes for us the beginning of a new life and a seal and security and illumination. It requires, therefore, all our unwavering strength to keep ourselves pure from filthy deeds, that we may not, like a dog returning to his vomit, make ourselves the slaves of sin again. For faith without works is dead, and likewise are works without faith. For the true faith is attested

throughout history through an educational and dynamic perspective. Besides, God's law, depicted in the holy scripture, elucidates the natural law and nothing more.⁴

The truth about the essence of the human *ethos* is revealed in Christ. He bequeathed to us not a systematic moral teaching but rather his body, the Church, where the whole world is renewed along with the human. This new human is presented with a new ethics, indicated in the divine commandments.⁵ However, the divine revelation is perceived not as a bank of moral rules and canons, but rather as the history of God's presence in the world. Therefore, the holy scripture and sacred Tradition, as references, offer us the basic material to build up the content of Christian ethics.

The Tradition annotates the life of the church as bearer of Christ's revelation, and it consists of a few main and elementary components. First are the doctrines and symbols of the church, which articulate its profound spiritual experience. There is a close relationship between Christian morals and doctrines, since the ethics has not only a practical but also a dogmatic character. The ethical axioms of the Lord and the apostles, interpreted by Christian ethics, are at the same time doctrines of faith: definite, infallible, and uncorrupted. Besides, the Christian ethics is borrowing the principles of dogmatics and sets them into practical human life. In simple words, we could say that ethics is, in some way, the practical implementation of the doctrines. Moreover, it seems impossible to follow a moral Christian life without profoundly believing in the doctrines, and vice versa.⁶

by works." «Ἡ μὲν τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν ἄφεσις πάσαν ὁμοίως διὰ τοῦ βαπτίσματος δίδοται, ἡ δὲ χάρις τοῦ Πνεύματος κατὰ τὴν ἀναλογίαν τῆς πίστεως καὶ τῆς προκαθήαρσεως. Νῦν μὲν οὖν διὰ τοῦ βαπτίσματος τὴν ἀπαρχὴν τοῦ ἁγίου Πνεύματος λαμβάνομεν, καὶ ἀρχὴ ἑτέρου βίου γίνεται ἡμῖν ἡ παλιγγενεσία καὶ σφραγίς καὶ φυλακτήριον καὶ φωτισμός. Χρὴ δὲ πάσῃ δυνάμει ἀσφαλῶς τηρεῖν ἑαυτοὺς καθαροὺς ἀπὸ ρυπαρῶν ἔργων, ἵνα μὴ πάλιν ὥσπερ κύων ἐπὶ τὸν ἴδιον ἔμετον ἐπιστρέψαντες δούλους πάλιν ἑαυτοὺς τῆς ἁμαρτίας ποιήσωμεν. «Πίστις γὰρ χωρὶς ἔργων νεκρά ἐστίν», ὁμοίως καὶ ἔργα χωρὶς πίστεως· ἡ γὰρ ἀληθὴς πίστις διὰ τῶν ἔργων δοκιμάζεται». Ἰωάννου Δαμασκηνοῦ, Ἐκδοσις ἀκριβοῦς τῆς ὀρθοδόξου πίστεως, Κείμενο-Μετάφραση-Εἰσαγωγή-Σχόλια Νίκου Μασσοῦκα (Πουρναρά: Θεσσαλονίκη, 2009), 346–48 (John of Damascus, *An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, Text - Translation - Introduction - Comments Nikos Matsoukas, Pournaras: Thessaloniki, 2009).

4. «Ὡστε ἰσοτίμους καὶ τὰ αὐτὰ ἀλλήλοις παιδεύοντας τοὺς δύο νόμους, τὸν τε φυσικὸν καὶ τὸν γραπτὸν, καὶ μηδέτερον θατέρου ἔχοντα πλεόν ἢ ἔλαττον». Μαξιμου Ὁμολογητοῦ, Περὶ ἀποριῶν, PG91, 1128CD (*Maximus the Confessor, Questions and Doubts*, PG91, 1128CD).

5. Γεωργίου Ἱ. Μαντζαρίδη, 77 (George I. Mantzaridis, *op. cit.*).

6. Παναγιώτου Χ. Δημητρίου, Ὁρθόδοξος Χριστιανικὴ Ἠθικὴ (Αθήνα, 1970), 16 (Panagiotis Ch. Dimitropoulos, *Orthodox Christian Ethics*, Athens 1970).

Another very important element of Christian ethics is the set of sacred canons, which are above all pastoral texts meant either to regulate particular needs of the church as a community of believers, or to guide the spiritual life of each church member. Thus, every canon presupposes a particular pastoral problem.⁷ The purpose of the canons is not to lead to personal perfection but rather to guard the frame of spiritual life. The Orthodox Church contains the principle that the facts of an issue precede the formulation or wording of that issue. Exactly as it happened in the holy scripture, the facts of the revelation of God to the prophets came first; then came the incarnate revelation of God's word to the evangelists and apostles; and later followed the recording of all the events of Christ's actions in the world and the life of the apostolic community. The same principle applies to the canons: the life of the Christian community of the church comes first; then all the problems of orderliness and the Christian way of life are identified; and finally, the holy canons pinpoint the limits of Christian freedom of action as a way of moral exercise.

One of the most significant sources of moral discernment for Orthodox Christian ethics is liturgical life – and especially the holy eucharist, given that all other “sacraments” (baptism, chrismation, laying on of hands (ordination), marriage, confession, etc.) are related to the celebration of the eucharist.

Orthodox ecclesiology has, as a basis for moral discernment, the eschatological experience and not the historical one. Therefore, we can understand why all rules (canons) of the ecumenical and local synods and canons of individual fathers concerning moral discernment are related to the possibility of participating in holy communion, which means to be members of the eschatological kingdom. The world and its historical situation do not alter the church of Christ, which means the kingdom of God, but vice versa: the world must be transformed and become the kingdom of God. This is the reason we pray during the eucharistic service: “Thy kingdom come.” This understanding is not a question of “conservatism,” but concerns the mission of the church to liberate the world from its sinful situation and renew it in Christ by the grace of the Holy Spirit.

A wider source of valuable material for Christian ethics are the texts of the church fathers.⁸ A very characteristic example is the book of *Didache*, which

7. «Έκαστος κανὼν προϋποθέτει συγκεκριμένον ποιμαντικὸν πρόβλημα, τὸ ὁποῖον ἡ Ἐκκλησία ἀντιμετωπίζει διὰ συγκεκριμένης ποιμαντικῆς ἐνέργειας, ἣτις συνοψίζεται καὶ συγκεκριμενοποιεῖται εἰς ἕκαστον κανόνα». See Ἀρχιμ. Γεωργίου Καψάνη, Ἡ ποιμαντικὴ διακονία κατὰ τοὺς ἱεροὺς Κανόνας (Ἄθως: Πειραιεὺς 1976), 59–71 (Archim. Georgios Kapsanis, *The pastoral ministry according to the sacred Canons*, Athos: Piraeus 1976).

8. The ethical content of Christian teaching in early Christianity has mainly been underlined by the apologists, who tried to present the Christian faith according to the philosophical

contains a basic manual of Christian ethics; and, finally, an important source for Christian ethics is the lives of saints. The personal nature of the divine revelation is borne in the Orthodox Church through the saints, who reveal the presence of God and the true human nature while living according to God's commandments. They thus become indicators of true life and freedom and set by their lives an example of Christian ethics.

It is significant to underline that none of the above can be properly interpreted outside the life of the one holy, catholic, and apostolic church. Everything takes meaning and makes sense only inside the community of the church.

The Ecclesiastical Structures of the Orthodox Church

Historically, the administrative organization of the church has been defined, firstly, by the formation of the ecclesiastical structures during the early years of Christianity, and secondly, by its canonical foundation through the ecumenical and local synods. The further development of the jurisdiction of the thrones was defined mainly by the dissemination of the Christian faith to Northern and Eastern Europe.⁹

The configuration of the administrative structures of the church during the era of the ecumenical synods was based on the new conditions created by the predomination of Christianity in the Greco-Roman world in the 4th century. This was, namely, the metropolitan system, which was first introduced during the first ecumenical synod (325 CE) as a form of administrative structure for the relations between each local church of each province. However, as the church continued to expand, the need arose for a higher authority that would oversee the work and deed of each local synod. This led to the patriarchal pentarchy, which remained until the latter years as the main administrative institution of the Eastern church.

Since the metropolitan bishops served as the main link between the hierarchy and the laity, they became entitled to the ordination of higher and lower

understanding of their era. A more systematic examination can be found in the work of the great Alexandrian theologians, represented mainly by Origen. Furthermore, ethical issues were thoroughly examined by Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa, Basil of Caesarea, and John Chrysostom. From the Latin fathers, Saint Augustine is the most distinguished; and from the Byzantine fathers, the works of Maximus the Confessor, John of Damascus, Theodore the Studite, Symeon the New Theologian, and Nicholas Kabasilas are quite important. Finally, an important work for the ethical and spiritual life of Christians is the *Philokalia*. See Γεωργίου Ί. Μαντζαρίδη, 82–87 (George I. Mantzaridis, *op. cit.*).

9. Βλάσιου Ίω. Φειδᾶ, Ἐκκλησιαστική Ἱστορία, Ἀπό τήν Εἰκονομαχία μέχρι τή Μεταρρύθμιση (Τρίτη Ἐκδοση: Αθήνα, 2002), 117–84 (Vlasios I. Feidas, *Ecclesiastical History, From Iconoclasm to Reformation*, Triti Ekdoti: Athens 2002).

clergy to facilitate the dissemination of the various deeds to the local parishes. Of course, the new clergy members were obliged to have certain educational qualifications and impeccable life manners. The canons of the first ecumenical and local synods utilized the relevant patristic tradition, which described not only the size of priesthood but also the duties of clergy in the worship and the general pastoral mission of the church.¹⁰

The Orthodox Church applies the synodal system, in the *terminus technicus*. This means that decisions on any matter, not only of moral nature, can be taken both within the local or pan-Orthodox synods, but also any priest in his parish is at liberty to make a decision for an individual believer. Thus, one of the assets of future priests is to meet the necessary spiritual qualifications for the fulfilment of their mission as well as the requisite theological education,¹¹ since it is within their duties to spiritually educate and guide the laity to safeguard the proper moral life of the members of the parish. However, we must also remember that for many believers, a monk or a nun, without having the priesthood, are spiritual advisors because they are devoted solely to prayer. The sayings of the desert fathers and mothers are important examples. So, pastoral counselling is not related to any authority but is the instrument of the Holy Spirit. This is the body of Christ.

Moral Discernment in the Orthodox Church

Moral discernment takes place in the body of the Orthodox Church (synod, bishops, presbyters, and the faithful). This section will explain the criteria for moral discernment and depict where the correctness of a decision is founded and/or affirmed. It is important to underline once again that moral discernment in the Orthodox Church is conditioned by the church's eucharistic eschatological conscience and understanding. Nearly, all "penances" (ἐπιτίμια) are related to the question of whether or not permission is granted for somebody to take part in the "sacrament" of the eucharist, which is the manifestation of the eschatological kingdom of God. The canons are norms of the kingdom, which is present and yet expected to come free of any legalism. Everyday life is illuminated by the eschatological kingdom, and not vice versa. It is a church action and not secular activism. Thus, as previously explained, according to

10. Βλάχου Ἰω. Φειδά, 964 (Vlasios I. Feidas, *op. cit.*).

11. Παντελεήμονος Ροδόπουλου, Μητροπολίτου Τυρολόης καὶ Σερεντίου, Ἐπιτομή Κανονικοῦ Δικαίου (Μυγδονία: Θεσσαλονίκη, 2005), 122–25 (Panteleimon Rodopoulos, *Metropolitan of Tyroloa and Serentium, An overview of Orthodox Canon Law*, Mygdonia: Thessaloniki 2005).

the Orthodox understanding there is no defining border line between faith-doctrine and practical life-ethos.

St Epiphanius of Constantia sets the following as criteria: (a) what Jesus Christ has done during his earthly ministry; (b) what is included in the holy scriptures; and (c) what the role of tradition, teaching, and canonical order of the church in the history of its life is.

The Conscience of the Church is a comprehensive definition that includes all the above-mentioned sources and criteria for moral discernment. The church received them from Jesus Christ, the apostles, the teaching and content of the holy scriptures as the revelation of God, the teaching of the fathers of the church, and the teachings and authority of the ecumenical and local councils. The church experienced them, preserved them, always hands them on as a continuous tradition and life, and teaches them as the saving truth. The “sacraments” of the church – having a eucharistic and eschatological character in content, structure, tradition – reveal the self-conscience of the church, meaning what the church is and what its nature reveals within history. The church constitutes the experience of faith and the relationship between the believer as member of the body of Christ with God and the other members of the body (faith and order).

The church can arrive at a solution on any challenging issue in two ways:

1. “*Kat’ Akriveia*” (ἀκρίβεια). This criterion for moral discernment for the Orthodox Church is the precise application of the norms (that forbid, for example, abortions or suicides) and the predetermined canonical penances (ἐπιτίμια) imposed to apply the canons to the letter.
2. “*Kat’ Oikonomia*” (οἰκονομία). This practice of the church allows for a certain flexibility. It does not mean the abolition of the canons, but rather refers to pastoral discernment and the benevolent (φιλόανθρωπος) application of canons, as long as they are curative for the human being.

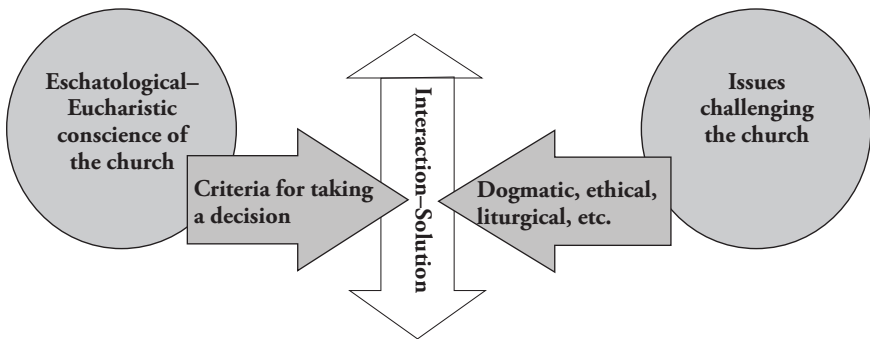
Issues That Activate the Criteria of the Conscience of the Church for a Moral Discernment

History has proven that issues the church might confront in its daily life are numerous and various. These include the following:

1. Issues concerning faith, doctrine, teaching. These issues cannot be changed (e.g., trinitarian doctrine, the divinity of Jesus and of the Holy Spirit, the content of the divine revelation).
2. Issues of Christian ethics and life and the application of the commandments (especially love, the new commandment of Jesus Christ).

3. Issues concerning holy sacraments and liturgical order.
4. Issues regarding canonical order.
5. The Christian way of living according to the teaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ.
6. The ethical dimension of political and economic decisions.

The following diagram could be applied for the discernment of issues concerning faith and doctrine, Christian ethics, canonical and liturgical order and action, and the life of every single member of the body of Christ.



The interactions of theological and dogmatic issues have often been productive, but they have also resulted in violent reactions and religious and political clashes. The challenges of heresies led to the Orthodox formulation of the content of the Christian faith.

People who have challenged the conscience of the church through the centuries were responded to by the church through the convocation of ecumenical councils, as an expression of the living experience of the church's life, faith, and tradition. But others, because of their autonomous attitude toward the ecclesial body, remained voluntarily out of the communion of the church, giving rise to various schisms. Additionally, the teaching of the gospel, the canons of the ecumenical and local councils, and the tradition of the church regulate the governing system of the church and determine the framework of the Christian ethics of the believers.

In conclusion, it is very important to note that the Orthodox Church is the church of tradition, and consequently has the conscience of preserving the tradition of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church. However, the tradition is not conservation in the sense of immovability. Rather, it is motion and life. The church is a living organism that moves and transforms, not through altering the unalterable content of the faith but through adapting it and expressing

it accordingly to each environment.¹² The adjustment of the Tradition to certain situations of contemporary reality requires empirical and fundamental knowledge not only of each situation but of the ecclesial tradition itself. And this can only be achieved by those who are members and live within this tradition.

12. Γεωργίου Ί. Μαντζαρίδη, Χριστιανική Ἠθική II (Π. Πουρναρά: Θεσσαλονίκη, 2009), 324–28 (George I. Mantzaridis, *Christian Ethics II*, P. Pournaras: Thessaloniki 22009).

2. Inspired by Ephrem the Syrian: Moral Discernment with a Therapeutic Approach

Mor Polycarpus A. Aydin

The Faith and Order Commission has undertaken to study the topic of moral discernment in the churches. In 2013 it published a first result: *Moral Discernment in the Churches: A Study Document*.¹ Subsequently, the commission mandated a study group to investigate how the churches themselves describe the discernment process that concerns ethical decision-making. With gratitude I have accepted the invitation to participate in this important study and will offer a description of the process and authorities involved in the discernment process in the Syriac tradition regarding moral discernment and ethical decision-making.²

This study opens with a brief account of the Syriac Church to situate it in its historical context. It includes a few words about canon law in the Syriac tradition. Next, I shall reflect about the sources of authority in which scripture holds a pre-eminent place. In a third section, I shall reflect on the ecclesial structures of authority with special reference to the notion of synodality. Since the faithful are dispersed throughout the world these days, the Syriac Church faces moral discernment in a worldwide context. The fourth section reflects the challenges that arise from this and describes how, in searching for a response to new needs and questions, St Ephrem's (ca 306-373)³ reflections guide the Syriac tradition until today. Finally, I will offer some concluding remarks on the subject under consideration.

1. World Council of Churches, *Moral Discernment in the Churches: A Study Document*, Faith and Order Paper No. 215 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2013). Published as Appendix 1 of this book. Also accessible at <https://archive.org/details/wccfops2.222>.

2. This study is a duly revised text of my earlier published article: "Synodality in the Syriac Tradition," in Péter Szabo, ed. *Primacy and Synodality: Deepening Insights*, Proceedings of the 23rd Congress of the Society for the Law of the Eastern Churches, Debrecen, St Athanasius Theological Institute, 3–8 September 2017. Kanon XXV (Nyíregyháza 2019), 309–321.

3. Sebastian P. Brock, "Ephrem," in *Gorgias Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Syriac Heritage: Electronic Edition*, ed., Sebastian P. Brock, Aaron M. Butts, George A. Kiraz, and Lucas Van Rompay (Piscataway, N.J.: Gorgias Press, 2011; online ed., Beth Mardutho, 2018), <https://gedsh.bethmardutho.org/Ephrem>.

The Syriac Orthodox Church in Its Historical Context

The Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch forms a distinct tradition belonging to the Oriental Orthodox family of churches and exists alongside the Greek and Latin traditions. Its significance within Christian tradition stems from its roots in the biblical/Semitic world, out of which the Bible and Christianity sprang. Furthermore, its Syriac language,⁴ the local Aramaic dialect of Edessa, which is employed in the liturgy today, is not all that different from the Galilean Aramaic that Christ himself would have spoken. As Robert A. Kitchen notes, “Syriac-speaking Christianity is centered about the heritage of its language, not around its theology. Many strands, theological, ecclesiastical and literary, are woven together to produce the distinctive Syriac tradition of Christianity which never forgets whose language it speaks.”⁵ Earliest Syriac tradition, up to the 4th century, is Semitic in character, free from the later influence of Greek culture, philosophy, and worldview.⁶

Commenting on the significance of the Syriac tradition, Sebastian Brock emphasizes the need to recognize Syriac spirituality as something quite distinctive within broader Christian spirituality as a whole. The Syriac tradition, he says, has its own specific contribution to make to Christian tradition. Therefore, it would be quite wrong to see Syriac, Greek, and Latin traditions as rivals, each contending for primacy; rather, we should understand each tradition as complementing the others – each has its own special contribution to make to Christianity. In other words, one tradition should not try to dominate the others, which would result in serious imbalance and impoverishment of the entirety of Christianity. Instead, each tradition should recognize the value of the other traditions and thus be mutually enriched.⁷

To understand the current worldview and development of the Syriac Orthodox Church, we must also bear in mind that it has faced many persecutions and horrific massacres throughout its history, especially the genocide of 1915 during the First World War. In it, the Syriac, Armenian, and Greek Christian populations of Anatolia were massacred at the hands of Turks and Kurds in the last years of the Ottoman Empire. In the Syriac oral tradition, 1915 is

4. Aaron M. Butts, “Syriac Language,” in Brock et al., *Gorgias Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Syriac Heritage*.

5. Robert A. Kitchen, “The Syriac Tradition,” in *The Orthodox Christian World*, ed. Augustine Casiday (London & New York: Routledge, 2012), 66.

6. On this, see Sebastian P. Brock, “Asian Christianity: The Need for a Historical Perspective,” *Asian Horizons* 10:3 (September 2016), 441–50.

7. Sebastian P. Brock, *Spirituality in the Syriac Tradition* (Kottayam: St Ephrem Ecumenical Research Institute, 2005), 1–2.

referred to as “*Sayfo*,” “[the year of] the Sword,” or “*Firmano*,” “[the year of] the *Firman*,” the official decree by the Ottoman Sultan to kill the Christian population living within its extensive territory.⁸

This and many other preceding horrific events throughout time led to the dwindling as well as dispersion of many members of the Syriac community in the various countries of the Middle East, and subsequently through the Western world where today one finds sizeable diaspora communities in Americas, Europe, Australia, and New Zealand.⁹ Furthermore, the history of persecution has had a major impact on social conditions and, consequently, on the development of canon law in the Syriac Orthodox tradition. This can be seen in the work of the Syriac Orthodox prelate and polymath, Bar Hebraeus (1226–1286),¹⁰ who wrote the most comprehensive systematic legal collection of the Syriac Orthodox Church, the *Book of Directions* (*Kthobo d-Hudoye*), which is better known in the literature under the title of *Nomocanon*.¹¹ The work comprises 40 chapters of ecclesiastical and civil law.¹² As Kaufhold explains,

Bar Hebraeus cites the sources already known from the chronological collections, specifically pseudo-apostolic texts, Greek synods, canons and writings of the Greek and Syrian fathers, Eastern Syrian texts, the *Syro-Roman Law-book*, and (without attribution) Islamic law. In most cases, he explains his

8. David Gaunt, *Massacres, Resistance, Protectors: Muslim-Christian Relations in Eastern Anatolia during World War I* (Piscataway, N.J.: Gorgias Press, 2006). See also David Gaunt, Naures Atto, and Soner O. Barthoma, eds, *Let Them Not Return: Sayfo – The Genocide against the Assyrian, Syriac, and Chaldean Christians in the Ottoman Empire* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2017); Shabo Talay and Soner O. Barthoma, eds, *Sayfo 1915: An Anthology of Essays on the Genocide of Assyrians/Arameans during the First World War*, Gorgias Eastern Christian Studies 50 (Piscataway, N.J.: Gorgias Press, 2018).

9. On this see Heleen Murre-van den Berg, “Syriac Christianity,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Eastern Christianity*, ed. Ken Parry (Hoboken, N.J.: John Wiley & Sons, 2010), 249.

10. Hidemi Takahashi, *Barhebraeus: A Bio-Bibliography* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2005).

11. Paul Bedjan, ed., *Nomocanon Gregorii Barhebraei* (Paris & Leipzig: Otto Harrassowitz, 1898). A Latin translation by J. A. Assemani in 1898 (Rome) under the title *Syrorum Nomocanon* is to be found in Cardinal Angelo Mai, “Scriptorum Veterum Nova Collectio,” volume 10. An English translation of the first eight chapters dealing with ecclesiastical law is provided by Baby Varghese, trans, *Book of Guides* (*Hudaya*) or *Nomocanon* (Kottayam: Malankara Orthodox Church Publications, 2014).

12. On this see Hubert Kaufhold, “Sources of Canon Law in the Eastern Churches,” in *The History of Byzantine and Eastern Canon Law to 1500*, ed., Wilfried Hartmann and Kenneth Pennington (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2012), 252–55.

sources freely, abbreviating and altering them, but he also adds something of himself to them.¹³

The latter is labelled in Syriac as *Hudoeye* (Directions). It is also worth mentioning that Bar Hebraeus, in his major work on moral doctrine called the *Ethicon* (*Kthobo d-Ithiqon*),¹⁴ also deals with questions of ecclesiastical law, frequently citing canonistic literature.¹⁵

After Bar Hebraeus, there was a period of stagnation in canon law due to the troubled history of the Syriac Church in the Levant. It wasn't until the very late 19th and early 20th centuries that canon law received its share as part of the revival of the Syriac Church. One of the main personalities of this revival was Patriarch Ignatius Afram Barsoum (1887–1957),¹⁶ who brought into focus the rich cultural heritage of the Syriac Orthodox Church and the deep spiritual, historical, and ecumenical foundation of its canon laws.¹⁷

It is against this background that I would like to consider synodality and its implementation in the Syriac tradition. In doing so, I shall consider three related areas as parameters for an authoritative moral discernment in the Syriac tradition, namely, sources of authority, structures of authority, and finally the dynamics of authority.

Sources of Authority

In the Syriac Tradition, scripture is used as a foundation and the primary source of inspiration by secondary sources for moral discernment. In addition to scripture and church Tradition, the other “key” sources considered for moral discernment and which are employed in such a process include prayer, conscience,

13. Ibid., 252.

14. Paulus Bedjan, ed., *Ethicon; seu, Moralia Gregorii Barhebraei* (Paris & Leipzig: Otto Harrassowitz, 1898). For an English translation of the *Mēmṛā I*, see Herman G. B. Teule, ed., *Gregory Barhebraeus: Ethicon (Mēmṛā I)*, CSCO 534–535, Syr. 218–219 (Leuven: Peeters, 1993).

15. Kaufhold, “Sources of Canon Law in the Eastern Churches,” 253.

16. George A. Kiraz, “Barsoum, Ignatius Afram,” in Brock et al., *Gorgias Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Syriac Heritage*.

17. Khalid Dinno, “The Synods and Canons in the Syrian (Syriac) Orthodox Church in the Second Millennium: An Overview,” *Journal of the Canadian Society for Syriac Studies* 17 (2017), 34. On the history of the revival of the Syriac Orthodox Church and one of the church's key players, Patriarch Afram Barsoum, see Khalid Dinno, *The Syrian Orthodox Church in the Late Ottoman Period and Beyond: Crisis and Revival* (Piscataway, N.J.: Gorgias Press, 2017).

reason, *oikonomia* (*mdabronutho*),¹⁸ human culture, philosophy, and related sciences.

The importance of the church in making a moral discernment is that the Tradition complements scripture, which provides a parameter/direction in making the moral discernment. Here, the Tradition is to be understood as all that has been received and handed over from the past through the work of the Holy Spirit distinctive from incidental cultural customs.

The Syriac Church uses a hermeneutical method that is deeply contemplative. It is based on a close reading of the scripture with specific attention to typology that seeks to understand the recurrent mystical symbols through which God has chosen to make revelations to the church.

Sabino Chialà, a member of the Monastic Community of Bose¹⁹ in Italy, in his article “St Ephrem the Syrian as a Reader of Holy Scripture: A Witness of Plurality in Biblical Hermeneutics,”²⁰ demonstrates this centrality of typology in the Syriac scriptural tradition. Chialà explains that the biblical text, beyond its apparent simplicity, is open to multiple meanings. These create a complexity that the 4th-century Syriac Father and Doctor of the Universal Church, Ephrem, creatively interprets.²¹ In his *Commentary on the Diatessaron*,²² a harmony of the four gospels, Ephrem states,

18. Hubert Kaufhold, “Ein syrischer Brief aus dem 9. Jahrhundert über die kirchenrechtliche Oikonomia,” *Oriens Christianus* 73 (1989), 44–67.

19. See Monastero di Bose website, <https://www.monasterodibose.it/en/>.

20. Sabino Chialà, “St Ephrem the Syrian as a Reader of Holy Scripture: A Witness of Plurality in Biblical Hermeneutics,” *Syriac Orthodox Patriarchal Journal* 55 (2017), 39–49. In this section, I draw upon the line of thought of Sabino Chialà.

21. For good introductions on St Ephrem, see Sebastian P. Brock, *The Luminous Eye: The Spiritual World Vision of Saint Ephrem*, 2nd ed., Cistercian Studies Series; 124 (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications, 1992); and Kathleen E. McVey, “Ephrem the Syrian,” in *The Early Christian World*, ed. Philip Francis Esler (London & New York: Routledge, 2000), 1228–50. Ephrem’s poems are now available in excellent editions (with German translations) by Dom Edmund Beck, published in the Louvain Corpus of Oriental Christian writers (*Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, Scriptores Syri*). The fullest collection of Ephrem’s Syriac poetry in English translation is by Kathleen E. McVey, *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns, Classics of Western Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989). A small selection is published by Sebastian P. Brock, *The Harp of the Spirit: Eighteen Poems of Saint Ephrem*, 2nd rev. ed., Studies Supplementary to Sobornost (London: Fellowship of St Alban and St Sergius, 1983). The small cycle of 15 poems on paradise is also translated by Sebastian P. Brock, *St Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns on Paradise* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1990). For a comprehensive bibliography of St Ephrem’s writings, relevant studies, and translations see Kees den Biesen, *Bibliography of St. Ephrem the Syrian* (Grove: self-published, 2002).

22. Carmel McCarthy, *Saint Ephrem’s Commentary on Tatian’s Diatessaron: An English Translation of Chester Beatty Syriac MS 709 with Introduction and Notes*, Journal of Semitic Studies Supplement 2 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

If there only existed a single sense for the words of the Scripture, then the first commentator who came along would discover it, and other hearers would experience neither the labor of searching, nor the joy of discovery. Rather, each word of our Lord has its own form, and each form has its own members, and each member has its own character. And each individual person understands according to his capacity, and he interprets the passages as is granted to him.²³

The concept of the multiplicity of meanings in scripture, because of the complexity of the text and that of the reader's situation, is again repeated in another passage of the *Commentary on the Diatessaron*, where Ephrem, addressing God, exclaims,

Who is capable of comprehending the extent of what is to be discovered in a single utterance of yours? For we leave behind in it far more than we take away from it, like thirsty people drinking from a fountain. The facets of God's word are far more numerous than the faces of those who learn from it.²⁴

Chialà goes on further to explain that both the "biblical word" and "those who meditate upon it" possess many "facets." This, in turn, gives rise to the variety of interpretations as two criteria of the hermeneutic fruitfulness of the biblical text: one intrinsic to the text, and the other extrinsic.²⁵

Ephrem explains this double richness, intrinsic and extrinsic, by using two images, namely that of a fountain and a mirror. Regarding the intrinsic fruitfulness of the text, he employs the image of a fountain:

God depicted his word with many beauties, so that each of those who learn from it can examine that aspect of it which he likes. And God has hidden within his word all sorts of treasures, so that each of us can be enriched by it, from whatever aspect he meditates on. For God's word is the Tree of Life [see Gen 2:9] which extends to you blessed fruits from every direction; it is like the Rock which was struck in the Wilderness [see Ex 17:6], which became a spiritual drink for everyone on all sides: "They ate the food of the Spirit and they drank the draft of the Spirit. [1 Cor 10:4]."²⁶

23. Sebastian Brock, *The Bible in the Syriac Tradition*, 2nd rev. ed.; Gorgias Handbooks, no. 7. (Piscataway, N.J.: Gorgias Press, 2006), 66.

24. Brock, *The Bible in the Syriac Tradition*, 66.

25. Chialà, "St Ephrem the Syrian as a Reader of Holy Scripture," 45.

26. Brock, *The Bible in the Syriac Tradition*, 66.

As to the second criterion, the fruitfulness extrinsic to the text, Ephrem employs the image of a mirror. This is beautifully expressed in his *Letter to Publius*. He addresses his correspondent,

You would do well not to let fall from your hands the polished mirror of the holy Gospel of your Lord, which reproduces the image of everyone who gazes at it and the likeness of everyone who peers into it. While it keeps its own natural quality, undergoes no change, is devoid of any spots, and is free of any soiling, it changes its appearance before colors although it itself is not changed.

Before white things it becomes [white] like them.

Before black things, it becomes dark like them.

Before red things [it becomes] red like them.

Before beautiful things, it becomes beautiful like them and

*before ugly things, it becomes hideous like them.*²⁷

From what is said above, it becomes clear that the pages of scripture reflect not only the face of God, whose narrative and teaching it contains, but also the face of the person who reads it.

Scripture, then, is the pearl of many reflections, the inexhaustible fountain, and the mirror that reflects ever-new images according to the person who is before it. The scripture is a living and open world that no one can seal or close – neither the person who reads and contemplates it devotionally, nor the clergy who explain it to the faithful in the context of a liturgical celebration in the church.

Chialà, summarizing his thought on St Ephrem as a reader of holy scripture and as a witness of plurality in biblical hermeneutics, concludes by saying,

this is the hermeneutical method by which our “theologian” poet constructs his thoughts about God, to take up the triad mentioned at the beginning: exegete, theologian, and poet. Ephrem’s thought is dynamic, transfused through the power coming through his poetic verse . . . We thus see all the coherence both of the formation of his thought and of its expression. This is a theology that leaves room for God’s and man’s complexity, as Scripture itself demands through its double fruitfulness, intrinsic (divine) and extrinsic (human).²⁸

27. Edward G. Mathews, J. P. Amar, and Kathleen E. McVey, eds, *Selected Prose Works*, The Fathers of the Church (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1994), 338.

28. Chialà, “St Ephrem the Syrian as a Reader of Holy Scripture,” 48.

Ecclesial Structures of Authority

The term “synodal” would best describe the structure of the Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch. The constitution of the church states that “the Holy Synod, headed by His Holiness the Patriarch, is the supreme religious, spiritual, legislative and administrative authority of the Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch.”²⁹ Within this structure, “His Holiness the Patriarch is the supreme head of the Church and its holy Synod, and the general administrator to its religious, spiritual, and administrative affairs. He supervises Archdiocesan religious, administrative, and financial matters.”³⁰ In that capacity, it is the patriarch who convenes the Holy Synod and presides over its meeting sessions and sanctions and announces its decisions.³¹ The Holy Synod normally convenes every year at its Patriarchal See, currently in Damascus. However, in circumstances such as war and conflict in the country, the synod convenes outside the Patriarchal See and as deemed necessary by his holiness the patriarch. The patriarch sets the agenda for the Holy Synod and invites all the diocesan bishops to send relevant items to be included in the agenda. Decisions of the Holy Synod are reached and decided upon through majority voting or by consensus, depending on the nature of the topic in question. The approved decisions of the Holy Synod are then communicated in writing by the patriarch through letters sent to all the bishops (the members of the Holy Synod), who then disseminate it through the churches within their jurisdiction to be announced and acted upon.

In the Syriac Orthodox model, the regional church structure is typically composed of archdioceses and dioceses. Each diocese has its own council that is representative of clergy and laity and convened and presided over by the bishop. This council exercises prescribed legislative, administrative, and judicial functions. The council may also have its own committees, and other bodies. The council is the deliberative body for administrative, cultural, social, economic, patrimonial, and pastoral matters, composed of representatives of clergy and laity elected by the parishes.

The relationship in terms of authority between local, national, regional, and worldwide structure of the Syriac Church is, then, properly called synodal. As mentioned above, the patriarch is the supreme head of the church and its highest authority. He is the one who calls for a Holy Synod and invites the diocesan bishops to send the relevant topics and items to be added to the agenda. The Holy Synod is called by and convenes under the auspices of the

29. *Constitution of the Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch* (Brussels: Centre International Jacques de Saroug, 2008), Article 3.

30. *Constitution of the Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch*, Article 12.

31. *Ibid.*, Articles 13 and 14.

patriarch and attended only by the diocesan bishops; however, the priests and the laity through the diocesan council are also involved in the process of the decision-making, and in some cases they may even influence the decision of the Holy Synod. This is because in the last century, in addition to canon law, the church constitution specified the establishment of parish boards within each diocese (whose membership consists of laity) presided over by the parish priest; and a diocesan board (whose members are drawn from the respective parish boards) presided over by the metropolitan or bishop of the diocese. Parish boards have been strong features of lay participation in the 20th century church, and bylaws regulating their functions have been enacted and modified over the years. The bylaws enacted by the synod held at Mor Matay Monastery³² (Iraq) in 1930 were subsequently updated to better serve community needs. The last version issued in the 20th century was “The Unified By-Laws of the Local Parish Councils Adopted at All Archdioceses of the Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch,” which was decreed by the Holy Synod on March 31, 2000.³³ The bylaws embodied a century-old tradition of a functioning civil participation in non-theological church matters, and communal activities working in close coordination with church leadership. This tradition of joint administration found relevance in the diaspora, where this is a common tradition.³⁴

The local church is represented in the Holy Synod by the bishop who “witnesses” (i.e., testifies) to the faith of the church. Before attending the Holy Synod, the bishop normally meets with the diocesan clergy and the lay members of the diocesan board. Based on the outcome of the meeting, the bishop will send any relevant item to be included on the agenda of the holy synod. However, the inclusion of items is decided by the patriarch together with the General Secretariat, consisting of a number of bishops. Certain items are excluded, deferred for a subsequent synod, or dealt with separately depending on the urgency and relevance of the topic. The obligatory character of the synodal decisions and their implementation, in practice, depends on how realistically and fully they deal with the question or topic under consideration and provide the necessary guidelines and recommendations.

It is notable that the synod is exclusively Syriac Orthodox, as no other Christian communities of the region may participate in the synodal deliberations

32. George A. Kiraz, “Matay, Dayro d-Mor,” in Brock et al., *Gorgias Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Syriac Heritage*.

33. *Constitution of the Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch*, 119–132.

34. Dinno, “The Synods and Canons in the Syrian (Syriac) Orthodox Church in the Second Millennium: An Overview,” 32.

except as observers. However, the hierarchs may unofficially consult with members of other Christian communities to discuss relevant or similar issues or topics that they are dealing with in their respective churches. In the case of the Oriental Orthodox churches in the Middle East, who are in communion with one another, the patriarchs of the Armenian Church (Catholicosate of Cilicia), the Coptic Church of Alexandria, and the Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch met regularly and officially before the current war in the region. They began to deal with a number of contemporary issues and topics common and relevant to their churches, especially in the Middle East, often issuing unified statements on social and theological issues.

Furthermore, the synod is not always without external influence, namely from the state. In the Middle East and elsewhere, the government regime, to a certain extent, might interfere with the church and the work of the synod. Often, this is an attempt by the state to exercise control and power over the people through the church and its governing bodies.

Dynamics of Authority in a Worldwide Church

To an extent, the local context affects the structures and processes for moral discernment. Because of the nature of the universality of the church and the dispersion of its faithful throughout the world, the Syriac Church is required to consider moral discernment in a worldwide context with room and with relevance to the local and national context.

The church is inevitably bound up with the society and culture within which it is situated. The differences between the various dioceses in distinct parts of the world are, therefore, likely to be more pronounced in this area than in the sources and structures of authority. Some relatively common features might nonetheless be tentatively identified.

What is distinct about the Syriac tradition's structures and processes for moral discernment is its therapeutic, rather than judicial, approach in dealing with the brokenness and infirmity of the human nature. This might be best understood in the context of the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15), where the emphasis is put on the healing of the prodigal son through the unconditional love of the merciful father. This act of mercy and unconditional love not only brings healing and restoration to the broken wayward son but also makes him sit at the right hand of the father to nourish his soul and body from the banquet set before him, thereby rejoicing with the father and all those invited to the wedding feast.

St Ephrem and Women Choirs

That being said, I would now like to refer to another study I wrote for this project on moral discernment in the churches. There, I elucidate with an example from the Syriac tradition how St Ephrem, inspired by the holy scripture itself, created women choirs in the church to sing praises to the Lord. In doing so, St Ephrem overturned the Pauline instruction in the First Letter to the Corinthians that “women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says” (1 Cor 14: 34).

St Ephrem considered praising God to be an essential element in the life of every believer; to offer praise was a joy and duty of everyone. Hence, he believed that women together with men should also give praise to the Lord in the liturgical celebrations. St Ephrem even went a step further: he composed doctrinal hymns or “teaching songs” specifically for the women choirs, known in Syriac as *madroshe* with the intention that the orthodox theological content of these songs would enable the women to learn about the faith, participate actively in the liturgical celebrations, as well as transmit the faith to further generations. St Ephrem, therefore, overturned the instruction on St Paul that women were to remain silent in the Church. St Jacob of Sarug (ca. 451-521) narrates and explains in a panegyric hymn the change introduced by St Ephrem, by referring to other sources from the scripture. The example is of immense relevance for the Syriac tradition, because over the course of history it has served as an inspiration – one could say, as a hermeneutical guide - to address new challenges.³⁵

Conclusion

The approach as described above, embodied by the example of Ephrem, is probably one of the inspiring and dynamic models for the church to use in making its moral and ethical discernment in today’s complex and dynamic world. Past liturgical decisions, drawing upon the key sources discussed above, this modality of decision-making is applicable to any conceivable issue currently present in the church. It functions like a hermeneutical lens for interpreting scripture and tradition in the context of the changing circumstances of the people. Therefore, this method prevents a mere positivistic or literal interpretation and allows for a dynamic understanding that focuses on the salvation of the human person. In that sense, the method is more therapeutic than judicial. The synodal structure, then, only serves to enhance this paradigm, as it draws from a wide base of experience – not only from the various ecclesiastical priestly ranks but from the constituent laity who comprise their local councils.

35. See Mor Polycarpus A. Aydin, “From the Pauline Admonition to Remain Silent to St Ephrem’s Creation of Women Choirs in the Liturgy,” Myriam Wijlens, Vladimir Shmaliy, Simone Sinn, eds., *Churches and Moral Discernment, volume 2: Learning from History*, Faith and Order Paper No. 229 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2020) forthcoming.

3. Moral Discernment through the Praxical Pursuit of God

Stephen M. Meawad

Coptic Orthodox Christians might often be hesitant or even reluctant to speak in terms of ethics, since the language of ethics challenges the integrity between *orthodoxy* and *orthopraxy*. Generally, Western and Eastern approaches to ethics have had their pros and cons: systematization characteristic of the former has led to deep analyses of complex topics, but has often fragmented otherwise composite topics that require interdependence for the most accurate assessment. In contrast, non-fragmentation typical of the latter has preserved the holistic reality that characterizes the complexity of truths, but it has not always allowed for the same depth of analysis as that engaged in Western systematic ethics.

The broad field of Coptic Orthodox Christian ethics is characterized most notably by three inextricably linked assertions. The first is the inherent integrative nature of Coptic Orthodox ethics. This perspective maintains that ethics cannot be separated from any other part of life but must be considered as part of a single fabric of life. Most important to this integrity is the unity between ethics or actions, on the one hand, and faith or beliefs, on the other. For this reason, many Orthodox Christian ethicists will begin with or at least devote much attention to matters of theology proper (dogmatic theology, sacramental theology, etc.), rooted in scripture and patristic texts, when presenting ethical stances. Coptic Orthodox Christians then have a complete integration of theology and ethics, since we conceive of ethics as resulting from the principle task of uniting with God – the second hallmark of Coptic Orthodox ethics.

Uniting with God (Christian ethics) is contingent on knowing God (Christian theology). The Coptic Orthodox Church is a trinitarian church, professing a belief in the triune God—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. This is in keeping with the early church creedal formula communicated through God’s self-revelation to humanity and recorded through the inspired words of holy scripture. It is the Holy Trinity who guides us communally and personally in moral discernment. The Holy Trinity is the central orienting principle by which determinations surrounding good and evil, right and wrong, and virtue and

vice are made. More than this, it is the active, dynamic, and unpredictable pursuit of God manifested through love for him and love for neighbor that dictates Coptic Orthodox Christian ethics. The centrality of this pursuit in Orthodox ethics is best understood through the concept of spiritual struggle – the third, and partially overlapping, characteristic of an Orthodox ethic.

Spiritual struggle for the Coptic Orthodox Christian is persistent, sincere, and humble. It is persistent in that it does not relent despite the difficulties that will inevitably arise. Spiritual struggle does not submit to life's obstacles but recognizes the value of a muscular ethic of exertion that is concomitantly synergistic and grace-enabled. It is sincere in its attempt to pursue God, who is able and desiring to be experienced and known yet mysterious and unable to be fully grasped. It is a humble struggle in its communal model of discipleship to spiritual elders, in its fundamental ecclesiology, and in its submission to the other and to God as the principle guide on the journey and its very *telos*.

Though not exhaustive, the following components help identify specific sources of the authority for moral discernment in the Coptic Orthodox Church.

Holy Scripture

First, the Coptic Orthodox Church regards the holy scriptures as fundamental to its ethics in a number of ways. Holy scripture can first be read for direct ethical instruction. This is especially clear in passages such as those of the Decalogue, the Sermon on the Mount, the Pauline epistles, and a plentitude of other pericope that offer direct exhortations. Holy scripture is also read among Copts with “spiritual senses,” a hallmark of Alexandrian hermeneutics at least since the time of Origen, the early church scholar. To read scripture in this way is to read with a presumption that there often lies a deeper, hidden spiritual sense under the immediately obvious or literal understanding of the text. There can exist multiple layers and multiple spiritual senses, each underscoring a different truth or the same truth in a more profound way. To access these deeper layers of truth, the Coptic Orthodox Church emphasizes the need for pure and virtuous reading. That is, holy scripture functions not only as a source of direct ethical instruction but also as a source of transformation that enables a more profound reading of scripture, ethically and otherwise. Holy scripture, then, is an ethic of moral asceticism, according to the patristic heritage that is formative for Coptic Orthodox worship, theology, and ethics.

St Gregory of Nazianzus, one of the three prominent 4th-century Cappadocians (along with St Gregory of Nyssa and St Basil), held that a pure mind was necessary to understand the pure matters of holy scripture. As scripture is

pivotal in discerning theological matters, regarding the discussion of theology, he writes,

It is not for all people, but only for those who have been tested and have found a sound footing in study, and, more importantly, have undergone, or at the very least are undergoing, purification of body and soul. For one who is not pure to lay hold of pure things is dangerous, just as it is for weak eyes to look at the sun's brightness.¹

Thus, it is “dangerous” for the impure to study what is pure. It is only a life of purity that allows a person to most accurately interpret holy scripture. Otherwise, one can rely only on intellect and conjecture—each important in their own right, but insufficient without purity. This would render a plethora of opinions and hermeneutical impasses, much as is seen today.

Saint Basil similarly highlights the necessity of “cleansing the eye of the soul” when reading Scripture. He writes, “As the power of seeing is in the healthy eye, so the activity of the Spirit is in the purified soul.”² The Holy Spirit, that is, the presumed author of scripture, is enlivened in the person who has a purified soul. That person is more apt for scriptural interpretation, not at the neglect of any other necessary “methods,” but in combination with these elements. It is in harmony with the Holy Spirit, who purifies all creation, that a person is to grapple in interpreting scripture.

As an added emphasis, this purity is not attained passively but requires a sort of moral asceticism. In fact, Origen believed that the very difficulty of interpreting holy scripture was to point towards the need for this moral asceticism in the exercise of interpretation. He writes:

The aim [of holy scripture] was that not everyone who wished should have these mysteries laid before his feet to trample upon . . . but that they should be for the man who had devoted himself to the studies of this kind with the utmost purity and sobriety and through nights of vigils, by which means perchance he might be able to trace out the deeply hidden meaning of the Spirit of God, concealed under the language of an ordinary narrative which points in a different direction, and that so he might become a sharer of the Spirit's knowledge and a partaker of His divine counsel.³

1. Gregory of Nazianzus, *On God and Christ: The Five Theological Orations and Two Letters to Cledonius*, trans. Frederick Williams and Lionel R. Wickham (Crestwood, N.Y.: St Vladimir's Seminary, 2002), 27.

2. *Ibid.*, 99.

3. Origen, *On First Principles*, foreword by John C. Cavadini, introduction by Henri de Lubac (Notre Dame, Ind.: Christian Classics, 2013), 374 [slightly edited].

He continues by describing sacred reading as an intentionally laborious task that requires attention and harmony with God. Holy scripture cannot be interpreted superficially, but one must struggle with the text wholeheartedly.⁴ He continues,

The Divine Wisdom has arranged for certain stumbling-blocks and interruptions of the historical sense to be found therein, by inserting in the midst a number of impossibilities and incongruities, in order that the very interruption of the narrative might as it were present a barrier to the reader and lead him to refuse to proceed along the pathway of the ordinary meaning and so, by shutting us out and debarring us from that, might recall us to the beginning of another way, and might thereby bring us, through the entrance of a narrow footpath, to a higher and loftier road and lay open the immense breadth of the Divine Wisdom.⁵

In addition to the patristic emphasis on virtue and purity, other important factors to read holy scripture well for ethical guidance include the centrality of Christ as the interpretive key to scripture; the importance of holistic, typological, and allegorical readings of scripture; and the need for an intensive, grace-filled, and communal reading of scripture.

Holy Tradition: Apostolicity, Patristics, and Canons

The Coptic Orthodox Church is apostolic; it was founded through St Mark, the apostle, evangelist, and martyr. The church's apostolicity is the foundation of its authority, as the apostles received instruction from the Lord Jesus Christ in his establishment of the Church on earth. Through apostolic succession, the Coptic Orthodox Church preserves its holy Tradition, theologically, sacramentally, and ethically. The successors of the apostles are the bishops, over which one representative – a head among equal brethren – is given the title “Pope, Patriarch, and Archbishop of the great city and See of Alexandria.” Following the synodality and conciliarity of the early Christian Church, the holy synod of the Coptic Orthodox Church, which consists of this presider along with all of the bishops, plays an important role in the moral discernment of the church through frequent gatherings for synodal decisions. In this spirit, the Coptic Church professes the beliefs of the first three ecumenical councils, which are authoritative regarding the doctrines of the church. From these and other local

4. *Ibid.*, 376.

5. *Ibid.*, 378–79 [slightly edited].

synodal councils, most notably in the first four centuries of Christendom, the Coptic Orthodox Church also recognizes the canons as guidelines for moral discernment.

Additionally, the writings of the early church fathers prominently factor in to the moral and spiritual cultivation of Coptic hierarchy and laity. Patristic texts from the United (Catholic) Church before the Council of Chalcedon, in addition to other non-Chalcedonian fathers after the schism, are very much responsible for the moral discernment, scriptural exegesis, and liturgical, intellectual, and spiritual formation of Coptic Orthodox Christians until this day. It should be noted, however, that historically and contemporarily the Coptic Orthodox Church has refrained from decreeing official ethical proclamations, as the static nature of such an endeavour would be counteractive to the dynamic nature of fluctuating circumstances that often decorate ethical conundrums. Instead, the church has often left the delegation of specific matters of moral discernment to local bishops, who oversee parish priests within their diocese. The bishop is given some latitude in applying the canons within different circumstances or situations. The guidelines are in place through theological tenets, and the minutiae are addressed through a spirit of love, compassion, and openness to the Holy Spirit of truth and wisdom.

Divine Liturgy

Coptic Orthodox worship consists of numerous components, including evening and morning raising of incense, the offertory, the liturgy of the word, the liturgy of the faithful, the distribution of the holy mysteries, the daily book of the hours (*Agpeya*), and the midnight Praises, among others. The worship of the Coptic Church, similar to the early Christian Church, is centred on the divine liturgy of the eucharist. As a transformative practice for Coptic Orthodox Christians, it plays a pivotal role in Coptic moral discernment.

The emphasis on the eucharistic liturgy is at the same time an emphasis on the power of liturgy to transform its participants into dwelling places of the divine. The Holy Trinity is present *in* and *at* the meal from the earliest of Christian eucharistic accounts. This real presence is the source of the transformative nature of the divine liturgy. The transformation offered through the liturgy is twofold – one practices grace-enabled struggle to purify oneself in order to be made worthy of receiving the eucharist, and one also receives a purifying grace through the mystery in order to aid in further purification of the participant. As noted above, this process of purification is central to the development of Coptic Orthodox moral discernment.

St John Chrysostom, a monk and archbishop of Constantinople in the late 4th century, notes both of these junctures in the process of transformation. In his first instruction to the catechumens, he writes,

One who is about to approach those sacred rites and awesome mysteries ought to be alert and wide-awake, cleansed of every earthly care, abundantly filled with temperance and zeal. He should banish from his mind every thought which is foreign to the mysteries and should make his house clean and ready in every respect, just as if he were about to receive the emperor under his roof. That is the way to prepare your mind, such are the thoughts you should think, such should be the purpose of your will.⁶

Similarly, in homily 46 on the gospel of St John, he warns his reader of the dangers of approaching the holy body and precious blood of the Lord Jesus Christ without purity of body and conscience. Otherwise, he maintains, that person would be just as guilty as those who nailed Christ to the cross.⁷ If this were not extreme enough of an expression, in section 6 of Homily 82 on the gospel according to St Matthew, he asserts that partaking of the mysteries while openly and unrepentantly in sin is worse than demon possession.⁸ He goes on to claim that he would rather give up his own life than have someone receive the mysteries in this manner.⁹

Such intensity of language is a direct reflection of the transformative nature of participation in the eucharist. Chrysostom exclaims,

This Blood is the salvation of our souls, by This the soul is washed, by This is beautified, by This is inflamed, This causes our understanding to be more bright than fire, and our soul more beaming than gold; this Blood was poured forth, and made heaven accessible . . . They who share this Blood stand with Angels and Archangels and the Powers that are above, clothed in Christ's own

6. John Chrysostom, *Baptismal Instructions*, trans. Paul W. Harkins, Ancient Christian Writers (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1962), 134.

7. John Chrysostom, *The Homilies of S. John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople, on the Gospel of St. John, Translated, with Notes and Indices*, A Library of Fathers of the Holy Catholic Church, Anterior to the Divide of the East and West, vol. 2, homilies 42–87 (London: Oxford, J.H. Parker, 1848), 401.

8. John Chrysostom, *The Homilies of S. John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople, on the Gospel of St. Matthew, Translated, with Notes and Indices*, A Library of Fathers of the Holy Catholic Church, Anterior to the Divide of the East and West, vol. 3, homilies 59–90 (London: Oxford, J.H. Parker, 1851), 1093.

9. Ibid., 1094.

kingly robe, and having the armor of the Spirit. Nay, I have not as yet said any great thing; they are clothed with the King Himself.¹⁰

From the perspective of Coptic Orthodox Christians, it is through the gathering of the community of believers, the church, at the divine liturgy that one attains the purity that is needed to reach the ultimate goal of the moral life – unity with God. In this way, the liturgy and the formation of moral discernment are inextricably linked.

Conclusion

To summarize, moral discernment in the Coptic Church depends on our understanding of God, the Holy Trinity; our struggle-filled, transformative, praxical pursuit of unity with God, which sharpens the spiritual senses and thus moral discernment; our intimacy with, guidance by, and formation through a virtuous, intensive, grace-filled, holistic, typological, allegorical, and communal reading of holy scripture; the holy Tradition, which includes the Coptic Orthodox Church's apostolicity, patristic heritage, and conciliar canons; and divine liturgy, a transformative practice that has always been central to Christian identity, that continues to be central for Coptic Orthodox identity, and that functions as a vehicle for God's divine indwelling within each member of God's body and church.

10. Chrysostom, *Gospel of John*, 400–401 [slightly edited].

4. Sources for Moral Discernment: Armenian Apostolic Tradition

Shahe Ananyan

The renowned Armenian-American Orthodox theologian V. Guroian describes Orthodox ethics as virtue ethics: “The degree to which virtue language shapes Orthodox theology and spirituality is impressive. And it would be convenient to simply classify Orthodox ethics as an example of virtue ethics.”¹ The main objective of Guroian’s book is to formulate love as a supreme Christian virtue without which it is impossible for a Christian to become perfectly virtuous. Yet, if Guroian’s statement is based in the ancient tradition of Orthodox spirituality and theology, then his assumption that Orthodox ethics is virtue ethics seems to contradict this – within the complex system of modern theological and philosophical ethics and with the modern conception of virtue and virtues. Nevertheless, it is important to note that one of the characteristics of Orthodox ethics is its derivation from Orthodox theology. One could find different kinds of answers to the Kantian question on moral imperative in the Orthodox ethics tradition: “What should I do?” This, however, does not mean that the diversity of answers presupposes a dissimilarity of sources. The commonly accepted initial capital sources for Christian morals in the Orthodox tradition are the *Holy Trinity, holy scripture, and the holy Tradition*. As it is pointed out in the “Orthodox Addendum” of the document *Moral Discernment in the Churches* (hereafter *MDC*), “these sources cannot be placed at the same level with the other sources.”²

1. V. Guroian, *Incarnate Love: Essays in Orthodox Ethics* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987), 13.

2. World Council of Churches, *Moral Discernment in the Churches: A Study Document*, Faith and Order Paper No. 215 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2013). Published as Appendix 1 of this book. Also accessible at <https://archive.org/details/wccfops2.222>. For the Catholic tradition, the three capital sources are the holy scripture, holy Tradition, and magisterial or teaching authority of the church, see Aurelio Fernandez, *Morale fondamentale: initiation théologique*, tr. française Madeleine Renedo-Klein (Paris: Le Laurier, 2003), 18–21; Charles E. Curran, *The Living Tradition of Catholic Moral Theology* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), 103–29.

In the Armenian Apostolic tradition, the classification of these three main sources also prevails. In its historical development, the Armenian tradition proves to be closer to Catholic moral teaching, but expresses some particular characteristics that are mainly due to the Oriental Orthodox conception of what is church: that is, to the ecclesiological tradition. Within the limits of this paper, I will try to briefly outline the sources for moral teaching and discernment from the Armenian Apostolic Orthodox perspective, summing up some historical and terminological particularities of the Armenian theological tradition as well.

Clarification of Terms

Before I proceed to analysis of the sources, it may be useful for the readers to have a preliminary idea of the terms and notions for describing the process of moral discernment in the Armenian Apostolic tradition.

Tradition and Traditions

First of all it is important to know that in the Armenian tradition, as in the Oriental Orthodox tradition, there is a clear distinction between the *Tradition* and *traditions*. And here another important point rises concerning the correlation of the Holy Scriptures and the Holy Tradition. According to the theological teaching of the Armenian Church, there could not be any kind of subordination or chronological distinction between the Holy Scriptures and Holy Tradition, for the church's tradition is established by the testimony of the Holy Scriptures and both are considered inseparably as a source of true apostolic faith.³ It is commonly accepted to discern the following expressions of the Holy Tradition⁴:

1. Dogmatic: confessional regularities for every member of the Armenian Apostolic Church. Tradition deals with the ways and norms of the confession of true and apostolic faith.
2. Sacramental: a sum of liturgical and mystical theological teachings.
3. Doctrinal: the teaching authority of the church on dogmatic and moral issues.

3. Nerses Shnorhali (the Gracious), *General Epistles* [in Armenian] (Holy Etchmiadzin, 1865), 222; see also Arshak Ter-Mikelian, *The Catechism of the Armenian Church* [in Armenian], 2nd ed. (Holy Etchmiadzin: 2007), 370–71.

4. Ter-Mikelian, *The Catechism of the Armenian Church*, 368–69.

Besides these groups, administrative-jurisdictional and historical-liturgical expressions could also be mentioned, which are rather a part of traditions and could have different content from one century to another.

Natural Law

The concept of natural law, or *lex naturalis*, in the Armenian tradition did not find a special room for further discussions and theological clarifications. In fact, some very short and descriptive formulations of law in general exist, and the definition of natural law could effectively be situated within these general definitions. The famous Armenian jurist and theologian of the 13th century, Mkhitar' Gosh (died ca. 1213), establishes a list of sources for moral and legal laws, where the *lex naturalis* is of primary importance: "Thus, for those trying to create a written legal law, it is absolutely necessary to define the sources of laws and customs wherein the parcels of truth could be found . . . First of all, one has to consider faithfully the natural law, with which the gentiles were proceeding."⁵ Although the consideration of natural law in this quotation mainly concerns the application of legal and canonical decisions, it is relied upon for the moral and theological discernments provided by the notion of *lex naturalis*. Another theological classification of law could be found in the book of St Gregory of Tar'ev, renowned especially for his wider use of scholastic philosophical and theological methods. St Gregory discerns two types of laws: *general* and *private*. The first type includes three mutually completing laws: natural, written, and evangelical. In the second type, there are moral, reasonable, and doctrinal laws. In this classification, the natural law proves to be the first and most encompassing, for it was given to the first man, Adam, having thus become the permanent part of human nature.⁶

Morality and Ethics

And finally one has to consider the linguistic specifics of the Armenian language when referring to the words "moral/morality" and "ethics." The problem is that in Armenian, there is a clear and significant distinction between moral and ethics. The word "moral" thus corresponds to the arm, "*բարոյականութիւն/բարոյական*" (*bar'oyakanutiun/bar'oyakan*), in Latin *moralis, praecepta morum* – that is, ordering, commanding or teaching. On the other hand, arm, "*բարոյք*" (*bar'oyk*), is used to designate ethics – in other words, natural

5. Mxitar' Goš, Գիրք Դատաստանի (Book of Judgment), ed. Kh. Torosian (Yerevan: 1975), 22–23. For the English translation, see *The Lawcode [Datastanagirk] of Mxit'ar Goš*, trans. with commentary and indices by Robert W. Thomson (Amsterdam; Atlanta: Rodopi, 2000), 71–72.

6. Gregory of Tar'ev, Գիրք Հարցմանց (Liber questionorum) (Jerusalem: 1993), 526–27.

disposition, innate character, unalterable intrinsic traits and qualities (in Latin, *mores indoles*).⁷ Therefore, linguistically speaking, in Armenian, “ethics” designates the natural and innate qualities of human nature, and “moral” labels teaching and moral commandments.

A Reflective Image of the Incarnate Love

MDC clearly distinguishes between “normative ethics” and “descriptive ethics”: the former relating to prescriptive claims referring to how persons or communities *ought* to respond to moral challenges, whilst the latter focuses on presenting and explaining how and why persons or communities are *in fact* responding the way they are (*MDC* § 25). From this point of view, there could be no place for the distinction between “moral” and “ethics.” Therefore, for the Armenian tradition it is more appropriate to speak of the teaching, commanding moral and natural/human disposition or inner qualities.

Although we mentioned four different specifics of the Tradition and traditions in the Armenian Church, it is important to bear in mind that the Tradition and the Holy Scripture coalesced into one law, the *law of God*, which is manifested in the life of the church in three ways: firstly, as a natural law; secondly as a written law (Mosaic law / Old Testament); and thirdly as a spiritual, evangelical law (the law of Christ’s gospel).⁸ To some extent, these three ways, not being in contradiction with one another, are laid down as a gradual expression of revelation. Thus, whenever there is a need for moral discernment in the church, these three mutually completing laws could be used as parcels of one undivided divine Revelation.

The Tradition and the Holy Scripture, being considered inseparably as a source for Christian faith and morality, somehow manifest different levels of appropriation and reception in the different Christian cultures and communities. This mainly concerns the notion of “traditions”: that is, the factual responding way by which the given community expresses “some kind of tradition or authorities from the past (especially their own confessional past) for consulting within the process of interpretation of the Scripture” (*MDC* § 34). The Armenian church fathers pointed out this important theological peculiarity during dialogues and apologies both with the Latin Catholic and Byzantine Orthodox churches.

7. For the full description of the meanings of the words “moral” and “ethics,” see D. Ioannes Miskgian, *Manuale Lexicon Armeno-Latinum ad usum scholarum* (Rome: 1887), 47.

8. Gregory of Ta’ev, Գրք Հարցման, 527.

With regard to the Armenian Church, teaching authority is unanimously reserved to the synod of bishops. In the Armenian tradition, along with the normative-canonical authority accorded to the *catholicoi* and the bishops, the same teaching authority, especially on the dogmatic and moral issues, is also accorded to the *var'dapets* (teachers, doctors). This special character of teaching authority with respect to the hierarchical place of *var'dapets* is unique to the Armenian Church and widely attested to in the canons and moral treatises issued by its famous teachers and doctors. These two types of teaching authority are always to be mutually completing and consistent, thus aiming to express the apostolic and prophetic natures of the ecclesial mission.

As mentioned above, the distinction between “ethics” and “moral” is an essential path in the correct understanding of moral discernment in the Armenian Church. With scientific and anthropological attitudes dealing with the inner and natural qualities of human nature, the Armenian Church’s teaching highlights two essential notions: divine *image* and *likeness*. These are the essential components of human nature at the very beginning of creation. In this respect, morality has to do with restoring the image of God in humankind, impelling the human being, according to its divine likeness, toward perfection or *theosis*.⁹ The context, where this restoration should be realized, is the liturgical location of ethics and morality¹⁰ – in other words, the life of prayer and sacraments/mysteries, the most important components of the church’s inner life. According to patristic teaching, “created in the image of God” means that humans are one in their essence according to their nature and in many hypostases according to their persons.¹¹ Therefore, to the one human nature, created in the image of God, conscience was accorded as “the spring of the moral life. It discerns what is good (and the proper end) for the human being and impels the human being toward it.”¹²

Nevertheless, this “universal judge” of the human nature proves to be differently applied and practised because of the many human hypostases according to human persons. And here we come to another aspect of human person: that is, *the correlation of law and love*, the supreme virtue of the Christian ethics

9. Guroian, *Incarnate Love*, 15–16; Fr. Mesrop Parsamyan, *Being God: The Three-level Development Way of Theosis According to the Teaching of St. Nerses the Graceful* [in Armenian] (Holy Etchmiadzin: 2015), 103–110.

10. V. Guroian, *Ethics after Christendom: Toward an Ecclesial Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1994), 34.

11. Թուղթ Արամայ (Letter of Aram, IX c.), coll. Classical Armenian Authors, vol. 9 (Antelias, Lebanon: 2008), 751–62; Christos Yannaras, *The Freedom of Morality*, tr. from Greek by E. Briere (Crestwood, N.Y.: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1984), 19.

12. Guroian, *Incarnate Love*, 15.

in the Orthodox tradition.¹³ Armenian tradition regards the experience of law as something externally imposed and peculiar to the psychology of the old Adam.¹⁴ This law includes two first laws – natural and written (Mosaic laws) – which are not able to attain the supreme level of Christian ethics perfection, or *theosis*.¹⁵ Consequently, sin itself is a contradiction of that inner spiritual law and not with the natural and written laws. One of the most important tasks of moral discernment in Christian life is to harmonize and unify the three levels of law, thus attaining the *pleroma* of divine revelation. The supreme love, as an expression of “incarnational faith,”¹⁶ was beautifully formulated within the context of the trinitarian structure of love in a poem of the Catholicos St Nerses IV the Gracious (1166–73):

*The Love, with His love, sent you,
O Love, and assembled His members in You,
Having founded His Church . . .*¹⁷

Thus, the human, natural, and written law should seek to be a reflective image of the incarnated love. Only through this harmonization can we find an authoritative basis for moral discernment, which will be from neither traditions nor human experience, but the good, expressed and experienced in the life of Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

My glance at the main sources for moral discernment in the Armenian tradition has focused on the distinctiveness and specifics of the moral and ethical notions and terms in the Armenian apostolic Orthodox tradition. The most important observation to be made about Armenian moral discernment is that it has never been rigorously systematic. It has understood theology and morality

13. See especially Fr Dumitru Staniloae, *Theology and the Church*, tr. Robert Barringer (Crestwood, N.Y.: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1980), 73–109.

14. Parsamyan, *Being God*, 61.

15. It is important to note here that the common three-level structure of Christian ethics perfection, which also touches implicitly on the relationship between soteriology and ethics, used to be described with three levels in the Armenian tradition: *purification* (first level for those having started their Christian life), *enlightening* (second level for those who are seeking to be united with the source of light), and *final goal, telos* (third level for those who have been united with God, Source of light), see *ibid.*, 111–41.

16. Guroian, *Incarnate Love*, 21.

17. Հայնքաղ շարական (Hymnorum Armenorum) (Holy Etchmiadzin: 1888), 291.

as inseparable entities of Christian moral life. Therefore, it seems fair to say, that in the Armenian tradition, to do ethics is a deliberate activity, always in unison with datum of prayer, spirituality, liturgy, worship, and spiritual experience. That is the reason why the two main Armenian conceptions of morality – *teaching as morality* and *inner, natural human qualities as ethics* – are used to describe the anthropological dimension of moral discernment.

The theological concepts of *theosis*, *image* and *likeness*, and *love* lie at the heart of the representation of moral discernment outlined here. These important theological concepts help us to understand the historical, gradual, and three-level development of the law of God, which in turn is another distinctive characteristic in the interpretation of the correlation of law and love in the Armenian tradition. Moreover, the systematization of morality and moral discernment risks overlooking the genuine expression of the ancient Armenian ecclesial tradition, wherein almost all the moral concepts and principles have been preserved over the centuries.

5. Catholic Ethical Teaching: Between Infallibility and the Sense of the Faithful

Josef Römelt

The formation and development of moral convictions are imparted in multiple ways within the Roman Catholic Church, involving a variety of “authoritative bodies” among the entities of the church (the faithful, professors of theology, bishops, and the college of bishops, the Pope), each with their own authority. This can be understood as a hermeneutical process, which serves to translate the final authority, namely the authority of the word of God, and its significance for the ethical orientation of the faithful into the respective time. In this process, the Catholic Church – whether it be in the sense of the proclamation of papal or episcopal teaching authority or in the sense of academic theological reflection – also makes use of philosophical argumentation, which may change in accordance with spiritual and cultural developments.

However, any such change is subject to the deeper significance of the inner processes of development involved in an understanding of the ethical consequences of the Christian faith and serves those processes. These inner processes are those which the church understands as an ever deeper penetration into the truth of the word of God and the revelation of Jesus Christ. It is from this deepening insight, which is beholden to the truth of the revelation, that in the end all change relating to the “ethical positions” of the church proceeds. This is where its inner centre lies. And yet this process can also be described as a “sociology of knowledge,” because it engages in a lively interaction with those changes that run through the social, academic, and spiritual history of cultures.

This paper will present the development of the passing on of the faith and ethics-related teaching in the context of the Catholic Church by first reflecting on the dogma of the infallibility of papal teaching authority as the Catholic Church holds it and on its significance for “matters regarding morality.” Subsequently, two examples will illustrate development. The first example concerns the acceptance and further development of the doctrine of natural law, which

throughout the centuries up to the present day has had and still has a particular importance within the Catholic Church in relation to reflections on the moral consequences of faith. The second example involves a presentation of the significance of the understanding of the sense of the faith of all faithful (*sensus fidelium*) for the development of moral convictions. Within the Catholic Church this has become rather evident in the “synodal process” of the Synods of Bishops on the theme of “The Family” held in Rome in 2014 and 2015.

The Authority of Church Doctrine in Questions of Ethical Matters

According to Catholic Church’s view, its teaching authority with regard to ethics, both infallible and fallible, is determined by the church’s understanding of and responsibility to pass on the truth of the gospel without error. If “teaching” is biblically an expression of the testimony of the word of God through the proclamation by all the faithful of the coming of the kingdom of God in Jesus (Mark 1:14), then Christ, as the Word of definitive self-communication by God, continues to be the actual teacher (Matt. 23:10). The sending of the Spirit (John 16:13) turned the community of disciples into the subject of the powerful history of the effects of the word of God. A reflected securing of the narrative and witnessing community by way of institutional structures occurred through the processes of the early development of the apostolic office, the unfolding of the ministry of the bishop, and the formation of the canon, etc.

The East and the West followed different paths, however: In the East bishops, episcopal synods, and councils remain responsible for doctrinal decisions. The prophetic competence of monasticism assumes an experiential, charismatically based doctrinal authority. In the West, a dynamic differentiation of the teaching authority emerged concerning the authority of bishops, episcopal synods, and councils, with the pope as the head on the one hand (*ecclesiastical magisterium*), and the functions of academic teaching on the other hand (*theological magisterium*). The dogma of papal infallibility, as proclaimed by the First Vatican Council in 1870, signifies a core expression of the authority of the ecclesiastical magisterium: the *depositum fidei* – which is entrusted to the church to be passed on in an unadulterated form along with everything that is necessary to protect its truth – is understood as the object of the infallible teaching authority of the papal office. This includes fundamental ethical truths:

When the Roman Pontiff speaks “*ex cathedra*”, that is, when, in the exercise of his office as shepherd and teacher of all Christians, in virtue of his supreme

apostolic authority, he defines a doctrine concerning faith or morals to be held by the whole Church, he possesses, by the divine assistance promised to him in blessed Peter, that infallibility which the divine Redeemer willed his Church to enjoy in defining doctrine concerning faith or morals. (Vat. I, *Pas-tor aeternus*, chapter 4)

In this sense the contribution of the ecclesiastical magisterium in its dialogue with human scientific knowledge and with human culture and in its significance for the personal relevant meaning of an individual human being can hardly be interpreted as simply restrictive or maximalist. It is a contribution that is historically conditioned, serving historical dialogue and the powers that drive this dialogue. In order to describe this contribution, neither purely objective and authoritatively juridical criteria nor simply subjective criteria will suffice. The contribution of the magisterium must be prophetic – with reference to the religious foundation of its authority – if the historical situation demands it.

Purpose and Limitations of the Notion of the Infallibility of Ecclesial Doctrine

The infallibility of the pope differs from other decisions and is bound by three conditions, which must all be present at the same time. They concern the subject, the object, and the act.

The subject. The decision is only infallible when the pope makes the decision in virtue of his supreme authority as shepherd and teacher of all Christians. The pope takes the decision only in virtue of his office and not as a private person, and it occurs under the assistance of the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, Vatican II clarified that this infallibility is also vested in the College of Bishops (*Lumen gentium* 22). Even though the assent of the church is not required as a condition, it nevertheless cannot fail if the teaching is to be effective. Furthermore, in matters of faith Vatican II grants to the body of the faithful an infallibility corresponding to that of the magisterium, which is equally awakened and maintained by the Spirit of truth. Therefore, the collective body of believers cannot go astray (*LG* 12).

The object. The matter can only concern issues in the area of faith and morals (*fides et mores*). In this, even the magisterium is bound by the normativity of the tradition of apostolic revelation. For this reason papal infallibility is a part of the infallibility of the church.

The act. The pope must explicitly qualify the act as a so-called *ex cathedra* decision.

With regard to ethical questions, it is worth noting that until now the magisterium in the Catholic Church has not yet made a solemn dogmatic declaration on an ethical subject. Nevertheless, Pope John Paul II did come very close to such a dogmatic declaration in his encyclical *Evangelium vitae*,¹ when he placed a strict ban on the killing of an innocent person; he invoked the teaching of the whole of tradition while reacting to practices within modern medicine (active assisted death, abortion, etc.). For this statement, he referred to the other bishops:

Therefore, by the authority which Christ conferred upon Peter and his Successors, and in communion with the Bishops of the Catholic Church, I confirm that the direct and voluntary killing of an innocent human being is always gravely immoral. This doctrine, based upon that unwritten law which man, in the light of reason, finds in his own heart (cf. Rom 2:14-15), is reaffirmed by Holy Scripture, transmitted by the Tradition of the Church and taught by the ordinary and universal Magisterium. (EV 57)

This pronouncement binds the conscience of the faithful, those involved in academic disputes (theology professors), and the office holders themselves (bishops, priests, and deacons).

The Actual Praxis

Nevertheless, the meaning of these declarations for specific questions concerning ethics (e.g., self-defence, military service, and international disaster relief) have to be revisited and reinterpreted time and again in dialogue with cultural developments. In the statement of Pope John Paul II quoted above, there is a reflection of the consciousness within in the Catholic Church as confirmed by Vatican II that in normal practice the extraordinary teaching authority (Magisterium) of the pope is bound by the consensus of the College of Bishops (ordinary magisterium). *De facto* this joint magisterium of the bishops operates most directly in church practice when it comes to questions of ethics and of discipline (see, e.g., the decision of the German Episcopal Conference to revoke the so called *missio canonica*, which is required for teaching religion in schools, from Catholics who enter into a registered civil partnership now available under the civil law institutions in Germany). A papal pronouncement made by means of encyclicals has its most lasting universal effect in concrete terms when it

1. Pope John Paul II, Encyclical Letter “*Evangelium Vitae* on the Value and Inviolability of Human Life.” English translation (Vatican Press, 1995), http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25031995_evangelium-vitae.html. Hereafter, EV.

comes to questions of morals within the church. So, for example, the publication of the encyclical letter “*Humanae Vitae* on the Regulation of Births” by Pope Paul VI in 1968 and the 1987-issued instruction by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, entitled *Donum Vitae*, on questions of contraception and medical assistance for infertility led to widespread controversy within the worldwide church.

The Example of the Doctrine of Natural Law

For many questions within the realm of ethics, the philosophical argumentation of natural law can offer help in the sense of using the ethical convictions of the Catholic Church for our time. Christian teaching on natural law, as it is understood in the Catholic Church, presents a highly multifaceted interpretation of the ethical significance of the Christian faith in dialogue with cultural developments. Facets of this interpretation include the following: the acceptance of the philosophical rationale for ethics from the non-Christian world (antiquity); the re-shaping of these arguments and rationales within the horizons of the Christian faith; the expansion or indeed “overhauling” of this thinking through confrontation with the revelations of holy scripture; and the interpretation of such an exegesis of the moral consequences of the Christian faith as protecting faithfulness to tradition as opposed to the risks of a false harmonization with the zeitgeist, above all in cases of conflict with modern, liberal society.

In Dialogue with Antiquity

Natural law thinking in theology is closely bound up with metaphysical understanding in the ancient world. It is the human capacity of abstraction that is able to point the way for this thinking into a deeper dimension of life. Accordingly, human beings, helped by an awareness of the nature of things going beyond the specific and the coincidental, can recognize what is universally valid, and thus have a sense of the eternity of the absolute. There, they can find a stability that is removed from the uncertainties of daily life – a reliable world because it offers benchmarks from a universality against which the behaviour of individuals and the rules of society can be tested and judged.

Without being able to present here in detail all the diverse variations that this understanding has found in the different philosophies of the ancient world, the following worldview may be meaningful with respect to ethical orientation: it is the function of the human being to fit in with the measure of order of a spiritual cosmos as background to the concrete world. In this, the dignity of human reason is expressed, which provides insight into the spiritual world. By

fitting into an orderly reality, the human being can find happiness and moral fulfilment.

This sort of ethic has not lost its fascination right up to the present day. Certainly, some ideas were considered legitimate within their time that are profoundly problematical to present-day understanding: for example, slavery, the dominance of men over women, a rigid social ordering of society into classes. Nevertheless, this ethic also produced foundational principles and initial fundamental intuitions of morality: for example, that the fairest path generally lies somewhere in the middle, that everyone should be regarded according to their needs and abilities (*suum cuique*), that medicine has to serve the wellbeing of the person, that contracts should be honoured, that property is to be respected, that lying disturbs the essence of human communication, and that the killing of an innocent person contradicts our most fundamental instincts and social longings for peace, mutual respect and security. These principles create order in human life and provide it with a framework. They radiate moral reliability and a moral overview.

Christian Natural Law

The supportive force of natural law ethics is strengthened for Christian thinking, according to the interpretation of Catholic theology, because in the inconsistency of life people are not only given a general understanding of their spiritual and free existence but also a natural ethical orientation.

Indeed, within the framework of the Christian trust in God's order as creation and the involvement of the rational insight of human beings in the encounter with the *personal* presence of God, ethics finds a balance between a regard for the natural basic principles of human culture and the development of human creative powers. A fascinating balance emerges between an ethic truly orientated on humankind and an enduring respect for the natural prerequisites of human life. A supportive commitment to the non-discretionary foundations of morality is bound up with an openness in ethical thinking. This openness is based on the history of human relations with God and on the mystery of humankind within that.

God's Order of Creation

At this point, once again, not all the specific details can be included. Biblical anthropology with its declaration of humankind being made as a counterpart image of God plays a relevant role in this development. It is with Augustine that a first draft can be found of the systematic interpretation of a Christian ethical orientation against the background of the metaphysical interpretation of reality in antiquity: that is, the biblical created order is equated with the

ancient understanding of the order of being. According to Platonic philosophy, the metaphysical order of reality, which humans can recognize through reason, appears as a reflection of the archetypal spiritual order. In Christian terms, it corresponds to the mind of God, to the archetype of the Spirit of God through which the world was created. Thus, Augustine understands the *lex aeterna* in the heart of the God of salvation history as the “archetypal law” for “the natural law that is expressed in the order of creation.”

In scholastic thinking, the Christian experience of faith finally becomes the framework for the philosophical understanding of the world, humanity and reason taken from the ancient world. This offers the possibility of understanding human persons in their dependence from nature.

Supernatural revelation is placed alongside natural revelation. Law is to be understood not only as *lex aeterna* and *lex naturalis*, but goes beyond it as *lex Divina*, be it as *lex vetus* (Old Testament) or *lex nova* (New Testament).² The human being should recognize the will of God from biblical directives and from the order of creation.

Nature and Culture

The decisive element in this synthesis is that through the Christian interpretation of nature as creation, the place of humans and an understanding of their *formative task* is reappraised. For in the encounter with the God of salvation history, the human being is no longer placed under the anonymous power of an eternal cosmos and natural cycles. Nature and cosmos are relativized. The human being is not just passively subjugated to them but can share in their formation. In light of the *lex aeterna*, the human spirit does not just see through the essence of the order of reality, but must first build that order for itself. “Natural inclinations are offered to humans only as the materials from which *they themselves* have to create a rational order.”³

For Thomas Aquinas, natural law is “*aliquid per rationem constitutum*.”⁴ From this arises ethical teaching that includes both the natural foundations

2. See STh I–I, q. XCI a. 4: “*ergo dicendum quod per naturalem legem participatur lex aeterna secundum proportionem capacitatis humanae naturae. Sed oportet ut altiori modo dirigatur homo in ultimum finem supernaturalem. Et ideo superadditur lex divinitus data, per quam lex aeterna participatur altiori modo.*”

3. J. Arntz, “Die Entwicklung des naturrechtlichen Denkens innerhalb des Thomismus,” in *Das Naturrecht im Disput. Drei Vorträge beim Kongreß der deutschsprachigen Moralthologen 1965 in Bensberg*, ed F. Böckle (Düsseldorf: 1966), 87–120, at 100.

4. See STh I–II, q. 94, a. 1 (This section selects the expression “*lex naturalis est aliquid per rationem constitutum*” and refers back to STh I–II, q. 90). Ibid., a. 5: “*Sed sacerdotium est duplex . . . scilicet sacerdotium Leviticum, et sacerdotium Christi. Ergo etiam duplex est lex divina, scilicet lex vetus et lex nova.*”

for human action and the free and sovereign responsibility of humankind. Nature must be incorporated into human culture. God's creation is entrusted to humans.

Such an ethic can hardly be valued highly enough if we keep in mind the difficulties of the present time around questions concerning the relationship between nature and culture. Where are the boundaries of genetic manipulation of the natural fundamentals of human structural design? To what extent can human technology interfere in the natural ecological balance? This theology also has decisive significance with regard to the overall development of spiritual history. On the basis of this thinking, several important institutions emerged both in the church and in Western culture: marriage based on the free consent of the partners and its sacramental interpretation; the mediation between religious culture and independent reasoning; related to it, the rise of scientific research in universities during the high Middle Ages; and indeed the laying of the foundations for modern international law during the late scholastic period. The insight into how rational nature binds together all human beings eventually became the founding principle for human rights. In this, the awareness of belonging to the natural order of the species is tied up with the recognition of pre-state rights for the protection of the freedom of the individual, which is associated with the human capacity to reason and with human dignity.

A Living Way of Moral Responsibility before God

The Catholic understanding, considered in brief, unites a concrete adherence to biblical norms and to the ordering of creation (natural law) with the liberating openness and existential depth of a personal relationship with God. The Christian search for moral orientation refers both to the Bible and to intuition in relation to the natural basis for human action in order to offer concrete values. At the same time, however, the horizon of the experience of the God of salvation history makes us aware that to live in the real world these values can and must be unlocked afresh through a living encounter with God. Moreover, it is an ongoing task to follow this path.

Thus, it is precisely in this sense that the theology of the ecclesiastical magisterium still today understands the natural law ethic as the basis of moral theology. Above all, it sees in this an answer to the pressing question of the freedom of the individual in the midst of all the varied factors on which this depends. The Catholic Church distances itself from the idea of an unbound "autocratic" freedom as the basis of culture. Morality based on natural law is thus from a theological point of view an expression of hope in the dignity of the individual human being, who through a recognition of the order which

God himself grants to life, is able to partake of it. “Others speak, and rightly so, of *participated theonomy*, since man’s free obedience to God’s law effectively implies that human reason and human will participate in God’s wisdom and providence . . . by the light of natural reason and of Divine Revelation, which manifest to him the requirements and the promptings of eternal wisdom,” man is able to participate in the eternal truth and to realise his own moral identity (“true moral autonomy”).⁵

In this order, human beings hold to the binding, unchangeable word of God. And yet we still need to unlock its sense anew in light of the challenges of our own time. Therefore, the insights into the fields of moral theology and its form in actual practice are ever-changing.

An Example of the Sense of the Faith of All Believers

The considerable role played by the sense of the faith of all believers (*sensus fidelium*) in this deeper understanding becomes evident in the perception of the moral duties of the Christian family, as has been formulated by the synods of bishops held in Rome in 2014 and 2015. In the preparations for these synods, the bishops consulted the faithful in a lengthy and complex process concerning their understanding of the biblical message for the interpretation of marriage and family, their thoughts on natural law and its implications for an ethic of sexuality, and their practical experience in local churches. They took the results of this survey as the basis for their endeavours to find a pronouncement relevant for today within the sphere of the Catholic Church.

The Family as Subject of Pastoral Care

Against this background, Pope Francis in his post synodal apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*,⁶ in which he tries to give a summary of the outcomes of the synods, gives a differentiated description of the duty of making binding ethical proclamations in the Catholic Church. In this, his statements made as Pope and with the authority of the Pope, who bears the special responsibility for the unity of the church, enjoy a considerable binding force. The Pope was aware that the synods revealed a tense debate among the participating bishops

5. John Paul II, Encyclical Letter “*Veritatis Splendor* on Some of the Fundamental Questions of Catholic Moral Teaching” August 6 (Vatican Press, 1993), §41, http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_06081993_veritatis-splendor.html.

6. Francis, Postsynodal Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, March 19, English translation (Vatican Press, 2016), https://w2.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20160319_amoris-laetitia_en.pdf.

concerning the moral questions surrounding marriage and family – above all the topic of remarried divorced persons and their admission to the sacraments of reconciliation and the eucharist. He therefore chose not to speak through the authoritatively higher medium of an encyclical, but in the form of an apostolic exhortation. The ordinary magisterium of the bishops itself describes its own pronouncement as a step on the way to the truth of Christ. Moreover, it encourages the faithful to follow this way actively in light of their own experience, so that the commitment of the whole church to the will of God may be ever more deeply revealed.

In the context of giving a clearer emphasis on the *family as the subject of pastoral care* it should be noted that Christian families are called to give a witness through their life together to the gospel of marriage that is entrusted to them . . . In this way the church itself will continue to learn from the experience of life and faith of those married couples and families.⁷

According to the statement of the synod fathers themselves, this is also valid for example when dealing with artificial birth control, which within the Catholic Church has been highly controversial since Pope Paul VI's encyclical *Humanae vitae*:

The choice of responsible parenthood presupposes the formation of conscience, which is “the most secret core and sanctuary of a person. There each one is alone with God, whose voice echoes in the depths of the heart” (GS, 16). The more the couple tries to listen in their conscience to God and his commandments (cf. Rom 2:15) and are accompanied spiritually, the more their decision will be intimately free from a subjective arbitrariness and the adaptation to people's conduct where they live.⁸

7. Relatio of the German-speaking group on the third section of the *Instrumentum laboris* in *The Vocation and Mission of the Family in the Church and the Contemporary World*, text of the Synod of Bishops, 2015.

8. Synod of Bishops, *XIV Ordinary General Assembly: The Vocation and Mission of the Family in the Church and in the Contemporary World. The Final Report of the Synod of Bishops to the Holy Father, Pope Francis*, 24 October (Vatican Press, 2015), §63, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curial/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20151026_relazione-finale-xiv-assemblea_en.html.

Continuity and Development in the Doctrine

There is thus an attempt to ensure the continuity of doctrine. However, in contrast to the moral evaluation of artificial forms of birth control as “intrinsically evil” (*intrinsece malum*), here there is mention of an open invitation involving ethical evaluation and actual practice:

The use of methods based on the ‘laws of nature and the incidence of fertility’ (HV, 11) are to be encouraged, because ‘these methods respect the bodies of the spouses, encourage tenderness between them and favour the education of an authentic freedom’ (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 2370). [yes 237 / no 21]⁹

In light of the fact that there was considerable controversy within the synods of bishops, above all with regard to Jesus’ ban on divorce and how to deal with the admission of people who have divorced and re-married to the sacraments, Pope Francis finally gave profound expression to the openness of the search within the Catholic Church to remain faithful to the word of God in respect of the moral consequences of faith:

Since “time is greater than space”, I would make it clear that not all discussions of doctrinal, moral or pastoral issues need to be settled by interventions of the magisterium. Unity of teaching and practice is certainly necessary in the Church, but this does not preclude various ways of interpreting some aspects of that teaching or drawing certain consequences from it. This will always be the case as the Spirit guides us towards the entire truth (cf. Jn 16:13), until he leads us fully into the mystery of Christ and enables us to see all things as he does. Each country or region, moreover, can seek solutions better suited to its culture and sensitive to its traditions and local needs. For “cultures are in fact quite diverse and every general principle . . . needs to be inculturated, if it is to be respected and applied.”¹⁰

This, however, means fidelity to God’s word, to revelation, and to its passing on in the contemporary relevant context form the background to the processes of change that lie beneath the developments permeating the Catholic Church in its current synodal processes. On the one hand, the background to this is the increased confrontation of academic theology with theoretical reflections

9. Ibid.

10. Pope Francis, *Post Synodal Apostolic Exhortation Amoris Laetitia from the Holy Father Pope Francis to the Bishops, Priests and Deacons, to Consecrated Persons, Christian Married Couples and All the Lay Faithful on Love in the Family*, 19 March (Vatican Press, 2016), §3, https://w2.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20160319_amoris-laetitia_en.pdf.

regarding the change in philosophical ways of seeking a basis for ethical convictions. On the other hand – and even much stronger – the sense of faith of all the members of the Catholic Church is proving to be the actual framework for triggering a deepening insight into the ethical consequences of faith.

6. Conscience Formed within the Community: Moral Discernment in the Old Catholic Church

Theresa Hüther

When students of Old Catholic theology are asked what they associate with Old Catholic ethics,¹ they first respond by asking whether such a thing really exists. If so, they associate it mostly with topics concerning their own church. That ethics is an under-studied subject in Old Catholic theology is stressed by Franz Segbers, who developed an Old Catholic ethic rooted in the freedom of every person.²

Historical Context

The Old Catholic Church emerged from the protest movement against the dogmas of the infallibility and the primacy of jurisdiction of the pope declared at the First Vatican Council in July 1870. This opposition stands in a long tradition with other reform movements and the reinforcement of the self-responsibility of the local church within the Catholic Church and rejects the idea of a centre that governs everything.³ An important point of reference was the early church of the first millennium, where not only the dogmatic decisions but also the discursive way of making decisions were seen as binding.⁴ Two theological schools influenced early Old Catholic theology. In the *Historische Schule*, the critical study of sources led to a more independent view of ecclesiastical history. The early church became the orientation for church reform, whereas the high

1. These notes focus primarily on the Old Catholic Church of Germany. Because of the local church theology, the organization and the understanding of moral questions differ in the various national churches.

2. Franz Segbers, "Ethik in alt-katholischer Perspektive," *Handbuch Alt-Katholische Theologie*, ed. Andreas Krebs and Peter-Ben Smit [to be published].

3. Günter Eßer, *Die Alt-Katholischen Kirchen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2016), 9-15.

4. Eßer, *Kirchen*, 32.

Middle Ages and the reception of Aristotle were seen as deformation. Major exponents were Ignaz von Döllinger (1799–1890) and Joseph Hubert Reinkens (1821–1896). Before and during the First Vatican Council, it was stated that something that is historically wrong (such as the infallibility of the pope) could not be a subject of faith and unconditional obedience.⁵ The second school was the school of Kantian transcendentalism within Catholic theology, which emphasizes not merely obeying rules and dogmas, but following one's own conscience. It made theologians such as Franz Peter Knoodt (1811–1889) and Theodor Weber (1836–1906) aware of problems within the neo-scholastic theology strengthened by the Vatican, which culminated in the dogma of infallibility.⁶

The importance of conscience and the rejection of juridical authority are deeply rooted in the Old Catholic Church and remain strong today. The subject of conscience (*Gewissen*) was the focus of a pastoral letter by the first Old Catholic bishop, Joseph Hubert Reinkens.⁷ He saw conscience as a voice inside a person that is deeply connected to God and God's law. In Reinkens's reading of St Paul, there is not one universal conscience, but only individual conscience, which is the highest instance for a moral decision. Awareness of one's own conscience consequently leads to respect for the conscience of every person.⁸ Reinkens also considered conscience to be given by nature. He followed the Kantian idea that a person does not only exist for society, but is an end in him- or herself. As a result, he rejected the claim that the pope's unerring decision in moral questions has to be obeyed as the price of salvation.⁹ The emphasis on conscience led as early as 1871 to a demand for "constitutionally regulated participation in ecclesiastical affairs [of the Catholic church members],"¹⁰ realized

5. Ignaz von Döllinger was a professor of church history in Munich; Joseph Hubert Reinkens in Breslau. Angela Berlis, "Blicke zurück: Vom Totenbett Döllingers auf sein Leben," Elisabeth Bach, Angela Berlis and Siegfried J. Thuringer, *Ignaz von Döllinger zum 125. Todestag: Spurensuche: Schlaglichter auf ein außergewöhnliches Leben*, from 2017 American Academy of Religion, Session "History of Christianity Unit and Nineteenth Century Theology". Boston. 18-21. November 2017, 78–92; Günter Eßer, "Reinkens, Joseph Hubert," *Neue Deutsche Biographie* 21 (2003), 373–74, <https://www.deutsche-biographie.de/gnd118599488.html#ndbcontent>.

6. Andreas Krebs, "Katholische Theologie nach Kant: Georg Hermes – Anton Günther – Theodor Weber," *Handbuch Alt-Katholische Theologie* [to be published].

7. Joseph Hubert Reinkens, "Hirtenbrief (31.3.1885)," in Joseph Hubert Reinkens, *Hirtenbriefe*, ed. Synodal-Repräsentanz Bonn 1897, reprint ed. Bischof und Synodalvertretung (Bonn: Alt-Katholischer Bistumsverlag, 2002), 106–25.

8. *Ibid.*, 107–19.

9. *Ibid.*, 112–23.

10. "Programm des Katholiken-Kongresses in München (22–24 September 1871)," in Eßer, *Kirchen*, 118.

in the “Order for the synod and the parishes.” Therein, the highest body in the parish is the assembly of the congregation that elects the pastor and the synod delegates. The bishop and the standing committee (with more lay than clergy members) are elected by the synod and govern the diocese together.¹¹ This synodality emerged within the patriarchal society of the 19th century, which meant that women were largely excluded from official decision-making, but it bears the idea of equality. This later took full effect when the question arose of whether it is acceptable to exclude woman from suffrage and church offices.

From the beginning, opponents of papal infallibility demanded the abolition of mandatory celibacy.¹² This was requested at the first synod in 1874, but the vote was postponed. The subject was discussed in the church and at subsequent synods, and the historical and legal positions were researched.¹³ In 1878 the synod finally decided to abandon the celibacy obligation. The bishop voted against the abolition, but told the delegates to act according to their conscience. Some delegates disagreed with the procedure and demanded “moral unanimity.”¹⁴ Nevertheless, the synodical decision-making proved successful in a moral decision.

In 1889, the Swiss, German, and Dutch Old Catholic churches joined together in the Union of Utrecht, with the bishops meeting regularly at the International Bishops’ Conference (IBC). Later, the Austrian Church, the Polish National Church, and the Polish National Catholic Church in the United States joined the Union of Utrecht; also the Czech Church, which became independent after the First World War. It is a union of local churches in which the Archbishop of Utrecht has honorary primacy but no juridical competence in churches outside the Netherlands.¹⁵

Because the strong emphasis on conscience was connected with a clear division between religious and political topics, the German church had a certain blindness to the inhuman ideology of the Nazis.¹⁶ Only from the 1960s on was

11. “Synodal- und Gemeinde-Ordnung,” in *Der Altkatholizismus: Geschichte seiner Entwicklung, inneren Gestaltung und rechtlichen Stellung in Deutschland*, ed. Johann Friedrich von Schulte (Giessen: Verlag Emil Roth, 1887), 46–54, §6, §13–15, §22, §30, §45–49.

12. Two other major topics discussed in the 1870s were church organization and language of worship.

13. *Beschlüsse der 1.–4. Synode der Altkatholiken des deutschen Reiches* (Bonn: Neusser, 1874–77); Johann Friedrich von Schulte, *Der Cölibatszwang und dessen Aufhebung* (Bonn: Neusser, 1876).

14. *Verhandlungen der 5. Synode der Altkatholiken des Deutschen Reiches 1878* (Bonn: Neusser, 1878), 106–108.

15. “Utrechter Union, Geschichte,” <http://www.utrechter-union.org/pagina/22/geschichte>.

16. Matthias Ring: “*Katholisch und deutsch*”: *Die alt-katholische Kirche Deutschlands und*

more attention given to global connections and responsibilities, development aid, and ecumenical cooperation.¹⁷ One example of a discernment process will be elaborated here in more detail: whether it is justified to exclude women from the priesthood.

After the first Anglican women priests were ordained in Hong Kong in 1971, the question arose of whether they could celebrate at an Old Catholic service, because male Anglican priests were allowed to do so due to the full communion between the two churches. The IBC decided women could not do so – with one conflicting vote and therefore not of a binding nature.¹⁸ In the Polish National Catholic Church in the United States, this issue put an end to the sacramental intercommunion with the Episcopal Church, which had introduced women's ordination. In Western Europe, the resolution was not received. Instead, protest arose, especially from Old Catholic women's associations.¹⁹ In 1981, the German synod proposed the reintroduction of the female diaconate, which had existed in the early church. The IBC resolved in 1982 to leave the decision to individual local churches.²⁰ The International Old Catholic Theologians' Conference in 1984 resolved the argument that the reasons against women ordination were obsolete and not theological and therefore spoke out in favour of women priests.²¹ The first female deacon was ordained in Switzerland in 1987, in Germany in 1988, and in Austria in 1991.²² In 1989, the synod of the German diocese instructed the bishop to speak up for female deacons, priests, and bishops at the IBC.²³ An extraordinary meeting of the IBC was called in 1991 to coordinate the discernment process about women's ordination. The bishops agreed to hold conversations with the churches in apostolic

der Nationalsozialismus, Geschichte und Theologie des Alt-Katholizismus B 3 (Bonn: Alt-Katholischer Bistumsverlag, 2008), 795–823.

17. For example, *Amtliches Kirchenblatt* X:3 (1947); *Amtliches Kirchenblatt* XII:3 (1961); and *Amtliches Kirchenblatt* 5 (1968).

18. *Amtliches Kirchenblatt* nr. 3 (1972); Anja Goller, "Die Frauenordination in der alt-katholischen Kirche Deutschlands," in *Frauen in der Kirche? Unverzichtbar*, ed. Ingrid Grave OP, Jordana Schmidt OP and Monika Zangerle OP (Freiburg CH: Paulusverlag, 2015), 42; Urs von Arx, "Kirchliche Chronik. IBK Sondersession in Wislikoven Juli 1997," *Internationale Kirchliche Zeitschrift* (IKZ) 87 (1997), 234.

19. von Arx, "Kirchliche Chronik," 225–26.

20. Goller, "Frauenordination," 43.

21. "Angenommene Thesen der 24. Altkatholischen Theologenkonferenz," IKZ 75 (1985), 70.

22. Goller, "Frauenordination," 43.

23. "Beschlüsse der 49. Ordentlichen Bistumssynode des Katholischen Bistums der Alt-Katholiken in Deutschland (1. bis 5. Mai 1989 in Mainz)," *Amtliches Kirchenblatt* 2 (1989), 2–3.

succession and to have a theological seminar in every local church to debate the topic. The 50th synod in Germany some months later made several proposals for the immediate implementation of women's ordination to the threefold office. "Only after multiple inventions by Bishop Sigisbert Kraft was it possible to postpone the final decision so as not to threaten the dialogue process within the Union of Utrecht."²⁴ At the 1994 synod, the first resolution was to open the threefold office to women in full.²⁵ Because the dialogue process in the Union of Utrecht had not yet ended and the Polish National Catholic Church was against the ordination of women, the German church's membership of the Union of Utrecht was suspended. At Pentecost 1996, the first two women were ordained to the priesthood in Konstanz.²⁶ One year later, the IBC could not reach consensus about women's ordination, but a majority declared that the local church bears the responsibility for its introduction. Women were subsequently ordained as priests in Austria, the Netherlands, and finally, in 2000, in Switzerland. The Polish National Catholic Church eventually left the Union of Utrecht in 2003.²⁷

Today the Union of Utrecht comprises churches from a central European context – with a distinction between churches that had to survive in a socialist environment and those that did not. The different historical and cultural backgrounds lead to a variance in dealing with moral questions without affecting the community of the churches. A discussion process is under way in the German Old Catholic Church (and others) on whether marriage should be for opposite-sex couples only.²⁸

24. Goller, "Frauenordination," 44; see "Von der 50. Ordentlichen Bischofssynode angenommene Anträge," *Amtliches Kirchenblatt* nr. 3 (1991), 18.

25. "Beschluß der Synode zur Frauenordination," *Amtliches Kirchenblatt* nr. 2 (1994), 9.

26. Goller, "Frauenordination," 44–45; *Amtliches Kirchenblatt* nr. 2 (1996), 1.

27. Goller, "Frauenordination," 45.

28. For the process of discussion, see e.g.: Andreas Krebs, "Sakramente als Beziehungsgeschehen," in *Mit dem Segen der Kirche. Die Segnung gleichgeschlechtlicher Partnerschaften in der theologischen Diskussion*, Geschichte und Theologie des Alt-Katholizismus B8, ed. Andreas Krebs and Matthias Ring (Bonn: Alt-Katholischer Bistumsverlag, 2018), 125–34; Matthias Ring, "Ein Beitrag zum Dialogprozess 'Ehe, Sakrament, Partnerschaft,'" in Krebs and Ring, *Segen*, 135–44; Lothar Haag, *Das Sakrament der Ehe: Alt-katholisches Eheverständnis in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, Geschichte und Theologie des Alt-Katholizismus B7 (Bonn: Alt-Katholischer Bistumsverlag, 2016); *Alt-Katholische und Ökumenische Theologie* 1 (2016) [Topic: The Blessing of Partnerships].

Sources for Moral Discernment Today

Old Catholics follow a hermeneutics of communion, which sees intersubjectivity and mutual understanding not only as an extrinsic form but also as an intrinsic characteristic of moral insight.²⁹ In practice, the starting point is a proposal to the synod. In ethical questions, this could start a dialogue process that brings discernment. People who are affected by a certain regulation and those potentially affected by a change can contribute their perspective in a free discussion. After a certain time, a vote is held that should be with a large majority or consensus (“moral unanimity”).

Scripture

Scripture is understood in its historical and social environment. A statement in the Bible is not simply transferred to our context 2000 years later. Instead, the reasons behind an action are translated into today’s context. It is the living spirit of Jesus that should be brought into everyday life. The plurality of the Bible is stressed when one statement is put into the perspective of the whole Bible with its different dealings of moral questions in law texts, in narratives, and in poetry. In this understanding, the Bible is our primary orientation for basic rules.³⁰ Ethical questions are embedded in the context of God’s preferential option to the poor and God’s advocacy for justice. In the biblical texts that come from a patriarchal context, we also find the testimony of a God who does not exclude women from God’s love, a sign of the equality of women and men in God’s eyes.³¹

Tradition

The Old Catholic Church stands in the tradition of collective decision-making that finds its expression in the synodical structure.³² Tradition is seen as a long stream of ideas that raises a diversity of options for acting on ethical questions. Questions of the theology of sacraments are (with a few exceptions) not ruled by church law, so dealing with them is a pastoral, not a juridical, matter. Church law is restricted to constitutional and administrative law so as to be able to act as an institution. The understanding of the ministry is not juridical, but primarily

29. Andreas Krebs, “Beziehungs-weise. Nachdenken über Kriterien alt-katholischer Theologie. Antrittsvorlesung am 21. Oktober 2016 an der Universität Bonn,” *Alt-Katholische und Ökumenische Theologie* 2 (2017), 3–22; “Social ethics is an essential perspective of all ethical reflection,” Segbers, “Ethik.”

30. Klaus Rohmann, “Schrift und Tradition,” *Handbuch Alt-Katholische Theologie* [to be published].

31. Christian Oeyen, “Frauenordination: Was sagt die Tradition wirklich?,” *IKZ* 75 (1985), 97–118.

32. For details, see the “History” section of the article.

spiritual and moral. Segbers also stresses that catholicity has an ethical meaning and could be understood as an antithesis to a capitalistic globalization.³³

Reason

Reason and therefore the humanities and sciences are also seen as key sources for moral discernment. Contemporary research in theology, philosophy, biology, psychology, medicine, and other disciplines is important for dealing with moral and ethical questions.³⁴ Common sense and story-telling are also given a place in the negotiating process, which is regarded as a common quest for truth and consensus.

Conscience

In many questions, the church does not hold an official position that governs every detail. Rather, acting according to one's own conscience is fundamental. This decision is within a framework of basic moral rules that takes scripture, tradition, reason, and authority into account. Within this framework, every Old Catholic is free to find their position on a particular moral question. No one should then blame individuals for disagreeing with the church, but accept their free conscience. The application of the criteria is thus left open to individuals with the obligation to act morally and also to reflect on how they come to ethical decisions.

Authority

The bishop is not entitled to dictate moral positions because the authority of the episcopal ministry is not formal or juridical, but spiritual and theological. Bishops must represent their local church and its decisions theologically and morally within the IBC and vis-à-vis other churches, whether in full communion or not. The synod is responsible for electing a candidate who can fulfil this service of unity, both within and outside their local church. They must respect the conscience of the people in the diocese. A person's authenticity is more important than the authority of their office.

The Archbishop of Utrecht is *primus inter pares* and honorary primate in the IBC, which issues theological statements and decides on questions of supranational significance. These decisions must then be received by the local churches. Sometimes they are approved, sometimes implicitly or explicitly

33. Segbers, "Ethik."

34. Gerhard Kruij, "'Eine andere Welt ist möglich': Globalisierung der Gerechtigkeit," *Antrittsvorlesung am Lehrstuhl für Christliche Anthropologie und Sozialethik der Katholisch-Theologischen Fakultät der Universität Mainz am 4.06.2007*, <https://www.sozialethik.kath.theologie.uni-mainz.de/files/2017/11/Antrittsvorlesung.pdf>.

rejected. The experience of the churches with which the Union of Utrecht is in full communion affects the way it talks about globalization. As a result, it is seen more clearly how the Western lifestyle leads people such as textile workers in the Philippines into deep poverty and exploitative working conditions to produce textiles and commodities for Western consumption.

Conclusion

Ecclesiology has ethical implications. Therefore, Old Catholics can accept only an ecclesiastical structure that respects the conscience of the faithful and their right of participation in decision-making. In this sense, Old Catholic moral discernment works in some respects like a discourse ethic.³⁵ The church as an institution has to receive moral norms to be trustworthy. It must have just structures and live *ad intra* what it claims *ad extra*. A strict orientation to natural law with claims to anthropology and creation theology would be a naturalistic fallacy. In Kantian tradition, the nature of human beings cannot be seen in itself; it is always a matter of interpretation. In the Old Catholic Church, moral discernment requires participation.

35. Micha H. Werner, "Diskursethik," in *Handbuch Ethik*, ed. Marcus Düwell, Christoph Hübenthal and Micha H. Werne (Stuttgart/Weimar: J.B. Metzler, 2002), 140–51.

7. Respecting the World, Engaging in the World: Basic Principles of Lutheran Ethics

Bernd Oberdorfer

How do Lutheran churches practise moral discernment? How do they implement moral reflection within the inner life of the church? How do they contribute to the moral orientation of church members? How do they participate in the public ethical discourse in a pluralistic society? To scrutinize these questions, I would like to start with a short outline of the Lutheran Reformers' vision of earthly life, their emphasis on the religious dignity of worldly functions as being "vocations," and their new assignment of the church's position in the social world. Then in the middle sections, I will highlight "law and gospel" and the doctrine of the "two realms" as basic principles of Lutheran ethics. I will then exemplify Luther's dealing with issues of social ethics by discussing his highly contested statements on the Peasants' War. This contribution ends with some concluding remarks on the setting and processes of moral discernment in (especially German) Lutheran churches today.¹

Upgrading or Secularizing the World? Controversial Discussions about the Reformation's Impact on Society and Culture²

Discussions on the impact of Reformation theology on society have always been controversial if not ambiguous. For instance, from its very beginning the Reformation was subject to the critique that its emphasis on justification through faith alone rendered human acts irrelevant, underestimated ethics, reduced persons to passive recipients, and thus destroyed human dignity by no longer requiring that people be responsible for their acts. At the same time, it has been

1. Sections 1–4 are a revised version of my paper "Law and Gospel and Two Realms: Lutheran Distinctions Revisited," in *Global Perspectives on the Reformation: Interactions between Theology, Politics and Economics*, ed. Anne Burghardt and Simone Sinn (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2017), 31–41.

2. See Bernd Oberdorfer, "Aus der Klausur ins 'normale Leben': Reformatorische Leitbildtransformationen," in *Reformation heute, Bd. 5: Menschenbilder und Lebenswirklichkeiten*, ed. Bernd Oberdorfer and Eva Matthes (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2019), 32–44.

pointed out that the Reformation enhanced the prestige of secular life. For instance, the Reformers abolished the distinction between “clergy” and “laity,” claiming that one status or rank in Christianity is based on common baptism. They therefore declined a “two-tiered ethics,” which restricted the “normal” Christian to the ten commandments, whereas monks and clergy, the “perfect” Christians, were dignified by additionally observing the *consilia evangelica*, the “evangelical counsels,” that is, poverty, chastity, and obedience. Luther insisted that every Christian is liberated and challenged to practise love in everyday life, be it in the church or in the secular world. This resulted in a new esteem of the worldly professions, which were now also regarded as “vocations.”

As to its historical effect, this new assessment of social life was and still is judged in very different ways. On the one hand, it has been noted that the theological quasi “upgrading” of the worldly professions implied an expansion of the “sphere of holiness.” Therefore, it has been remarked that while the Reformers closed down the cloisters, they turned the whole world into a monastery. On the other hand, exactly the same phenomenon has been interpreted as an important step toward secularization. This can be meant critically as well as affirmatively. Critics such as Charles Taylor³ have emphasized that by evening out the difference between clergy and laity and abolishing many forms of religious life (e.g., monastic vows, relics, processions, pilgrimage, and veneration of saints) the Reformers sobered up the world, eliminated the specific sphere of religion, and made religion increasingly invisible because it diffused into society and eventually was indistinguishable from it. Others insist that secularization established a world in which religion would find its proper place, precisely because it lost its comprehensive authority and only retained responsibility for its own, intrinsically religious affairs, and that the Reformation played a significant role in this process. Thus, they claim, secularization should be appreciated by religion itself because it helped to give God what is God’s and Caesar what is Caesar’s.

As to the ethical implications of the Reformers’ theology, it can be clearly seen that their emphasis on *distinguishing* church and world did not intend to withdraw Christians from worldly life. Certainly, in its historical origins, the Reformation started with a critique: first, of the profanation of the church and its perversion into an institution with worldly structures, interests, and purposes; and, second, of the monetization of salvation evident in the selling of indulgences. From the beginning, thus, the Reformation fought against the confusion between and combination of religion and economics or politics. Reformation meant returning the church to its primary and proper form and function of spreading the gospel, which the Reformers felt to be obscured by this blending

3. See Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007).

of religion and politics. Yet, by distinguishing the church from the “world,” the Reformers did not want to isolate church from “world” but rather to enable the church again to serve the “world.” Reformation, moreover, implied the diagnosis of crisis in society and the intention to reform society. Luther was convinced his Reformation of the church would result in a reform of society.

Reformation meant distinction. But distinction did not mean separation or isolation. On the contrary, it meant identifying differences in order to establish relations. The most famous distinctions with reference to ethics developed during the Lutheran Reformation are the distinction between “law and gospel” and the “two realms.” In the following, I would like to show that both are intended to identify the church in its specific function, including its relations to the “world.” Moreover, they are supposed to display the real dignity of the “world” in light of the gospel, and to indicate basic guidelines for a Christian way of dealing with it.

Law and Gospel

Whereas the distinction between the two realms marks the outward threshold of the church as it were, distinguishing law and gospel defines the church’s inner identity. For Luther, this distinction seemed so crucial that he wrote, “Therefore, whoever knows well how to distinguish the Gospel from the Law should give thanks to God and know that he is a real theologian.”⁴ For Luther, the confusion between law and gospel was at the root of the Roman as well as the Anabaptist fallacy. According to him, the Roman church made the gospel a law by demanding human works as a prerequisite for salvation – but also by offering the ordinary people affordable ways to fulfil God’s demand (because this made salvation look as if it were for sale). According to Luther, the Anabaptists converted the gospel into a legal code for the Christian community, thus turning salvation into a human action. In his famous autobiographical retrospective of 1545,⁵ Luther recalled how he had suffered, knowing that he could never be righteous before the righteous God, until he understood that true righteousness “lives by a gift of God, namely by faith,”⁶ in other words: not law but gospel.

From this basic insight follows a veritable spate of consequences, for the church as well as for how Christians perceived society. First, given that salvation

4. Martin Luther, “Lectures on Galatians, 1535,” in Jaroslav Pelikan, ed., *Luther’s Works*, vol. 26 (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1963), 115.

5. See Martin Luther, “Preface to the Complete Edition of Luther’s Latin Writings,” in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 34. ed. Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia, Pa.: Muhlenberg Press, 1960), 323–38.

6. *Ibid.*, 337.

is a pure gift, it cannot and need not be merited or bought. This implied a critique of the medieval system of repentance, which made absolution dependent on acts of contrition beforehand and satisfaction after. Furthermore, it included a critique of the church imposing new rules, such as fasting, on Christians without biblical legitimation while claiming them to be indispensable for eternal salvation. Thus, to concentrate on the preaching of the gospel required a restructuring of the church itself. As to the content of the preaching, it also required a new emphasis on freedom, because preaching the gospel means communicating salvation as a free gift that liberates Christians from the stressful pressure of having to be agents of their own salvation.

Yet, to distinguish law and gospel does not mean to eliminate the law. Actually, within the Lutheran movement, certain theologians, the “Antinomists,” claimed that for Christians the law has lost its relevance. But Luther strongly objected to this idea. The law would only be superfluous if we already lived in a state of perfection. We still live in a state of transition in which our certainty of being saved is always at risk of getting lost because of the lacking evidence of salvation. Thus we often fall back into our old life. We are “justified and sinners at the same time” (*simul iustus ac peccator*). Therefore we are still in need of the law in its, as Lutheran dogmatics puts it, “theological use” (*usus theologicus* or *usus elencticus*). Here the law does not function as a way of salvation but as a way to salvation. It is a reminder of our lacking perfection. It is a mirror that shows us we still do not comply with God’s will and are not able to overcome our inability ourselves. The law gives us a realistic, disenchanting picture of ourselves. We are neither what we ought to be nor what we wish to be, and we cannot make ourselves what we ought and wish to be either. The law leads us into a salutary desperation.

“Salutary desperation,” to be sure, does not mean pleasure in feeling pain or, even worse, God’s pleasure in causing pain. The desperation is not salutary in itself, only insofar as it directs the hope to the gospel. The law, as Paul puts it in his letter to the Galatians, was “our disciplinarian until Christ came” (Gal. 3:24). In other words, the law is salutary because it cuts off all human-made ways to salvation, leaving only the way God chose by sending his son.

But besides this “negative function,” the law has also a positive one, which makes it relevant to social ethics. The Lutheran Reformers called it the *usus politicus*, the “political use” of the law. This use refers to the order of society. The Reformers were convinced that it is part of God’s will to preserve and sustain God’s creation and to keep culture as well as nature, and thus also human societies, in good order. God’s law provides orientation for individual and social life and God introduced institutions to establish, maintain, and safeguard the

social order based on the law. With reference to Romans 1–3, the Reformers regarded the law as being universal and thus as the binding authority for every human being. Whereas the Jews had the privilege to receive the law in a written form, all other people have the same law inscribed in their hearts. Luther therefore saw himself entitled to change the text of the Decalogue for use in his “Small Catechism.” He emended all allusions to the specific context of Old Testament Israel and replaced it with general terms, such as “holiday” instead of “Sabbath.” Of course, “law” then only entailed those parts of the Torah that did not particularly refer to the certain cultic practices but, rather, were applicable to universal ethics.

Evidently, the law can have this “political” function only because it is not the gospel. It only orientates the exterior life but does not (and is not entitled to) touch the soul. It has neither the competence nor the responsibility for spreading the gospel. The law in this use is valid not exclusively for Christians, but for every human being. Luther therefore sometimes polemically reminded the Christian nobility that the Turkish sultans apparently governed their state better than they did.

With the *usus politicus* of the law, we have already touched on the other basic distinction of the Lutheran Reformation – the “two realms.”

The “Two Realms” or “Regiments”

Remarkably enough, the term *Zwei-Reiche-Lehre* (doctrine of the two realms) stems from not earlier than 20th century. It was critically introduced by the Reformed theologian Karl Barth. Barth claimed that the distinction between God’s realm (or Christ’s) and the worldly realm resulted in (or even aimed at) the church’s withdrawal from the world. By ascribing autonomy to the worldly spheres of politics, economy or culture, the Lutheran tradition, in Barth’s view, diminished the “reign of Christ” (*Königsherrschaft Christi*), which extended to the whole cosmos. Thus, it participated in the idea of modernity, which Barth interpreted as a process of emancipation from God.

In any case, this is a caricature of the Reformers’ intentions. The distinction between the two realms was not meant to qualify God’s caring attitude toward the world. Although the term *realm* might suggest a spatial separation of two different spaces that are situated side by side and have nothing in common, the alternative (and more appropriate) terminology of the two regiments (*zwei Regimente*) shows that the distinction identifies two different ways in which God governs God’s one world, or the two different ways in which God cares for God’s one world: on the one hand by revealing and spreading God’s *euangelion*; on

the other, by establishing a stable order that warrants peace in social life. Luther calls the first one God's "proper work" (*opus proprium*) because spreading the gospel purely expresses God's very essence, which is love. The second one is God's "extrinsic work" (*opus alienum*) because it is only necessary for external reasons, namely human sin that causes disorder and destruction in society. It is the political authority's God-given duty then to fight disorder and to establish, organize and safeguard a stable and peaceful order of human beings' external life. Of course this is also motivated by God's love because it is part of God's *conservatio mundi* (conservation of the world): God does not leave us alone with the mess that we have created ourselves. But it is not a direct expression of God's love, for the authorities must have the competence and ability to oblige people to obey the rules or to use force in order to overcome violence. This does not always look like an act of love.

From the distinction of the two realms, also, follows a spate of consequences, both for the church and the world. For the church this implies a critique of any attempt to foster the spreading of the gospel by means of external coercion. The famous words of Augsburg Confession, article 28, namely that the bishops should preach the gospel *sine vi humana, sed verbo*, "without human force, but rather through God's word alone," exactly describe the character of the church's *opus proprium*: convincing, not coercing. The Reformers trusted in the convincing power of God's word itself. We may wonder why this did not immediately lead to the idea of religious freedom and tolerance and may recall the acts of intolerance and religious coercion that the Reformers were able and willing to perform: the expulsion of Karlstadt, the persecution of the "Anabaptists," the uninhibited polemics against the Jews, to name but a few.

Seen from today's perspective, this is an obvious self-contradiction. However, I believe that in these cases the Reformers did not argue with the *opus proprium* but with the *opus alienum*. They thought that the propagation of alternative interpretations of the gospel (not to speak of heresies) would confuse the people and lead to controversial debates that could jeopardize peace in society. So they considered it to be a part of the state's responsibility to protect the citizens from this confusion. Unlike today, in the 16th century the peaceful coexistence of people of different religious backgrounds seemed impossible. Moreover, the legal system had also not yet been truly disconnected from religion and therefore heresy: for example, contesting the doctrine of the Trinity or the baptism of children constituted a crime that had to be prosecuted. The *sine vi humana sed verbo* unfolded its full potential only centuries after the Reformation.

As to the world, it is crucial to recognize that the Reformers distinguished between the two realms or regiments but were not dualistic: they did not regard

the *civitas terrena* as *civitas diaboli*. Of course, Luther in particular, reckoned with the power of the devil. In his famous hymn “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God,” he even called him “this world’s prince,” adding that “on earth is not his equal.” This, however, does not mean that the world is a sphere beyond God’s power that Christians have to flee. The Lutheran Reformation did not support escapism or “quietism” as has often been argued. On the contrary, this world continues to be governed by God, and God limits the devil’s power by making rules and creating institutions to safeguard the good order of the social world. Therefore Christians are entitled and even obliged to participate in the duty of maintaining the social order. This is clearly expressed in article 16 of the Augsburg Confession:

Concerning civic affairs they teach that lawful civil ordinances are good works of God and that Christians are permitted to hold civil office, to work in law courts, to decide matters by imperial and other existing laws, to impose just punishments, to wage just war, to serve as soldiers, to make legal contracts, to hold property, to take an oath when required by magistrates, to take a wife, to be given in marriage.⁷

The confession explicitly condemns first “the Anabaptists who prohibit Christians from assuming such civil offices,”⁸ and second “those who locate evangelical perfection not in the fear of God and in faith but in abandoning civil responsibilities”⁹ (addressed to the claim that monastic life constitutes the perfect form of Christian life). Repeatedly, the confession insists that the gospel aims at “justice of the heart” and does not demand an alternative lifestyle that competes with (and retreats from) the “civil ordinances” such as state or family.

The confession almost inconspicuously hints at the Reformers’ theological assessment of civic life. It is condensed in the word “love.” The gospel itself – as the confession puts it – “requires . . . the exercise of love in these ordinances.” “Civic affairs,” in other words, are the place where (and not beyond which) Christians are to exercise love of neighbour. To engage in civic affairs, thus, is a matter of Christian love. This does not only mean that Christians are requested to practise love also when dealing with civic affairs. Rather, it implies that civic affairs are institutions of love themselves because God established them to give

7. “The Augsburg Confession – Latin Text – Article XVI: Civic Affairs,” in *The Book of Concord*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2000), 49.

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid.

social life a stable order that frames and structures people's peaceful lives. This is why Lutherans have always emphasized loyalty to the state's authority and institutions. It is well known that this has been criticized as "Lutheran authoritarianism," which has led Lutherans to long-term heteronomy. As a result, Lutheran churches were dependent on the state and prevented from developing or fostering a culture of civil society. Historically, we must admit that there is some truth to this, particularly in Germany. From a more systematic perspective, I see considerable potential in the idea that human well-being requires stable institutions (or institutions of stability) and that loyalty to these institutions – taking responsibility for their maintenance and further development – is an expression of Christian love.

This idea has, of course, to be adapted to the structures and standards of modern society. When article 16 of Augsburg Confession states, "Consequently, Christians owe obedience to their magistrates and laws,"¹⁰ we need to consider what this implies today in light of the structures of modern societies. These, according to the sociologist Niklas Luhmann,¹¹ are no longer hierarchical and mono-centered but "functionally differentiated"; and within them, the political system is much more participatory than it was in the 16th century. Obeying the magistrates may rather mean being loyal to the procedures of democratic decision-making (e.g., accepting the results of elections, being willing to stand for office). The confession also mentions the law. Obeying the law today might include defending "the right to have rights"¹² (namely, the civil or human rights that are incorporated into many constitutions) and fighting corruption and other illegal forms of taking advantage.

It is essential to see that the confession does not demand unconditional "obedience to their magistrates and laws." Repeatedly, it speaks of "just punishment" or "just wars" and of "lawful civil ordinances"; and thus, by implementing the category of justice, it indicates that not every law and magistrate may be regarded as the "good works of God." Explicitly, moreover, after the phrase, "Christians owe obedience to their magistrates and laws," it adds, "except when commanded to sin. For then they owe greater obedience to God than to human beings (Acts 5 [:29])."¹³

Luther was very hesitant with this restriction. To him, the order in itself was such a blessing that he was willing to prefer a bad order to the chaos that protests

10. Ibid., 51

11. See Niklas Luhmann, *Soziale Systeme* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1984).

12. Hannah Arendt, Imperialism, part 2 of *The Origins of Imperialism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich [1951] 1968), 177.

13. "Augsburg Confession," 51.

and rebellions were likely to cause. In case of necessary resistance, he therefore preferred passive martyrdom to active opposition. But this has remained a matter of debate within the Lutheran tradition. In any case, qualifying obedience indicates an “anti-totalitarian impulse” that fits very well with the distinction of the “two realms.” The “realm of the world” is not the sphere of perfection and absolute decisions, but the sphere of imperfection and preferences.

In his papers on “Ethics,”¹⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer appropriately introduced the category of the “penultimate” to characterize the questions of worldly life, the sphere of ethical decisions. These “penultimate” questions do not determine the “ultimate” question of eternal salvation, but they have their own dignity precisely because of that. For the Christian faith, they are neither a field of indifference (anything goes) nor a space of permanent *status confessionis*. Worldly life is supposed to witness, express and reflect the faith of the “heart” through the “bodily” works of love. The sphere of “works” very seldom requires an exclusive “either/or.” Mostly it is a sphere of “more or less,” that means, it implies a spectrum of possibilities that are “more or less” appropriate expressions of Christian love. It cannot be decided in advance what is more and what is less. It depends on the context, which might also change. This idea is fundamental to Paul’s ethic: “everything is lawful, but not everything builds up,” and “test everything; hold fast to what is good.”¹⁵

What does this mean for political or ethical statements of the church? I would like to illustrate this by referring to one famous, highly controversial example of how Luther dealt with questions of social ethics: his notorious statements during the Peasants’ War.

Commenting on Politics: Luther on the Peasants’ War

Given that today the church is frequently advised to remain silent *in rebus politicis* because this is supposedly not its business, it is remarkable in itself that Luther commented on politics. Of course, he was a public figure, whose every statement was collected (see the *Tischreden*) and disseminated. Yet, he did not simply present his opinions as a “public intellectual” (as we would put it today), but deliberately as a theologian. Consistently, with his concept of the “two realms,” he did not claim the role of ultimate referee in matters of culture,

14. See *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, vol. 6, *Ethics*, ed. Clifford J. Green, trans. Reinhard Krauss et al. (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2005).

15. See Bernd Oberdorfer, “A New Life in Christ: Pauline Ethics, and its Lutheran Reception,” in *Pauline Hermeneutics: Exploring the “Power of the Gospel,”* LWF Studies 2016/3, ed. Eve-Marie Becker and Kenneth Mtata (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2016), 159; 163.

politics, or economy. He emphasized that the church has no superior knowledge in these spheres. And he also made clear that the Bible does not offer concrete prescriptions for how to build a house, govern a state, educate children, run a business, etc. Nevertheless, he did not hesitate to speak out on social conflicts and political crises. Of particular significance are his public statements during the Peasants' War of 1525.¹⁶

Luther felt impelled to comment for several reasons. First, the peasants relied on his reformatory idea of "Christian freedom" when demanding freedom from their lords. Thus, these lords could accuse him of being responsible for the riots. Second, the peasants derived their political and economic demands directly from the gospel. Third, they fought for their issue in a non-legal, violent way, disobeying the authorities and destabilizing the order of society. Therefore, although he regarded the peasants' complaints about being treated unjustly by their lords as mostly legitimate and supported many of their political demands, he believed that the peasants were wrong in at least two respects. They confused law and gospel by making the gospel law, and they disdained the rules and principles that are valid in God's worldly realm by violently rebelling against the authorities and changing order into chaos. So, on the one hand, he criticized the nobility for treating the peasants badly and strongly requested them to comply with the peasants' legitimate demands, while, on the other, he emphatically challenged them to stave off the rebellion with the harshest possible means. He even reminded them that they did God's work when using their swords against the rebelling peasants. In other words, he urged them to use force in the name of God.

We might tend to say, *si tacuisses* – if only you had remained silent. But even in these notorious, horrible, rude and almost blasphemous words we can still discover the Reformer's positive assessment of the world as a sphere of God's caring and conserving power. Luther's concern was to protect and to stabilize the social order essential for a peaceful life. He was convinced that in a world contaminated by sin it is sometimes necessary to use force. Yet, in contrast to his aggressive verbal outburst against the peasants, he strictly bound the use of force to the law and legitimacy. Some years later, in his 1532 series of sermons on the Sermon on the Mount, he explicitly stated that princes who start a war without a legitimate reason should be called "children of the devil" rather than "children of God," and he requested people who suffered injustice to go to court

16. See esp. Martin Luther, "Admonition to Peace Referring to the Twelve Articles of the Peasants' Union in Swabia," in *WA* 18, 291–334, *LW* vol. 46, 3–43; "Against the Murderous, Thieving Hordes of Peasants," in *WA* 18, 357–61, *LW*, vol. 46, 45–55; "Open Letter on the Harsh Book Against the Peasants," in *WA* 18, 384–401, *LW* vol. 46, 57–85.

instead of taking revenge individually.¹⁷ In principle, this is consistent with his statements on the Peasants' War. He criticized the peasants for not following the path of the law to pursue their concern, and exclusively addressed the state authority to end the rebellion with force. However, by legitimizing unlimited force, he damaged his cause, and for centuries Lutherans have been confronted with the image of being devoted servants to the state, unable to raise a critical voice and to put limits to the authority of the state. It took centuries for Lutherans to clearly recognize that the concept of the "two realms" allowed them to support the emergence of a civil society that would resist the totalitarian excesses of the state.

This example might warn Lutherans to be cautious in their political statements. These statements are not straight from heaven. They are not automatically "prophetic voices." They are not *iure divino*. They are always at risk of eventually being proven to be false. They have to be continuously re-evaluated in light of the principles of Lutheran social ethics. These principles not only allow for but even require an active involvement of Lutherans and the Lutheran churches in the processes of developing a society, "in which justice dwells." The concept of the "two realms" does not prevent but rather encourages this involvement, precisely because Christians cannot save the world – they can merely engage with it.

Some Concluding Reflections on Moral Discernment in Lutheran Churches Today

What follows from this historical recollection of the Lutheran reformation for the current context of moral discernment in Lutheran churches? The first is that although the doctrine of the two realms encourages Christians to engage in building up a good and just order of society, it limits the church's competence to prescribe moral norms. This applies even more so in modern societies where church and state are separated and where the churches have lost the role of supreme referees of moral life – if they ever had it. Moreover, a distinction has to be made between, on the one hand, public statements of the church with reference to political, social, or economic issues and, on the other hand, internal church decision-making on moral issues that are relevant for the "*leiturgia*, *martyria* and *diakonia*" of the church itself and have impact on the church members' life.

17. See Bernd Oberdorfer, "How Do We Deal with a Challenging Text," in *To All the Nations. Lutheran Hermeneutics and the Gospel of Matthew*, LWF Studies 2015/2, ed. Kenneth Mtata and Craig Koester (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2015), 75–88.

Regarding public statements, it has to be clarified (1) who is entitled to speak in the name of the church, and (2) whether and how these statements have a binding authority for the church members.

Who is entitled to speak? Official statements of the church on social issues have to be authorized by the church's governing bodies. In German Lutheran churches (*Landeskirchen*), for example, synods and bishops represent the church and therefore are entitled to raise the church's voice in the public sphere. On national level, the Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland (EKD) mandates commissions of experts to prepare statements that – once accepted – are published by authority of the EKD council as being the leading church board. These statements, however, do not claim to be normative decisions but rather memorandums (*Denkschriften, Orientierungshilfen*) which develop and evaluate arguments and highlight aspects that, from a Protestant perspective, should be included in the public discourse. They mirror the internal pluralism in Protestant churches and, respecting this pluralism, aim to formulate a consensus based on common convictions.

Do these statements have a binding authority? These memorandums are not only addressed to the public but also to the church members themselves. They do not enforce a normative church position that has to be shared by any member but rather aim to foster the formation of the individuals' conscience to help them to orient themselves responsibly. Thus, they try to establish a common space of moral deliberation – a space that, of course, has limitations but that is wide enough not to preclude dissenting voices such as, for example, of those who are not being Christian any longer. In any case, the church members' participation in processes of political decision-making is not mediated by the church. The moral discernment of Christian individuals with respect to a social or political issue does not depend on the church's decisions on that issue. For example, a church member can vote in favour of opening shops on Sundays, even though the church has strongly opposed it in public statements.

Yet sometimes churches have to decide on moral issues that concern their own liturgical and congregational life. For example, should divorced men or women be allowed to marry again in a wedding service? Should the church offer wedding services for homosexual couples who already live in a civil marriage? Should people who deliberately left the church be given a church funeral? In questions like these, churches cannot abstain from deciding, although the discussion sometimes is (and remains) very controversial. Churches, in these cases, normally try to establish processes of open dialogues, engaging as many members as possible in order to find a consensus and excluding as few members as possible. This consensus, once found and decided upon by the church

governing boards, is binding for church officials like pastors or congregational councils. But even in these cases (especially regarding same-sex marriage) the church allows for individual dissent based on reasons of conscience.

This does not mean that the church does not stand for any norms or criteria of moral discernment with reference to individual and social life. Lutheran ethics is not an equivalent of “anything goes.” But these criteria or basic convictions are located on a more general level and include concepts like justice, love, and good order, which have to be adapted to concrete contexts. However, this adaptation, first, always refers to changing circumstances and therefore may change itself during history; second, it does not depend on the authority of church governing boards or persons but rather on the responsibility and conscience of any church member; and third, it makes space for a broad spectrum of concrete solutions instead of prescribing the “one and only” way.

8. Sharing Power to Discern the Will of God in Every Time and Place

Rebecca Todd Peters

Churches in the Presbyterian tradition¹ are part of the “Reformed” branch of the Christian church. Presbyterianism developed during the Reformation and was particularly influenced by the theology of John Calvin. While many aspects of Calvin’s theology continue to influence various churches that fall within the Presbyterian tradition, Presbyterianism and Calvinism should not be regarded as synonymous. Theologically, the Reformed tradition’s commitment to a covenantal theology rooted in the belief that God lovingly claims the whole world as God’s own is the foundation for recognizing the distinctive aspects of both the Reformed tradition and Presbyterianism.

The term “presbyterian” is taken from the Greek word *presbyteros*, which is used more than 60 times in the New Testament. This Greek word is often translated into English as “elder” and can simply refer to older members of the congregation or community. However, the term is also used on several occasions to describe members of the congregation who have been chosen to serve as leaders. Churches in the Presbyterian tradition share the belief that the apostolic and catholic church is rightfully governed by presbyters or elders elected from the church membership. Given that the root of the term “presbyterian” relates to questions of church leadership and governance, it is not surprising that it is a shared form of ecclesial polity that ultimately holds churches in the Presbyterian tradition together. However, this representative and democratic form of governance reflects deeply shared theological beliefs and commitments about the nature of God, God’s relationship to humanity, humanity’s relationship to the divine, and God’s desire for the order of the church.

Given that Presbyterians affirm membership in the catholic church and see themselves as part of the Reformed tradition more broadly, many of theological beliefs that form Presbyterian identity are shared by Christian churches in other

1. While this paper speaks to the Presbyterian tradition more broadly, I am an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church (USA) and this paper is influenced by my particular reality and experience. Special thanks to Dr Mark Douglas for his valuable feedback on a draft of this paper.

traditions and communions. The purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate how the foundational theological commitments of the Presbyterian tradition inform moral discernment in the Presbyterian tradition, a question that is rooted in ecclesiology.

The theological cornerstones of Presbyterian ecclesiology are the recognition that Jesus Christ is head of the church (Col. 1:18); belief in the unity of the church, which scripture attests is given by God to the church, which represents Christ's body (1 Cor. 12:12-14); and belief in the indwelling of the Spirit (John 14:17), which resides not only in the clergy but in all the people of God. These theological commitments undergird the following principles that govern Presbyterian ecclesial polity and shape moral discernment in the Presbyterian tradition:

- *Unity of the church.* The unity of the church ties congregations together as members of one holy catholic church, and this unity is best realized through representative councils (sessions, presbyteries, synods, assemblies) that govern the life of the community.
- *Parity of ministry.* The indwelling of the Spirit in all God's people suggests an equality between lay people and clergy that shapes a commitment to parity of ministry in which ministers of the word and sacrament and elders (who are ordained to church leadership) have parallel ecclesial status and work together to provide shared governance for the church at every level.
- *Shared power.* A representative form of governance that respects the right of each church member to participate in the election of elders also reflects a belief that sharing power and vesting councils with the responsibility of ecclesial governance embodies the belief that the power and responsibility of governance is a shared and collective task of the church.²

In this short introduction to the question of moral discernment in the Presbyterian tradition, I will outline (1) the location of authority in Presbyterian theology and polity; (2) the process by which churches in this tradition engage in moral discernment; (3) the sources that inform theological and moral discernment in the tradition; and (4) the nature of the authority of ecclesial statements in the Presbyterian tradition.

2. It is important to note that all members of the church – female and male, young and old – are recognized as full voting members of the church. This is true even in denominations that continue to block access to ordination to some members of the church.

Authority in Presbyterian Theology and Polity

Authority within the Presbyterian tradition is ultimately vested in the triune God who “gathers, protects and cares for the church through the Word and Spirit.”³ Second only to the authority of the Divine One is the authority of the holy scripture, which is regarded as “given by inspiration of God, to be the rule of faith and life”⁴ and considered by the church as “not a witness among others, but a witness without parallel.”⁵ Recognition of this authority is evident, for example, in the ordination questions posed to both teaching and ruling elders in the Presbyterian Church (USA) who share governance responsibilities in the church equally in a model of leadership known as “parity of ministry.”

In the Presbyterian tradition, persons are ordained to fulfil the particular functions of either “teaching elders” or “ruling elders.” Teaching elders are also known as ministers of the word and sacrament and they are responsible for “teaching the faith in word and deed and equipping the saints for the work of ministry,” which includes the authority to administer the sacraments of baptism and communion.”⁶ To be ordained to the role of teaching elder/minister of word and sacrament, a person requires a master of divinity degree and extensive preparation for ministry process. There are two aspects of this process. One is a multi-year process of mentoring and dialogue between the candidate for ministry and their Presbytery in which a committee of Presbytery assesses an individual’s call and their preparation for professional ministry. The other is a series of ordination exams administered by the national church to ensure knowledge of and familiarity with the basic tools for ministry.

Ruling elders are chosen from confirmed members of the congregation “to discern and measure its fidelity to the Word of God, and to strengthen and nurture its faith and life.”⁷ The ordination questions posed to both teaching and ruling elders outline trust in Jesus Christ and belief in the triune God; acceptance of the holy scriptures as the authoritative witness to God’s word; guidance by the confessions of the church; and adherence to the church’s polity

3. The Confession of Belhar was adopted by the Dutch Reformed Mission Church in South Africa, 1986. “Confession of Belhar,” in *Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA), Part I: Book of Confessions* (Louisville, Ky.: Office of the General Assembly, Presbyterian Church [USA], 2016), 10.1.

4. The Westminster Confession of Faith was adopted by the Scottish General Assembly in 1647. *PCUSA Book of Confessions* (2016), 6.002.

5. The Confession of 1967 was adopted by the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America in 1967. *PCUSA Book of Confessions* (2016), 9.27.

6. *Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA), Part II: Book of Order* (Louisville, Ky.: Office of the General Assembly, Presbyterian Church [USA], 2019), G-2.0501.

7. *Ibid.*, G-2.0301.

and discipline as the authoritative guideposts for Presbyterian leaders. These questions express the conviction that the triune God, scripture, confessions, and Presbyterian polity form the authoritative foundations of the Presbyterian tradition. Further examination of the structure and function of Presbyterian polity reveals how ecclesial authority is made manifest within the tradition.

Representative governance is a primary foundation of the Presbyterian tradition. All confirmed members of the church have the right to vote in their local congregation. This right is primarily associated with the responsibilities of electing elders from among the membership to serve in leadership and governance; to call an ordained minister of the word and sacrament (also known as a teaching elder) to serve the congregation; and to approve the budget. At the congregation or local church level, a body made up of the teaching elders (ministers of the word and sacrament) called to serve that congregation and the ruling elders elected from confirmed members of the congregation is known as the “session.” The session serves as the decision-making body of the congregation and is responsible for providing spiritual guidance, pastoral care, moral guidance, and governance of the congregation.⁸ Individual churches are able to bring matters of concern to the attention of the Presbytery through an action of their session. Each congregation also elects a representative number of ruling elders to participate in the next level of governance known as the Presbytery alongside all ordained ministers of word and sacrament who are members of the Presbytery. At every conciliar level, teaching elders and ruling elders participate and vote with the same authority, and all are eligible to hold any office.⁹

Presbyteries are normally regionally organized bodies or councils of congregations that meet together on a regular basis to provide guidance and leadership to the congregations who are members of that Presbytery. These councils are made up of equal numbers of teaching elders (ministers of the word and sacrament) and ruling elders (congregationally elected leaders) who work together to provide the leadership and governance for a particular Presbytery. Presbyteries have the governing responsibility to oversee the health and well-being of the teaching elders and the congregations under their care and to examine, approve, and ordain candidates to ministry of the word and sacrament. Presbyteries also function to coordinate collective ministry initiatives among churches in their respective presbyteries including mission, education, and various specialized ministries. Presbyteries are able to send matters of concern, including questions about moral issues, to the attention of the general assembly through an action known as an “overture.” An equal number of representatives are elected from

8. *Ibid.*, G-1.0103.

9. *Ibid.*, G-2.0301.

both the teaching and ruling elders of each Presbytery to participate in synod and general assemblies.

Synods are larger regional bodies than Presbyteries and their governance responsibilities vary according to location and communion. In the United States, their tasks are largely to coordinate regional ministries (camps and conferences, education, etc.) on behalf of the Presbyteries in their jurisdiction.

General assemblies meet on a regular basis to review the work of synods, to resolve controversies in the church, to attend to matters of common concern for the whole church, and to serve as a symbol of unity for the church. The Presbyterian Church (USA), for instance, outlines several specific responsibilities for its general assembly in chapter 3 of the Book of Order:

The assembly seeks to protect our church from errors in faith and practice, is responsible for assuring that the expression of our theology remains true to the biblical standards in our historic confessions. The General Assembly presents a witness for truth and justice in our community and in the world community. It sets priorities for the church and establishes relationships with other churches or ecumenical bodies.¹⁰

Overtures from Presbyteries make up a considerable portion of the work of the general assembly. These overtures deal with questions of church order and discipline as well as issues of social and moral concern to the church and its members. The action of a general assembly conciliar body, or council, holds authority over those members or congregations that fall within its jurisdiction, this authority proceeds from local congregations to the presbytery, synod, and general assembly.

Process of Moral Discernment in the Presbyterian Tradition

The Reformed tradition, which emerged in the 16th century, shares a commitment with other Protestant traditions to the foundational principles of the Reformation often summed up in the expressions *sola scriptura* (scripture alone), *sola gratia* (by grace alone), and *sola fide* (by faith alone).¹¹ *Sola gratia* and *sola fide* both speak to the Reformers' soteriological and anthropological positions that the sinful nature of humanity's condition renders it impossible

10. "General Assembly of the PC (USA)," Office of the General Assembly website, PCUSA, 8 April 2020, <http://oga.pcusa.org/section/ga/ga/>.

11. While some scholars also include *solus Christus* and *solī Deo gloria* as two additional foundational Reformed principles, this paper focuses on the principles of scripture, grace, and faith.

for anyone to earn or merit salvation through any action or “works” of their own. Rather, the nature of salvation is such that grace must be understood as a freely offered gift from God reflecting the Divine’s love for humanity. A secondary but important aspect of these theological principles emphasized by both Luther and Calvin was that even though a Christian’s “works” or actions do not function to contribute to their salvation, faithful Christians orient their lives toward living out their faith in the world, making ethical or right-living a foundation of Reformed Christian belief and practice. This concern for how to shape an ethical life or how to live rightly in the world represents the ongoing attention to moral discernment and ethical practice that marks churches in the Reformed and Presbyterian traditions.

The principle of *sola scriptura* highlights the Reformers’ emphasis on the primacy of the authority of scripture in shaping the life of the church and the lives of God’s people. Commitment to the authority of scripture in guiding the life of the church is the foundation of the Reformed understanding of Christianity as a lived tradition that must continually be reinterpreted and reformed in every new age and in every different community in which it takes root. This idea of the dynamic life of the living church is expressed in the common refrain *ecclesia Reformata; semper Reformanda* which emerged in the Dutch Reformed Church and is used widely among Reformed communions. The social and moral questions that confront humanity shift and change as the world shifts and changes. As new questions arise, the church and its leaders must discern how God is calling us to respond and to live in each new age. While the gospel itself does not change, a Reformed theological perspective holds that human understandings and interpretations of the gospel do change and grow as the human community changes and grows.

Presbyterians affirm that engaging in public social witness is one of the tasks and responsibilities of the Christian church in the world. This task is in keeping with Paul’s admonishment, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Rom. 12:2). The task of discerning God’s will for right-living by humanity and the church is the process of moral discernment.

In keeping with the model of discernment in the New Testament as a collective action of communities of faith, Presbyterians affirm that discernment takes place in community. Investing the responsibility and authority to engage in discernment of what the church is called to be and do in the hands of a representative community of believers is referred to as a *conciliar* model in contrast with other church forms which invest this authority either in individuals

(episcopal) or in a single congregation (congregational). This conciliar process of discernment also marks the process for moral discernment in the Presbyterian tradition where conciliar bodies (congregation, presbytery, general assembly) are vested with the responsibility and authority of examining a social, political, or moral question with the purpose of discerning how God is calling the church to respond. While this task of moral discernment may be assigned to representative agents of the church in the form of a theologian or a committee acting at the request of a conciliar body, the determinations of that representative/committee would be vetted and acted upon by the appropriate conciliar body. This process reflects the Presbyterian belief that “faithful discernment is most likely when elected representatives meet in community to interpret the Word of God in relation to contemporary challenges, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.”¹²

There is no proscribed process for the task of moral discernment and so the discernment process can take many forms but the process should always be the following: faithful to scripture; inclusive of diverse voices and perspectives; informed by relevant sources of knowledge from biblical, theological, and ethical scholarship to secular disciplines; aware of the past (history and tradition) and present; faithful in disagreement; reformed and always being reformed; and accountable and respectful.¹³

Sources That Inform Theological and Moral Discernment in the Presbyterian Tradition

While such a conciliar model invests representative bodies with the task of engaging in moral discernment, the process of moral discernment reflects a desire to gather and assess facts, information, and diverse perspectives that pertain to the topic in order that the deliberations reflect informed, scientifically accurate, and diverse sources that pertain to the topic. Specific sources that inform the process of moral discernment include

the wisdom of theological discourse; the guidance of the Reformed confessions; the insights of sociopolitical disciplines; the tradition of past policy statements; the advice of members and all governing bodies of the church; the insights of people who are poor, victims of existing policies, and those

12. *Why and How the Church Makes a Social Policy Witness*, A Report Adopted by the 205th General Assembly (1993) (Louisville, Ky.: Office of the General Assembly, Presbyterian Church [U.S.A], 1994), 21.

13. *Ibid.*, 24–27.

who have not had a voice in the councils of the church; and the counsel of ecumenical partners.¹⁴

Most importantly, as a Reformed model of moral discernment, these various sources are put in dialogue with the living word of God through the witness of the holy scripture as revealed by the Holy Spirit. This task requires that the members of the conciliar body engaging in moral discernment open themselves to hearing God's word anew in light of contemporary questions and open themselves to listening for the guidance of the Holy Spirit "as it speaks to us out of the events and the teachings of the biblical witness."¹⁵ Bringing new questions to the text that arise from the experience of contemporary Christians allows the church to continue to hear the word of God anew and to discern how God is calling the church to think and act on the issues in question in its present time and place.

On the Nature of the Authority of Ecclesial Statements in the Presbyterian Tradition

While churches in the Presbyterian tradition affirm the right and responsibility of conciliar bodies to engage in processes of moral discernment that result in public social policy statements and positions, there is no expectation that these statements are the result of absolute unanimity on the subject nor that the presence of such a statement requires the assent of individual members of the church. Because governing bodies neither claim to speak on behalf of all members of the church nor compel assent of its members to these statements, questions of the nature of the authority represented by these statements and positions of the church on various social, political, and moral questions abide.

The nature of this authority is in keeping with a Reformed understanding of theological anthropology and ecclesiology. Presbyterians believe that "the church is given the responsibility to discern the work of Christ in the world and for the world, and to act on what it believes faithfulness to Christ entails."¹⁶ This responsibility to discern the work of Christ in the world is part of the church's responsibility for the spiritual direction and guidance of its members. Any statements or positions that result from this conciliar process are intended to provide guidance to members in their personal life and witness as well as to direct the corporate witness of the connectional church on these issues both to its members and to the larger world. Because members of the Presbyterian tradition

14. *Ibid.*, 4.

15. *Ibid.*, 15.

16. *Ibid.*, 18.

believe that the Holy Spirit works through its elected leaders to help illuminate the truth of the gospel for our times, the authority represented in these councils and their statements is voluntarily accepted and respected as the wisdom of the church. Additionally, as noted earlier, ordained teaching and ruling elders take vows to be governed by the church's polity and discipline, which includes the statements and positions of representative conciliar bodies.

In the work of moral discernment, faithful councils seek to understand how God is calling the church and its members to respond to the moral and social questions that they face. However, human imperfection and our inability to fully know the Divine will ultimately mean that no human position or conciliar statement is ever final or absolute. While all such statements and positions are the result of considerable processes of discernment, they remain provisional reflections of our best human judgment and discernment at the time and stand open to further illumination and reform in light of the ongoing life and experience of the people of God and the work of the triune God in the midst of human life.

Additionally, the Reformed tradition strongly respects the theological principle that "God alone is Lord of the Conscience," and each individual member is encouraged to remember that, ultimately, they are accountable only to God. Members are free to disagree with established social policy positions and statements of the church and to witness to their disagreement as members of that body. Sometimes, minority voices join together to offer an alternative position to the majority discernment. While these dissenting voices are respected and offered a platform for continued dialogue with the majority position, such minority positions do not undermine the right or authority of the conciliar bodies to engage in moral discernment and make statements witnessing to the body's understanding of how God is calling the church to speak and act on the issue in question.

9. Anglican Moral Discernment: Sources, Structures, and Dynamics of Authority

Jeremy Worthen

Questions of authority have been the subject of repeated and at times passionate debate in Anglican tradition from the 16th century onward. The separation under Henry VIII of the Church of England from the Catholic Church on the European continent hinged on incompatible claims regarding the authority of pope, monarch, and national church, rather than the teaching of the Protestant Reformation about salvation. Competing views on the authority of bishops, presbyters and congregations played a significant role in the violent upheavals of the 17th century in England, while how authority might be shared between different Anglican churches became a critical issue in the formation of the Anglican Communion in the colonial period. More recently, however, it has been moral issues that have tended to raise the sharpest questions about church authority for Anglicanism.

Anglicans have a rich and varied heritage of moral theology,¹ as well as centuries of reflection on ecclesial authority. Yet consideration of one of these has not always been attentive to the other. The aim of this short article is to sketch very briefly some points of relation between the two and thereby indicate some distinctively Anglican parameters for authoritative moral discernment by the church. It proceeds by considering three related areas: sources of authority, structures of authority, and dynamics of authority.² The final section of the paper considers a recent debate in the Church of England as a potential

1. Peter H. Sedgwick, *The Origins of Anglican Moral Theology*, Anglican-Episcopal Theology and History (Leiden: Brill, 2019). See also Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC) II, *Life in Christ: Morals, Communion and the Church*, 1993, §45, http://www.anglicancommunion.org/media/105236/ARCIC_II_Life_in_Christ_Morals_Communion_and_the_Church.pdf.

2. This distinction is proposed by Paul Avis, in *In Search of Authority: Anglican Theological Method from the Reformation to the Enlightenment* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 1–2. For a range of perspectives on structures of authority in the life of the church, see Paul Avis et al., eds. *Incarnating Authority: A Critical Account of Authority in the Church* (Munich: Herbert Utz Verlag, 2019).

case study to illustrate how these parameters operate in the contemporary Anglican context.

Sources of Authority

Since the mid-point of the 20th century, there has been a lively debate within Anglicanism about what defines it and where Anglicans should locate the continuity and coherence of their tradition.³ The idea that there is a distinctive Anglican theological method, defined in part by its approach to the sources of doctrine, has had its champions as well as its critics in that debate. Nonetheless, it remains the case that Anglicans have often identified scripture, tradition, and reason as the three primary sources for authority in church teaching. Part of the attraction is that this triad can be neatly correlated with the three major “parties” of Anglicanism that emerged in the 19th century (evangelical, Anglo-Catholic and liberal or “broad church”).⁴ It would be a mistake to assume, however, that this implies three equal, parallel, and relatively independent sources for Christian doctrine. The unique authority of scripture is clearly indicated in the Church of England’s “Articles of Religion,” formulated in the 16th century: “Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation: so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of the Faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation.”⁵ At the same time, with this principle established, a subsequent article affirms that “The Church hath power to decree Rites or Ceremonies, and authority in Controversies of Faith.”⁶

There was, then, a recognition that not everything that the church says and does can be, as it were, simply lifted from the page of scripture. On some matters, the church needs to exercise judgment. This is terrain that came to be associated particularly with the work of Richard Hooker, from the end of the

3. See e.g. S. W. Sykes, *The Integrity of Anglicanism* (London: Mowbray, 1984); Rowan Strong, Series Introduction, in *The Oxford History of Anglicanism, Volume I: Reformation and Identity c.1520–1662*, ed. Anthony Milton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), xvii–xxvi; Robert S. Heaney and William L. Sachs, *The Promise of Anglicanism* (London: SCM, 2019).

4. Church of England House of Bishops, *Report of the House of Bishops Working Group on Human Sexuality* (London: Church House Publishing, 2013), §279–308.

5. “Articles of Religion of the Church of England,” Art. 6; the text of the Articles of Religion, normally printed with the Church of England’s Book of Common Prayer, may be accessed online at <https://www.churchofengland.org/prayer-and-worship/worship-texts-and-resources/book-common-prayer/articles-religion>.

6. Articles of Religion, Art. 20; see also Art. 34.

16th century.⁷ While affirming with his Anglican contemporaries that scripture has a unique, indeed incomparable, authority in matters of faith and that all other sources of authority are very much secondary to that and indeed at the service of it, Hooker also stressed the role of reason. This is partly a matter of acknowledging the role of reasoning in the reading of scripture and therefore in the process of receiving and responding to its authority. It is also about affirming that by the providence of God, human reason perceives truth in a range of ways and from a diversity of sources, and that it is not God's purpose that the reading of scripture should somehow render them all redundant; moreover, truth is one and therefore what is revealed in scripture and what is known from nature cannot finally be contradictory. Both of these insights have continued to be significant in Anglican approaches to authoritative discernment in theology, including moral theology.

As with other writers from the Protestant Reformation, "tradition" is not always a positive term for Hooker, and he never refers to it as a source for doctrinal authority. He does, however, attribute a certain weight to the considered views of past generations of the church, particularly where a clear consensus could be viewed as having "the status of collective reason, the time tested wisdom, of the community of Christians."⁸ The acceptance by the Church of England of the creeds of the early centuries as declarations of faith that "ought thoroughly to be received and believed: for they may be proved by most certain warrants of Holy Scripture"⁹ was accompanied by a high regard for the theologians and councils of the first six Christian centuries as interpreters of the Bible, deserving and repaying careful study. Again, however, such "tradition" was valued primarily for its ability to enhance the understanding of scripture and to furnish customs for the church in areas where scripture did not prescribe or indeed was silent.

As was noted in the introduction, it was not primarily in relation to moral questions that Hooker and other Anglicans of earlier centuries worked out their theology of ecclesial authority. Yet in the 17th century a distinctive Anglican tradition of moral theology also begins to come into focus, with a strong emphasis on formation in the virtues, through and for union with Christ, by transforming attention to him sustained through particular disciplines in the life of the

7. Avis, *In Search of Authority*, 93–129.

8. Peter Lake, cited in John Gibaut, "Reason as a Source of Authority in the Anglican Tradition," in *Sources of Authority 2: Contemporary Churches*, ed. Tamara Grdzeldze (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2014), 91–106, at 96.

9. Articles of Religion, Art. 8.

church.¹⁰ Related to that is a concern for affirming and informing the work of conscience: not setting out detailed rules for what may and what may not be done in every situation, but rather preparing people to discern in the complex variety of their circumstances the choices that will keep them faithful to Christ. Reading scripture has the cardinal place here, in the context of the exercise of reason and participation in the practices of the church, with a particular Anglican emphasis on public worship, in which both listening to God's word in scripture and addressing God with the words of scripture through psalms and canticles are central. This approach cannot be neatly mapped against the familiar Anglican triad of sources. Nonetheless, Anglican writers on moral theology clearly learnt much from Christian traditions, with a particular debt for Hooker as for many others to Thomas Aquinas, in a way that profoundly shaped their study of scripture and their processes of reasoning. Moreover, when facing critical issues over the past hundred years, the Anglican Communion can be seen to have sought to follow a method that self-consciously weaves the three sources together.¹¹

Structures of Authority

Authority was quickly identified as a key issue for international dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the Anglican Communion when initial discussions took place in the wake of Vatican II.¹² The Anglican–Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC) has to date published three agreed statements with “authority” in the title, the only subject to receive such repeated attention.¹³ The work of ARCIC has therefore represented a significant

10. Timothy Sedgwick, “The Anglican Exemplary Tradition,” *Anglican Theological Review* 94:2 (2012), 207–31; and “Anglican Ethics and Moral Traditioning,” *Anglican Theological Review* 94:4 (2012), 665–70.

11. Gibaut, “Reason as a Source of Authority.”

12. ARCIC I, “Authority in the Church,” 1976, Preface; see ARCIC, *The Final Report*, 1982, at http://www.anglicancommunion.org/media/105260/final_report_arcic_1.pdf.

13. ARCIC I, “Authority in the Church,”; ARCIC I, “Authority in the Church II,” 1981 in ARCIC, *The Final Report*; ARCIC II, *The Gift of Authority: Authority in the Church III*, 1998 at http://www.anglicancommunion.org/media/105245/ARCIC_II_The_Gift_of_Authority.pdf. The Preface to the first agreed statement from ARCIC III, *Walking Together on the Way: Learning to Be the Church – Local, Regional, Universal. An Agreed Statement of the Third Anglican–Roman Catholic International Commission* (London: SPCK, 2018), notes, “Two interrelated themes have had an abiding presence in the work of ARCIC since its inception in 1970: the question of authority and the ecclesiology of communion. This current document takes up these two themes again, and seeks to develop them in a new way” (xi). The text is also published on-line at <https://www.anglicancommunion.org/media/331678/ARCICIII-Agreed-Statement-Walking-Together-21-May-2018.pdf>. On the wider issues raised ARCIC’s

opportunity for Anglicans to articulate their understanding of structures of authority in the church.

The first ARCIC statement on authority opens by affirming the Lordship of Jesus Christ, as the proper point of departure for any Christian theology of authority. It links the apostolic witness to Christ to the unique place of scripture in the life of the church. The authority of the church is then set in the context of its union with Christ in mission and service to all humanity: Christians “are enabled so to live that the authority of Christ will be mediated through them. This is Christian authority: when Christians so act and speak, men perceive the authoritative word of Christ.”¹⁴

With this framework established, the document sets out some of the characteristic structures of authority in Anglican and Roman Catholic churches. The authority of the ordained ministry around the central figure of the bishop is highlighted first, as a “pastoral authority” that is “officially entrusted only to ordained ministers.”¹⁵ While the role of the whole community under the guidance of the Holy Spirit in discerning truth is also emphasized, the document tends to use language that suggests this is primarily in response to “the insights and teaching of the ordained ministers.”¹⁶ The importance of councils that may include “bishops, clergy, and laity,” or comprise “bishops only,” is discussed, in the context of how “local churches” each under one bishop come together to deliberate and take decisions.¹⁷

All of these themes are developed much more fully in the later statement from ARCIC II, *The Gift of Authority*. The text included paragraphs on where Anglicans and Roman Catholics differ, as well as on what they could affirm together, and the paragraph on what the document calls “synodality” can stand as a useful summary of the Anglican tradition and current position:

In the Church of England at the time of the English Reformation the tradition of synodality was expressed through the use both of synods (of bishops and clergy) and of Parliament (including bishops and lay people) for the settlement of liturgy, doctrine and church order. The authority of General Councils was also recognised. In the Anglican Communion, new forms of synods came into being during the nineteenth century and the role of the laity in

work in this area, see Jeremy Worthen, “Ecumenical Dialogue and the Question of Authority,” in Avis et al., *Incarnating Authority*.

14. ARCIC I, “Authority in the Church,” §3.

15. Ibid., §5.

16. Ibid., §6.

17. Ibid., §8.

decision making has increased since that time. Although bishops, clergy, and lay persons consult with each other and legislate together, the responsibility of the bishops remains distinct and crucial. In every part of the Anglican Communion, the bishops bear a unique responsibility of oversight. For example, a diocesan synod can be called only by the bishop, and its decisions can stand only with the bishop's consent. At provincial or national levels, Houses of Bishops exercise a distinctive and unique ministry in relation to matters of doctrine, worship and moral life.¹⁸

The passage strikes a careful balance between the central importance of synods in which lay people are fully involved and the distinctive ministry of bishops "in relation to matters of doctrine, worship and moral life." While lay members of synods would expect bishops to exercise an appropriate leadership in questions of moral discernment, they also take very seriously their own responsibilities to consider such questions and may challenge what bishops present to them. Nonetheless, in the case of the General Synod of the Church of England, for instance, any significant changes to current teaching on "matters of doctrine, worship and moral life" can only be made if supported by the House of Bishops, reflecting the particular way that the authority given to bishops relates to what the document elsewhere calls the "ministry of memory."¹⁹

Anglican churches do not, therefore, lack suitable structures for discerning moral issues and coming to authoritative decisions; how they may do that together as a global communion at the present time is, however, a further question.²⁰ At the same time, the careful statement of differences from Roman Catholicism on moral authority in another text from ARCIC II remains relevant: "Anglicans affirm that authority needs to be dispersed rather than centralized, that the common good is better served by allowing to individual Christians the greatest possible liberty of informed moral judgment, and that therefore official moral teaching should as far as possible be commendatory

18. ARCIC II, *Gift of Authority*, §39.

19. *Ibid.*, §30.

20. There are useful summaries and commentary in ARCIC III, *Walking Together on the Way*, chapter 6, "Instruments of Communion at the Worldwide/Universal Level of Anglican and Roman Catholic Life." See also Inter-Anglican Standing Committee on Unity, Faith & Order, *Towards a Symphony of Instruments: A Historical and Theological Consideration of the Instruments of Communion of the Anglican Communion*, Unity, Faith & Order Paper No. 1 (London: Anglican Consultative Council, 2015). On the role of the Lambeth Conference in the current context, a range of perspectives is apparent in Paul Avis and Benjamin M. Guyer, eds. *The Lambeth Conference: Theology, History, Polity and Purpose* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017), to which might be added Heaney and Sachs, *Promise of Anglicanism*, 203–14.

rather than prescriptive and binding.”²¹ An important factor in this assessment is that although some Anglicans have continued to practise “the ministry of absolution” (or “the sacrament of reconciliation” in contemporary Roman Catholic terminology), since the 16th century, the Church of England has not required confession and absolution as a matter of church discipline. This is a point to which we will return in the following section.

Dynamics of Authority

How authority actually works in any church is inevitably bound up with the society and culture within which it is situated, and indeed with the prevailing attitudes to authority to be found there. The differences between Anglican churches in different parts of the world are therefore likely to be more pronounced in this area than in the first two. Some relatively common features might nonetheless be tentatively identified.

To begin with, the lack of a “centralized” moral authority and a concern for “liberty of informed moral judgment” should not be taken as indicating an indifference to moral matters. As noted at the outset and at the end of the first section, Anglicanism has given a great deal of weight to moral theology and to moral formation; the concern is for the liberty of “informed” moral judgment, not individual moral opinion, and the church has definite responsibilities for such informing. Anglicanism has also given particular attention to the moral formation of society. While there is a unique – though also changing – relationship between church, state, and society in the case of the Church of England, this distinctive emphasis on social theology is by no means confined to it.²²

On social questions as on matters of individual judgment, the Anglican approach has tended to be one of offering teaching that can help those responsible to decide wisely, rather than attempting to impose teaching that will be “prescriptive and binding.” This in part reflects the reality that Anglican churches have limited scope to bind what people do, with relatively open boundaries when it comes to the sacraments and no strong tradition of public church discipline for the laity. Yet this need not be a source of regret. To live in faithfulness to Christ is to choose freely what is good in the light of Christ (see Philemon 14), not to act in fear of social stigma, imprisonment, or corporal punishment, the coercive instruments of church authority at the height of Christendom. This

21. ARCIC II, *Life in Christ*, §49.

22. Malcolm Brown, ed., *Anglican Social Theology* (London: Church House Publishing, 2014).

historic preference for what has been summarized as “counsel”²³ – not mere suggestion, but the fruit of careful deliberation given to those who may or may not be willing to receive it – perhaps explains in part the particular tensions for Anglican churches around moral issues that pertain to the discipline of clergy, where within the framework of ecclesiastical law there may be sanctions against ordained ministers who depart from the church’s moral teaching that lack obvious parallel in the case of the laity.

An influential model from Anglican social theology of the last century is that of “Middle Axioms.”²⁴ The proposal here was that it is possible to identify certain principles that mediate between the teaching of scripture in the life of the church, on the one hand, and, on the other, specific decisions about social questions in the public square. The church should not – and cannot – tell its members or society at large which economic policies to adopt, for instance. Yet by listening carefully both to the church’s sources of authority and to those with serious expertise in the relevant areas, it can discern and commend common Christian principles for all to consider as they formulate their choices and pursue possibly divergent courses of action. While Anglican social theology continues to develop, the concern to speak on moral matters in a way that is congruent with the social dynamics of how ecclesial authority is received remains significant.²⁵

An Example from the Church of England

In July 2015, the General Synod of the Church of England devoted considerable time to consideration of questions relating to investment policy and climate change. A number of voices within the Church of England had endorsed the global movement for complete divestment by churches – and other institutions – from companies whose activities contribute to greenhouse gas emissions. Others had urged a more active use of investment policy to seek to change companies’ behaviour than was perceived to be the case currently. The National Investment Bodies of the Church of England handle something like £10 billion of endowments and pension investments, proceeds from which then make a substantial contribution to funding mission and ministry in the

23. Philip Lorish and Charles Mathewes, “Theology as Counsel: The Work of Oliver O’Donovan and Nigel Biggar,” *Anglican Theological Review* 94:4 (2012), 717–36.

24. Keith Clements, *Ecumenical Dynamic: Living in More than One Place at Once* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2013), chapter 11, “Translating Faith into Public Policy: ‘Middle Axioms’ Revisited.”

25. Malcolm Brown, “The Church of England and Social Ethics Today,” *Crucible* (July–September 2011), 15–22.

Church of England. The Church of England's Ethical Investment Advisory Group (EIAG), which guides the investment policy of the national investment bodies, had provided a detailed background paper, while the debates themselves focused on two shorter policy papers advocating specific proposals.²⁶ In summary, the EIAG argued against wholesale disinvestment and for a series of measures designed to use investment policy strategically to promote a low-carbon economy. This approach was overwhelmingly endorsed by the General Synod.

What sources of authority were used in arriving at this decision? The primary source here was clearly scripture. That was evident in the preparation for the debate itself, which included an overview presentation of scriptural teaching relating to the environment from a renowned biblical scholar and then time spent by synod members in Bible study groups discussing relevant passages. The substantial background paper from the EIAG included sections on scripture (first), theology, and ecclesiology. At the same time, the importance of reasoning, including reasoning that takes into account insights available to "natural" reason, is evident in a determination to describe what is happening to the planet as accurately and truthfully as possible. Thus the major paper from the EIAG included important summaries of the scientific evidence for climate change and its relation to human activity, and of empirical studies modelling the likely effects of specific courses of action in this regard. The views of other churches and of Christian tradition were invoked at various points, but there was evident here an approach to the three classic sources of Anglican tradition that did not treat them as either separate from one another or identical in function.

What about structures of authority? The General Synod of the Church of England was seen to be the appropriate body to consider this matter and recommend a decision to the national investment bodies. It was the lead bishop on the environment who presented the two reports and led the debates, but all were able to speak, including lay members with particular expertise on relevant matters, and all voted. Moreover, the papers provided clearly drew on a range of expertise from scientists, economists, and financial professionals. There was a conscious dependence in coming to a decision on the "authority of knowledge" held by those who did not have the "authority of office" belonging to the bishops or other members of the synod itself. Finally, the extent of the electoral franchise of the synod meant that, in a certain qualified sense at least, all members of the Church of England were represented in the debate.

26. Papers available at <https://www.churchofengland.org/more/policy-and-thinking/work-general-synod/agendas-papers/july-2015-group-sessions>; see especially GS 2003, GS 2004, and GS Misc 1110.

On the dynamics of authority, something of the “Middle Axiom” approach can be discerned in the paper from the EIAG. Having stressed humanity’s “divinely mandated responsibility for the physical world,” rooting its moral reflection in theological anthropology,²⁷ it then linked this to the doctrines of the kingdom of God, redemption, and eschatology, as well as to the doctrine of creation. It also connected responsibility for the physical world with solidarity and support for the “least,” the most vulnerable. While members of the synod and indeed of the Church of England more widely might still take different approaches on policy, strategy, and tactics in addressing the challenges of climate change, here were two principles that could be commended to all as distinctively Christian parameters for thinking through related decisions, as well as underpinning the response to the specific policy question that was being addressed on this occasion.²⁸

27. This is an important theme in recent theological ethics, already evident in the approach of ARCIC II, *Life in Christ*.

28. The general synod returned to the topic of climate change and investment policy at the July 2018 sessions; see the papers and Report of Proceedings for Sunday, July 8, items 10 and 11, <https://www.churchofengland.org/more/policy-and-thinking/work-general-synod/agendas-papers/july-2018-group-sessions>.

10. Peace at the Heart of Ecclesial Moral Discernment

Rachel Muers

Morality and Ecclesiology from a Peace Church

My students, in a non-confessional university, think “peace” is one moral issue among many. It is one of the standard chapters in textbooks on ethics; you learn to debate just war theory versus pacifism, and then you move on to the next issue.

But my co-religionists think “peace” is a shared vocation, the name for how we respond to the gracious call of the living God, walking with Christ through a violent world. If peace is up for debate, the core of our Christian life is up for debate.

The distinctive vocation of Historic Peace Churches within the wider family of churches is defined by something – peace – that would often be described as a “moral issue.”¹ More than this, however, I suggest that, from the perspective of the Historic Peace Churches, what the World Council of Churches (WCC) terms “moral discernment” is at the heart of what it means to be church, not an optional appendix to ecclesiology. Moral life – being formed into holiness and learning to answer God in the world and in other people – is central to Christian identity, individually and communally; and collective discernment is a core practice of the church understood as the gathered community of the faithful people of God. For Quakers in particular, distinctive practices of communal discernment, akin in certain respects to the WCC’s own consensus process, are

1. This paper is written from the perspective of the Society of Friends (Quakers), of which I am a member; I have, however, attempted to set it in the context of the larger group of Historic Peace Churches (with particular attention to the Mennonites and the Church of the Brethren).

closely bound up with worship and (what might in other traditions be called) liturgy.²

The Historic Peace Churches' strong orientation – in theological anthropology as well as in ecclesiology – toward mission, broadly understood, also orients their thinking about “moral discernment.” The primary focus of moral discernment in the Historic Peace Churches has tended to be not the discernment of general moral principles that hold good for all time, but the discernment of the specific vocation of the people of God in a given place and time. There are, certainly, discernible patterns to this vocation – the pattern of Christ and the pattern of his followers – but the point remains that the moral discernment of the church is irreducibly historical and contextual.

In the experience of the Historic Peace Churches, then, careful attention to historical context in moral discernment does not mean assenting to a culture's dominant moral norms, or even its dominant modes and presuppositions of moral reasoning. On the contrary, while recognizing the extent to which they are formed by their contexts, Historic Peace Churches, and individuals within them, have repeatedly discerned the calling radically to challenge the ordinary moral expectations of their cultural contexts. Historically contextual moral discernment, attending closely to lived experience, will not always mean “going with the flow” of cultural change – particularly if that cultural change leads toward greater injustice and conflict.

Authority and Sources for Moral Discernment

Authority, in moral discernment as in any other aspect of the church's life, needs to be understood as dynamic. In seeking “authority,” we are attending to the process by which Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit, orders and guides the church for the sake of the kingdom/reign of God. From a Quaker perspective, this means, *inter alia*, that sources and locations of authority cannot be definitively listed or placed in order; authority is recognized, rather than given, by the church community. In what follows, I discuss a few of the sources mentioned in the document *Moral Discernment in the Churches: A Study Document* and comment on the distinctive insights that a Historic Peace Church perspective might bring concerning their place in moral discernment.

Conscience, understood most fundamentally as the place in which the individual encounters and responds to the call of Christ, is a particularly

2. For an account of Quaker decision-making prepared specifically for the WCC, see Eden Grace, “An Introduction to Quaker Business Practice,” paper for the subcommittee meeting of the Special Commission on Orthodox Participation in the World Council of Churches, Damascus (2000), <http://www.edengrace.org/quakerbusiness.html>.

important focus of moral authority within the Historic Peace Churches. The widely accepted obligation to act in accordance with conscience is emphasized, in these churches, as an obligation on each individual to discern and follow the direction of the Spirit of Christ in everyday life and to live in a way that bears witness to Christ.

The theological and anthropological significance of conscience itself gives rise to significant moral conclusions. Most obvious among these are the commitment – precious to all the Historic Peace Churches – to freedom of religion and to non-coercion in matters of faith. The conscience (mine or another's) is inviolable because Christ has the sole claim upon it. At the same time, precisely because the same Christ claims and addresses each person, the faithful obedience of one may serve as an effective testimony to convict and convince others.

Some of the distinctive stances of the Historic Peace Churches, in particular on nonviolence and the refusal of oaths, found direct scriptural authorization in the words of Jesus (see Matt. 5:33–42). It is important to recognize, however, that the “literal” adherence to these dominical commands does not reflect a more general or a naïve scriptural literalism, nor the decision to take the Bible as the sole authority on moral matters. On the contrary, following the dominical commands – specifically – is a practical recognition and acceptance of the present authority of Christ in the life of the believer and of the church. The primary point is not to obey the scriptures, but to hear and obey the voice of the Lord.

One of the insights that Quaker tradition, specifically, might bring to the understanding of scriptural authority in matters of moral discernment is summed up in the frequent claim of early Quakers: “none can understand the scriptures but by the spirit that gave them forth.”³ This approach does not deny or relativize the authority of scripture, but it draws attention to the role of interpretation – more precisely, to the church's ongoing reliance on the guiding and sanctifying activity of the Holy Spirit to make this interpretation possible. Scripture's authority comes from its living source, who is present in and for the church.

This view of scriptural authority, with its theological underpinnings and its implications for moral discernment, is reflected in a well-known and frequently cited early Quaker statement on nonviolence:

The spirit of Christ, by which we are guided, is not changeable, so as once to command us from a thing as evil and again to move unto it; and we do

3. Edward Burrough, *The Memorable Works of a Son of Thunder* (London: E. Hookes, 1672: text from 1659), 515.

certainly know, and so testify to the world, that the spirit of Christ, which leads us into all Truth, will never move us to fight and war against any man with outward weapons, neither for the kingdom of Christ, nor for the kingdoms of this world.⁴

The consistency of the community's stance, in this text, relies primarily not on the consistency of a way of reading scripture nor on consistently holding to a tradition, but rather on the consistency, through all changing historical circumstances, of the Spirit of Christ who "leads into all truth" – and who always leads in a direction consistent with the revelation of God in Christ. This approach holds together a radical openness to the leadings of the Spirit in each particular situation, with a continuity of moral purpose grounded in the continuing faithfulness of God.

Within the Historic Peace Churches, individual authority in matters of moral discernment arises from the practice of discipleship and its fruits in faithful lives. The "saints" past and present carry authority as witnesses to the work of God in history. They are authoritative not through claiming or seeking to acquire authority, but through their obedient service; the authority that their lives and words carry derives from their faithfulness to the same call that the church seeks to hear in the present (see Heb. 12:1).

The authority of the gathered church community is central to Historic Peace Church understandings of moral discernment – where "gathered" signifies both the church being gathered out of the world (*ek-klesia*, "called out") and the church being gathered together into one body. The centre of moral discernment is, to the community assembled in the name and the presence of Christ (Matt. 18:20), seeking to know and do the will of God through the power of the Holy Spirit. Judgments reached by the gathered community carry authority on the basis of the community's faithful seeking of the will of God – although the extent to which this authority is reflected in structures of community discipline varies considerably through history.

A significant way in which Historic Peace Churches bring together an emphasis on individual conscience and obedience to guidance, with an equally strong emphasis on the community as the locus of moral discernment, is through structures of mutual accountability and the "testing" of individual judgment. So, for example, in Quaker contexts there is a well-developed tradition of individuals who have a sense of divine calling to specific action – for themselves or for the church community – presenting that initial discernment of guidance

4. George Fox et al., *Declaration of the Harmless and Innocent People of God* (London: n.p., 1660).

to the community for shared reflection and testing. Without undermining the freedom of the individual's conscience, this process recognizes that authority rests not with the conscience as such but with God who calls and addresses it.

Similarly, a particular community's judgments and discernments are undertaken in the context of testing against the historical record of the church's discernment and witness, that is, tradition. This should not, however, be seen as a zero-sum game of authority in which the past invariably overrides the present, the community overrides the individual, or vice versa. The process only works on the basis of mutual trust – not in the rightness of the conclusions reached by another person or another group, but in their faithful engagement in the work of discerning and bearing witness to the work of God in the world. The history of communal discernment, like the lives of the saints, bears witness to the guidance of God to previous generations. It establishes the shape of this particular community's lived vocation; it shapes ongoing moral discernment, not by providing a set of rules that must be adhered to, but by establishing the embodied and narrated memory that gives this community its identity. So, being a "historic peace church" is not just "following a historic set of rules about peace," but rather "continuing the life of a community that has been shaped by nonviolence and peacemaking."

What of wider contexts of discernment – culture, "reason," social contexts? Belief in the present guidance of the Holy Spirit, as the source of truthful moral discernment, carries with it the responsibility to attend to the many witnesses and signs of the Holy Spirit's work in the church and the world – scripture, the testimonies of faithful individuals and communities past and present, but also the wider historical context through which the Holy Spirit can speak to the churches

It is easy to caricature at least some Historic Peace Churches (historically and in the present day) as being straightforwardly opposed to "the world" in and through their moral discernment – holding to a set of moral claims and stances that separate the community of believers from the surrounding culture. Certainly, the persistent themes within peace church traditions of holiness, of cruciform discipleship and faithful adherence to the way of the cross, and of bearing or maintaining "testimony against" the world point toward patterns of moral discernment that assume a critical relationship to culture – and, in particular, to state power and its demands. "Authority" is not only dynamic but potentially conflictual; recognizing Christ's authority can (and perhaps inevitably will) bring the church and the believer into confrontation with innerworldly claims to "authority." Within the Historic Peace Church traditions, this confrontation is "negotiated" through persistent faithful counter-cultural witness, whatever suffering this entails.

A Note on Structures and Processes of Moral Discernment

The community of believers seeking God's will together is the basic "structure" for moral discernment in the Historic Peace Churches. Practices and processes of collective moral discernment – how the community finds and tests guidance – have received considerable attention in both Quaker and Mennonite contexts over recent years. A frequent concern is that the patterns and processes by which we undertake moral discernment should themselves be "moral" – or, better, that they should be drawn into the community's task of embodying and communicating the peace of Christ in a chaotic and violent world.

Among Quakers, this emphasis on peaceful processes as well as peaceful outcomes has led to decision-making processes that emphasize the search for unity and a common mind and that actively discourage either the formation of factions or the exercise of individual power – and that are frequently in contrast to the dominant modes of moral deliberation in their surrounding contexts. Decision-making without voting, for example, looks strange in contemporary contexts where representative democracy is the norm; so does decision-making grounded in shared worship and prayer, emphasizing dependence on divine guidance. Unanimity and the "common mind" arrived at through extended deliberation is also a feature of other Historic Peace Church accounts of moral discernment. Among Quakers (at least), unity has historically been prized not only as a sign of effective use of processes for communal discernment, but also to emphasize and reinforce the solidarity of a marginal group. It is important to recognize that these distinctive approaches to the practice of moral discernment are not simply "cultural." Although they do give rise to numerous cultural "unwritten rules" and expectations, their roots are theological.

Structurally, for Quakers and across the Historic Peace Churches, the opportunity for all members of the church community to participate in decision-making processes – including processes of moral discernment – is very important. It rests on the conviction that all are enlightened by the light of Christ, and that the operation of the Holy Spirit who "guides into all truth" is not restricted by people's different capacities, roles, or levels of education. This does not exclude the use of a full range of sources, including the expertise of individuals, to inform moral discernment, but it must be clear that the authority rests with the gathered church community. Leadership in moral discernment, in this context, is the servant leadership that enables the community to "test the spirits" thoroughly and arrive at a common mind. While individuals may need to take on specific roles within a process of moral discernment – introducing issues for consideration, reflecting and recording decisions – these

roles are not understood as giving those individuals authority or power over and above what is given to each member of the community.

This process might seem to imply a “congregational” model of decision-making and authority, focused on the church gathered in a particular place. This is certainly an important dimension of moral discernment, based on ecclesiology. However, for at least some of the Historic Peace Churches, structures exist whereby processes of moral discernment can be carried out at national or international level. In Quaker contexts, one key to the success of these processes is that “representatives” of different groups or local areas are all prepared to enter into the shared discipline of the decision-making process and to be open to new insights and leadings.

11. Baptist Moral Discernment: Congregational Hearing and Weighing

Steven R. Harmon

In September 2003 I served as a member of the Baptist delegation to the North American phase of a dialogue between the Anglican Communion and the Baptist World Alliance (BWA).¹ One of my responsibilities was to present a paper offering a Baptist perspective on authority. I began with the qualification that “there is not a singular Baptist understanding of authority, nor are there universally authoritative sources in the Baptist world to which one might look for expressions of such an understanding”; instead I would present “an overview of Baptist understandings (plural) of authority.”²

The need to make such qualifications is not limited to Baptists, for my counterpart on the Anglican delegation began his paper on an Anglican perspective on authority by offering precisely the same qualification about the Anglican tradition.³ What is true for the question of authority in the abstract is true for the particular question of authority for moral discernment in ecclesial traditions as diverse as Baptist churches on the one hand and Anglican churches on the other, as a recent journal article examining former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams’s approach to moral discernment in Christian

1. For the published report of the dialogue, see Anglican Consultative Council and Baptist World Alliance, *Conversations around the World: The Report of the International Conversations between the Anglican Communion and the Baptist World Alliance 2000–2005* (London: Anglican Communion Office, 2005).

2. Steven R. Harmon, “Baptist Understandings of Authority, with Special Reference to Baptists in North America,” paper presented to the Anglican-Baptist International Commission–North American Phase, Acadia University, Wolfville, Nova Scotia, 10–13 September 2003; subsequently published as Steven R. Harmon, “Baptist Understandings of Theological Authority: A North American Perspective,” *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 4:1 (2004), 50–63. A further revision appeared as a chapter in Steven R. Harmon, *Towards Baptist Catholicity: Essays on Tradition and the Baptist Vision*, *Studies in Baptist History and Thought*, vol. 27 (Milton Keynes, U.K.: Paternoster, 2006), 23–38.

3. Ronald C. Stevenson, “An Anglican Understanding of Authority,” paper presented to the Anglican-Baptist International Commission–North American Phase, Acadia University, Wolfville, Nova Scotia, 10–13 September 2003.

community suggests. One of its quotations from Williams would be just as applicable to Baptists as to the Anglicans he addresses:

In a 2006 letter to the Anglican Communion, Williams argued that the main issue for the church “is a question, agonisingly difficult for many, as to what kinds of behaviour a church that seeks to be loyal to the Bible can bless, and what kinds of behaviour it must warn against – and so it is a question about how we make decisions corporately with other Christians, looking together for the mind of Christ as we share the study of the scriptures.”⁴

The Baptist counterpart to the Archbishop of Canterbury, in the sense of functioning as the leader of a Christian world communion, is the general secretary of the BWA. Current General Secretary Neville Callam recently offered reflections on the necessity and complexity of moral discernment: “We should not fail to recognize the complexity of the process by which we can hear the voice of God as we seek to relate the teaching of scripture to the vexed issues of contemporary life.”⁵ Williams and Callam both point to a common authorizing

4. Sarah Moses, “The Ethics of ‘Recognition’: Rowan Williams’s Approach to Moral Discernment in the Christian Community,” *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 35:1 (2015), 147–65, at 148; quotation is from Rowan Williams, “The Challenge and Hope of Being an Anglican Today: A Reflection for the Bishops, Clergy, and Faithful of the Anglican Communion,” 27 June 2006, <http://rowanwilliams.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/1478/the-challenge-and-hope-of-being-an-anglican-today-a-reflection-for-the-bishops-clergy-and-faithful-o>.

5. Neville Callam, “When the Churches Present Inconsistent Moral Teachings,” Baptist World Alliance General Secretary’s blog, 1 March 2016, <http://www.bwanet.org/dialogue/entry/when-the-churches-present-inconsistent-moral-teachings>. Callam’s reflections were occasioned by concerns expressed by 13 cardinals of the Catholic Church in the aftermath of the Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops of the Roman Catholic Church that met 4–25 October 2015 regarding what the cardinals perceived as a trend toward moral relativism in “liberal Protestant churches,” which they hoped would not be mirrored in the ongoing process of moral discernment by the Synod of Bishops. Callam wrote, “Whatever we make of the cardinals’ claims, it seems to me that the church needs to hear a stark warning in what they voice.” After the sentence quoted in the body text above (“Yet, we should not fail to recognize the complexity of the process by which we can hear the voice of God as we seek to relate the teaching of Scripture to the vexed issues of contemporary life”), Callam continued:

First, we should note that discerning the mind of Christ is not simply about a Christian taking the counsel that is given in the Bible and applying it directly to a particular issue of concern. One reason for this is that, in this individualistic world, discernment of the voice of Christ is best done in community with other Christians. God can speak to each of us in the privacy of our place of prayer. But we must test what we believe we are hearing against the wider sense of the believing community. Of course, this is a principle that was firmly advocated by the

source for the church's task of moral discernment – the normativity of scripture – and recognize the complexity of the church's efforts to apply the authority of scripture to issues faced by the church today in relation to various other sources that play some authoritative role in ecclesial moral discernment.

In offering an account of how Baptist communities approach moral discernment, I will distinguish between two differing types of authoritative sources for this task: first, *theological* sources that function in a pattern of authority for the practice of the church as well as its faith, and second, *ecclesiological* sources that are essentially a community's socially embodied efforts to discern what the mind of Christ is for their life together in the world. Though this twofold typology differs from the classification of various sources of authority as “faith sources” and “sapiential sources” in chapter 2 of the Faith and Order study document *Moral Discernment in the Churches: A Study Document* (hereafter *MDC*), all 14 sources identified there as “Sources for Moral Discernment” inform Baptist communities in the task of moral discernment, even when they are not explicitly acknowledged.⁶

earliest Baptists and it has been affirmed in several other Christian World Communions. Relating the Scripture to contemporary issues requires corporate, and not simply private, activity. We should not simply rest on the conclusions that we each draw from our reading of Scripture.

Another reason why discerning God's mind is a complex process is that we do not come to the process of applying biblical teaching to issues of the day with a tabula rasa. Instead, we come to the issues with our minds flooded with all sorts of ideas. Serious Christians who apply biblical insights in the process of decision making may wish to admit that among the things they bring to the process of decision-making are the values formed in them in their early development at home, school and church. They also bring the traditions of biblical interpretation and the body of social teaching that they have learned in their church.

Yet, another reason why the interpretive task is a complex affair is that, in God's freedom, believers may receive “more light and truth” issuing from God's Word than they earlier experienced. Of course, every text of Scripture needs to be read in its context. Furthermore, each text of Scripture needs to be read in the light of the whole of Scripture. Moreover, because God has witnesses in every place and every culture, God may choose to speak to us through human culture and history as well. Still, there are times when the values of culture are antithetical to what our faith teaches. In this complex situation, there is simply no easy way to speak with confidence and sincerity about the will of God.

Thankfully, about one thing Baptists have made consistent affirmation: once the church has discerned the normative teaching of Scripture, whatever is inconsistent with this is an unacceptable foundation for Christian praxis.

6. World Council of Churches, *Moral Discernment in the Churches: A Study Document*, Faith and Order Paper No. 215 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2013). Published as Appendix 1 of this book. Also accessible at <https://archive.org/details/wccfops2.222>.

“Theological” Authority for Moral Discernment⁷

Baptists have emphasized the primacy and sufficiency of the scriptures as their authority for faith and practice, but their confessions of faith make it clear that they ascribe ultimate authority to the triune God.⁸ With few exceptions, early Baptist confessions issued in the Netherlands and England begin not with statements about the authority of the Bible (and frequently lacked such statements) but rather with articles on the nature and attributes of the one God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It is not making too much of this ordering of confessional statements to discern in it the conviction that the God whose story scripture tells is the ultimate authority for Christian faith and practice. Confessions issued in North America during the 19th and 20th centuries, however, have normally begun with an article on the inspiration and authority of the scriptures, yet this shift does not indicate a reversal of ultimate authorities. Even if these confessions emphasize scripture as the means by which God is known, the Baptists who adopted and affirmed them would agree that any legitimate source of religious authority derives from the God who is revealed in the person of Jesus Christ to whom the Spirit bears witness.⁹

While Baptists ascribe ultimate authority to the triune God, they identify scripture as the supreme earthly source of authority that derives its authority from the triune God. Many early Baptist confessions lacked articles on the scriptures, but they evidenced a radical biblicism in their copious prooftexting of confessional statements with parenthetical and marginal biblical references. Most Baptist confessions adopted in North America have contained an article specifically addressing the inspiration and authority of the scriptures.

The most widely influential article on the scriptures in Baptist confessions issued in the United States is the article with which the *New Hampshire Confession* of 1833 begins.¹⁰ This article was incorporated in or adapted by

7. Some material in this subsection has been abridged and adapted from Steven R. Harmon, *Baptist Identity and the Ecumenical Future: Story, Tradition, and the Recovery of Community* (Waco, Tex.: Baylor University Press, 2016), 70–78.

8. Harmon, *Towards Baptist Catholicity*, 71–87; Steven R. Harmon, “Baptist Confessions of Faith and the Patristic Tradition,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 29:4 (Winter 2002), 349–58.

9. Baptists share this conviction with the whole church, expressed as a matter of fundamental consensus in *MDC*, chapter 2: “For Christians, moral discernment also involves a desire to act in agreement with their belief, the centre of which is faith in the Triune God” (§30) and “Faith sources are ways through which Christians access the ultimate source of truth and authority, which is God as revealed in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit” (§31).

10. William L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 2nd rev. ed., ed. Bill J. Leonard (Judson Press, 2011), 378: “We believe [that] the Holy Bible was written by men divinely inspired, and is a perfect treasure of heavenly instruction; that it has God for its author, salvation for

confessions printed in numerous Baptist church manuals and issued by various Baptist unions in the United States, notably the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), which made the *New Hampshire Confession* the basis of the statement of the *Baptist Faith and Message* that the SBC adopted in 1925, revised in 1963, amended in 1998, and revised yet again in 2000. The successive modifications of the article on the scriptures in the *Baptist Faith and Message*, which reflect a movement from a perspective that was arguably more open to the contributions of historical-critical biblical scholarship and limited the scope of the Bible's authority to matters of faith and practice toward a more restrictive theory of biblical inerrancy,¹¹ illustrate the diversity that has characterized recent

its end, and truth, without any mixture of error, for its matter; that it reveals the principles by which God will judge us; and therefore is, and shall remain to the end of the world, the true centre of Christian union, and the supreme standard by which all human conduct, creeds, and opinions should be tried."

11. Whereas the *New Hampshire Confession* called the Bible "the supreme standard by which all human conduct, creeds, and opinions should be tried," the 1925 *Baptist Faith and Message* qualified the "opinions" as "religious opinions." This modification subtly limited the scope of biblical authority to matters of faith and practice – in other words, not scientific matters – and enabled both those who allowed for the possibility that evolution was the means by which God created human beings and those who opposed all forms of evolutionary theory to affirm the same statement on the authority of the Bible. It is significant that the convention declined to adopt a proposed anti-evolution amendment to the article on "Man" (Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 408). The 1963 revision of the *Baptist Faith and Message* added a phrase and a sentence to the article on the scriptures in the 1925 statement. The first addition asserted that the Bible "is the record of God's revelation of Himself to man," distinguishing between the Bible and the revelation that preceded and resulted in the writing of scripture and subtly allowing for interpretive approaches that reckoned seriously with the human dimensions of the biblical text. The second addition, "the criterion by which the Bible is to be interpreted is Jesus Christ," was perceived by some as permitting those who saw some moral and theological progression in God's revelation from the earliest layers of the Old Testament to God's definitive revelation in Jesus Christ (e.g., a progression from the divine sanctioning of "holy war" in the Old Testament to the peacemaking ethic of the reign of God taught by Jesus Christ in the New Testament) to affirm the statement in good conscience. The 1963 revision thus seemed to combine an affirmation of the trustworthiness of the Bible with openness to the contributions of contemporary biblical and theological scholarship to its interpretation. Following decades of theological controversy from which more conservative Southern Baptists emerged in control of denominational agencies, however, a revision of the article on the scriptures in 2000 moved in a different direction from its 1925 and 1963 predecessors. The article alters the statement that the Bible "is the record of God's revelation of Himself to man" to read that the Bible "is God's revelation of Himself to man" (emphasis added), thus seeming to equate the Bible, in its entirety, with revelation proper – though, it should be noted, this language does not require such an equation (*Baptist Faith and Message [2000]* §1, in Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 512). The final sentence added in the 1963 revision, "the criterion by which the Bible is to be interpreted is Jesus Christ," is deleted and replaced with "all Scripture is a testimony to Christ, who is Himself the focus of divine revelation." These most recent modifications reflect a shift in North America's largest Baptist

understandings of biblical authority in Baptist life in North America. In the larger Baptist context, some Baptists would affirm this recent more restrictive understanding of the inspiration and authority of the Bible;¹² some Baptists would affirm standard historical-critical conclusions about the formation of the Bible and their usefulness for biblical interpretation;¹³ and some Baptists would view these battles as vestiges of a dying modernity and would prefer to move beyond them by focusing instead on the manner in which scripture functions authoritatively for the Baptist communities that are gathered by its proclamation and study.¹⁴

A focus on the authoritative function of scripture in the life of the community implies a relationship between scripture and other possible sources of authority to which members of the community may turn, consciously and unconsciously, when they interpret the scriptures together. Baptist confessions have tended toward a *sola scriptura* understanding of authority in that they specify scripture as the supreme authority but do not explicitly identify other subordinate sources of authority.¹⁵ Yet the actual hermeneutical practice of Baptists might be better described as *suprema scriptura*.¹⁶ Baptist confessions contain

group toward an understanding of biblical authority defined in terms of a theory of biblical inerrancy along the lines of the 1978 Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy drafted by a group of North American evangelical theologians (International Council on Biblical Inerrancy, "Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 21 [December 1978]: 289–96; for various Southern Baptist perspectives on the appropriateness of this conceptualization of the nature of biblical inspiration and authority, alongside representative non-Baptist evangelical perspectives, see Conference on Biblical Inerrancy, *The Proceedings of the Conference on Biblical Inerrancy*, 1987 [Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman Press, 1987]).

12. For example, L. Russ Bush and Thomas J. Nettles, *Baptists and the Bible*, rev. ed. (Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman & Holman, 1999).

13. For example, many of the essays in Robison B. James, ed., *The Unfettered Word: Southern Baptists Confront the Authority-Inerrancy Question* (Waco, Tex.: Word Books, 1987).

14. For example, Mikael Broadway, Curtis W. Freeman, Barry Harvey, James Wm. McClen-don, Jr., Elizabeth Newman, and Philip E. Thompson, "Re-envisioning Baptist Identity: A Manifesto for Baptist Communities in North America," published initially in *Baptists Today* (June 1997): 8–10, and *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 24:3 (Fall 1997), 303–10.

15. Garrett, "Sources of Authority in Baptist Thought," 43.

16. James Leo Garrett, Jr., *Systematic Theology: Biblical, Historical, and Evangelical*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1990), 181, suggested that "Baptists who emphasize the use of Baptist confessions of faith and who insist on a clearly articulated doctrine of the Trinity, often using terms easily traceable to the patristic age, would do well to affirm *suprema Scriptura*." Garrett's suggestion of *suprema scriptura* as a more accurate descriptor of this functional pattern of authority among Baptists has influenced the text of the reports from the conversations between the BWA and the Anglican Consultative Council and from the second series of conversations between the BWA and the Catholic Church,

numerous echoes of the doctrinal formulations of Niceno-Constantinopolitan trinitarianism and Chalcedonian Christology, employing theological terminology with origins in the 4th century and later.¹⁷ When Baptists affirm doctrinal formulations with patristic origins or embrace the authority of a biblical canon, they are at least unconsciously granting some degree of authority to tradition in the interpretation of scripture.

Explicit Baptist recognition of tradition or other sources of theological authority in addition to scripture exists almost exclusively in the context of academic theological discourse;¹⁸ extrabiblical sources of authority are seldom referenced by Baptist confessions of faith. A major exception to this generalization is the 1678 confession issued by general (i.e., non-Calvinistic) Baptists in England under the title *An Orthodox Creed*, which commends the reception and belief of the Nicene, (pseudo-) Athanasian, and Apostles' Creeds, subordinating their authority to that of scripture but regarding them as reliable summaries of biblical teaching.¹⁹ In addition, at least two recent European Baptist confessions of faith likewise make positive reference to the Apostles' Creed. The first paragraph of the confession adopted in 1977 by German-speaking Baptist unions in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland "presupposes the Apostles' Creed as a common confession of Christendom,"²⁰ and the initial paragraph of the confession approved by the Swedish-Speaking Baptist Union of Finland in 1979 "accepts the Apostolic Creed as the comprehensive creed for the union."²¹

While these affirmations of a traditional rule of faith that summarizes the Bible and provides broad guidance for its proper interpretation suggest openings for a Baptist convergence with other Christian traditions that have more explicitly affirmed tradition as authoritative, most Baptists profess adherence to a *sola scriptura* theological hermeneutic. Yet Baptist laypeople and Baptist clergy alike are in fact reading the Bible through the lenses of all sorts of traditions and

both of which describe the Baptist perspective as "*suprema scriptura*" (Anglican Consultative Council and Baptist World Alliance, *Conversations Around the World 2000–2005*, §26; BWA and Catholic Church, "The Word of God in the Life of the Church," §62).

17. See Harmon, *Towards Baptist Catholicity*, 71–87; Harmon, "Baptist Confessions of Faith and the Patristic Tradition," 349–58.

18. See Harmon, *Towards Baptist Catholicity*, 1–21; Harmon, "'Catholic Baptists' and the New Horizon of Tradition in Baptist Theology," in *New Horizons in Theology*, ed. Terrence W. Tilley (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2005), 117–43; and the literature by "catholic Baptist" theologians cited therein.

19. *An Orthodox Creed* (1678), §38, in Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 337–38.

20. G. Keith Parker, *Baptists in Europe: History & Confessions of Faith* (Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman Press, 1982), 57.

21. *Ibid.*, 111.

engaging in moral discernment on the basis of what seems reasonable to them and what best accords with Christian experience, in a manner comparable to the “Wesleyan Quadrilateral.” The actual hermeneutical practice of Baptists is therefore *suprema scriptura*, with scripture functioning as the supreme source of authority in a larger pattern of authority.

“Ecclesiological” Authority for Moral Discernment

The foregoing description of “theological” authority for Baptist moral discernment could be applied to what individual Baptists do when they wrestle with moral issues, whether as laypersons, ministers, or theologians and ethicists. But while there have been individualistic tendencies in Baptist life, for Baptists moral discernment is also an ecclesial matter. To frame Baptist efforts at moral discernment in ecclesiological terms is to recognize that teaching authority, which *MDC* identifies as an ecumenically shared “faith source” of moral discernment,²² has this function also for Baptists.

In other words, Baptists have their own form of “magisterium,” though differently configured from the forms of magisterium recognized more explicitly as such in other Christian traditions.²³ Beyond the Catholic²⁴ and magisterial Protestant²⁵ configurations of magisterium, there is yet a third major

22. *MDC*: “All churches have some form of teaching authority, which has the responsibility to preserve the faith in moral convictions, determine the binding force of a doctrine, and consequently identify whether, or to what extent, diversity on a given moral issue is possible” (§35).

23. For an ecumenical framing of the role of magisterium in ecclesial moral discernment, see Gerard Mannion, “Retrieving a Participatory Teaching ‘Office’: A Comparative and Ecumenical Analysis of Magisterium in the Service of Moral Discernment,” *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 34:2 (2014), 61–86.

24. The relation of the teaching authority exercised by the bishops in council to the coinherence of scripture and tradition in Catholic understanding is summarized in *Lumen Gentium* §25 and *Dei Verbum* §10 from the documents of the Second Vatican Council. Vatican II, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Lumen Gentium)*, §25, 21 November 1964, in *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, rev. ed., ed. Austin Flannery (Northport, N.Y.: Costello Publishing, 1992), 380; Vatican II, *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (Dei Verbum)*, §10, 18 November 1965, in *Vatican Council II*, ed. Flannery, 755–56.

25. That Protestants have their own version of magisterium is suggested by George Huntston Williams’s use of the label “Magisterial Reformation” to distinguish the “classical Protestant” traditions that include the Lutheran and Reformed churches from churches of the “Radical Reformation” exemplified by the Anabaptists (George Huntston Williams, *The Radical Reformation* [Philadelphia, Pa.: Westminster Press, 1962]). The Magisterial Reformation was accomplished with the cooperation of the civil power, the magistrates, but it was also magisterial in the sense that it was accomplished through the influence of the magister, the authoritative teacher, in association with the magistrate. In the origins of this paradigm of Protestant

pattern according to which the church “teaches as she must teach if she is to be the church here and now.”²⁶ This configuration might be called “Free Church magisterium.”²⁷

In one sense, Free Church magisterium functions as a magisterium of the whole. Inasmuch as Baptists have historically granted that local churches gathered under the Lordship of Christ possess an authority that derives from Christ as Lord, this authority can also be extended to the communion of saints, who constitute a real community under the Lordship of Christ that transcends space and time.²⁸ The church’s teaching authority can be located most broadly in the communion of saints in its entirety in its ongoing argument²⁹ about what the church “must teach in order to be the church here and now.”³⁰ But who decides how the argument should be decided, however provisionally, at various points in the historical extension of the argument? If all members of the communion of saints are participants in this ongoing argument, do they all participate in the same way? Do the voices of all participants carry the same weight, so that the argument is decided by majority? This magisterium of the whole offers a way for Baptists and other historic dissenters to appreciate the place their dissent has within the larger argument that constitutes the Christian tradition, making positive contributions to the health of the living tradition through their dissent,³¹ but it needs greater specificity in its location of socially-embodied ecclesial authority.

magisterium, the authority of the Catholic bishops could be rejected when, according to the Protestant Reformers, the bishops had failed to teach the truth; instead they could point to other teachers whose authority derived from their faithful teaching of the gospel and to authoritative confessional documents that definitively expressed this faithful teaching.

26. The quotation is from the definition of the task of Christian doctrine offered by Baptist theologian James Wm. McClendon, Jr., *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2, *Doctrine* (Waco, Tex.: Baylor University Press, 2012), 23–24.

27. Some material in the remainder of this subsection has been adapted and abridged from Harmon, *Baptist Identity and the Ecumenical Future*, 176–80.

28. See Harmon, *Towards Baptist Catholicity*, 39–69.

29. This construal of ecclesial tradition as “argument” draws on Alasdair MacIntyre’s definition of a “living tradition” as “an historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute that tradition” (Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd ed. [Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984], 222), with the goods that constitute the tradition defined in terms of the Christian narrative – the biblical story of the triune God that is told at length and with great particularity in the scriptures and summarized in the ancient creeds.

30. McClendon, *Doctrine*, 24.

31. See Harmon, *Towards Baptist Catholicity*, 66.

Free Church magisterial authority is located primarily in the gathered congregation. One might call this the “magisterium-hood of all believers.” But in the Free Church practice of teaching authority it is not the local congregation alone that authorizes its teaching, nor is the membership of the congregation undifferentiated in its participation in this practice. In Baptist ecclesiology, the independence of local congregations is not absolute. Local Baptist congregations are interdependent in their relations with one another, in local associations but also in various national and international associations of Baptists. The rule of Christ in the local congregations in the plural has implications for the efforts of any single local congregation to discern the mind of Christ, and vice versa. Together in their mutual relations they seek to walk under the government of Christ, seeking from him a fuller grasp of the truth, as one ecclesial communion – a communion which, the earliest Baptist confession issued by an association of Baptist churches hopefully suggested, might extend beyond Baptist churches in association to include all the saints.³²

Within local congregations, discerning the mind of Christ is not a matter of simple majority vote of the congregation, nor is it determined by acquiescence to the will of the congregation’s pastor. Baptist theologian Paul Fiddes explains the embodied “Baptist experience” that informs Baptist efforts to bring their faith and practice under the rule of Christ:

The liberty of local churches to make decisions about their own life and ministry is not based in a human view of autonomy or independence, or in selfish individualism, but in a sense of being under the direct rule of Christ who relativizes other rules. This liberating rule of Christ is what makes for the distinctive “feel” of Baptist congregational life, which allows for spiritual oversight (*episkopé*) both by the *whole* congregation gathered together in church meeting, and by the minister(s) called to lead the congregation . . . Since the same rule of Christ can be experienced in assemblies of churches together, there is also the basis here for Baptist associational life, and indeed for participating in ecumenical clusters.³³

Elsewhere Fiddes fleshes out what it means for the whole congregation to seek together the mind of Christ in what British Baptists call “church meeting”:

32. London Confession (1644) pref., in Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 143.

33. Paul S. Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces: Baptist Identity in Church and Theology*, Studies in Baptist History and Thought, vol. 13 (Milton Keynes, U.K.: Paternoster, 2003), 6.

Upon the whole people in covenant there lies the responsibility of finding a common mind, of coming to an agreement about the way of Christ for them in life, worship and mission. But they cannot do so unless they use the resources that God has given them, and among those resources are the pastor, the deacons and (if they have them) the elders. The church meeting is not “people power” in the sense of simply counting votes and canvassing a majority . . . The aim is to search for consent about the mind of Christ, and so people should be sensitive to the voices behind the votes, listening to them according to the weight of their experience and insight. As B[arrington] White puts it, “One vote is not as good as another in church meeting,” even though it has the same strictly numerical value.³⁴

“In all this,” Fiddes writes, “the pastor’s voice is the one that carries weight” – provided that pastors have created trust in their leadership through service. In this paradigm, pastors play a distinctive role in the shared exercise of *episkopē*, which carries with it the catechetical task of equipping the members of the congregation with the resources they need from beyond the congregation for seeking the mind of Christ, resources which include the doctrine, worship, and practice of other congregations, other Christian traditions, and indeed the whole Christian tradition.³⁵

In 1997 a group of Baptist theologians issued a statement titled “Re-envisioning Baptist Identity: A Manifesto for Baptist Communities in North America.” It proposed five affirmations regarding the nature of freedom, faithfulness, and community, the first of which follows in part:

We affirm Bible Study in reading communities rather than relying on private interpretation or supposed “scientific” objectivity . . . We thus affirm an open and orderly process whereby faithful communities deliberate together over the Scriptures with sisters and brothers of the faith, excluding no light from any source. When all exercise their gifts and callings, when every voice is heard and weighed, when no one is silenced or privileged, the Spirit leads communities to read wisely and to practice faithfully the direction of the gospel.³⁶

34. Ibid., 86.

35. For this reason, theological educators also have a key form of participation in Free Church magisterium, for they have the opportunity to supply ministers with these God-given resources from beyond the local congregation and to train them in the skills they need for the discerning use of these resources. I have developed this suggestion more fully in Steven R. Harmon, “What Have Baptist Professors of Religion to Do with Magisterium?” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 45:1 (Spring 2018), 37–48.

36. Broadway et al., “Re-envisioning Baptist Identity: A Manifesto for Baptist Communities in North America,” §1.

Beyond an undifferentiated magisterium of the whole, this way of framing the process by which the church discerns what it must teach regarding its faith and practice on the basis of the word of God summarizes well how this more nuanced configuration of congregational Free Church magisterium functions. In its ideal exercise, the moral discernment of a Baptist community in which “no light from any source” is excluded and “every voice is heard and weighed” and “no one is silenced or privileged” would give consideration to the full range of “faith sources” and “sapiential sources” treated in *MDC* (chapter 2).³⁷

Moral Discernment and Congregational Ecclesiology

The congregational ecclesiology of Baptists means, however, that the moral discernment of Baptist communities will result in widely varying decisions as to how they will address a specific moral issue.³⁸ Furthermore, Baptist congregational governance means that while a local association of Baptist churches, a national union of Baptist churches, a world communion of Baptists, or an ecumenical council to which Baptist churches and unions may belong will also

37. In Harmon, *Baptist Identity and the Ecumenical Future*, 180–88, in response to the questions “What then are the potential sources of light that ought not be excluded as Baptist communities determine what it is they must teach to be the church in the time and place they inhabit? What are the voices that should be heard and weighed without being silenced in their Free Church practice of magisterium?” I suggested that these voices ought to include the following nine types of resources: (1) the ancient creeds that stem from the early church’s rule of faith; (2) historic Reformation confessions and catechisms, along with more recent confessional statements from various denominations; (3) Baptist confessions of faith; (4) Catholic magisterial teaching; (5) liturgical texts of other traditions; (6) reports and agreed statements of bilateral and multilateral ecumenical dialogues; (7) contextual theologies that emerge from other social locations; (8) ecclesial resolutions on ethical issues adopted by diverse church bodies; and (9) the lived Christian lives of the saints. For a collaborative exploration of what it might mean to bring these inter-contextual sources to bear on congregational discernment by Baptist churches in their specific local contexts, see Amy L. Chilton and Steven R. Harmon, eds, *Sources of Light: Resources for Baptist Churches Practicing Theology*, Perspectives on Baptist Identities, no. 3 (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 2020).

38. For the purposes of this paper and in keeping with its limitations of length, I have chosen to generalize about Baptist ecclesial moral discernment rather than taking up as test cases of these generalizations how specific Baptist communities have addressed particular moral issues. However, a group of theologians and ministers affiliated with the Baptist Union of Great Britain who hold differing perspectives on the issue of same-sex unions issued in 2016 a document commending Baptist ecclesiology as making space for local Baptist communities to reach differing conclusions in their exercise of ecclesial moral discernment about matters of human sexuality without these differing conclusions becoming ground for division: Beth Allison-Glenney, Andy Goodliff, Ruth Gouldbourne, Steve Holmes, David Kerrigan, Glen Marshall, and Simon Woodman, “The Courage to Be Baptist: A Statement on Baptist Ecclesiology and Human Sexuality,” <http://www.somethingtodeclare.org.uk/statement.html>.

function as ecclesial communities that seek to bring their life together under the rule of Christ³⁹ and may adopt resolutions or implement policies that are expressions of their communal efforts at moral discernment, these resolutions and policies are not binding on local Baptist churches. But just as local Baptist churches may make their own decisions about the associations or unions of churches with which they will affiliate, Baptist associations and unions too may make their own decisions about the local churches they will consider members in good standing, and sometimes these decisions have been based on stances on moral issues adopted by local Baptist churches.

Authority for Baptist ecclesial moral discernment is primarily located in the local Baptist congregation. Yet when they engage in congregational moral discernment, local Baptist churches can and should take into consideration the efforts at ecclesial moral discernment undertaken by other local Baptist churches and national and international Baptist unions, as well as by churches belonging to other Christian communions. Whenever Baptist communities recognize and approach ecclesial moral discernment as a fully ecumenical undertaking, they are ensuring that “no light from any source” is excluded, “every voice is heard and weighed,” and “no one is silenced.” When they do so, Baptists are both being true to their own best ecclesial gifts and are joining the pilgrimage of the whole church toward the church fully under the rule of Christ.

Summary

Sources for Moral Discernment in the Tradition

How is scripture used in relation to other sources for moral discernment? For Baptists, scripture is the pre-eminently normative “theological” authority for moral discernment, but its authority is both derivative and relative – derivative in the sense of deriving its authority from the ultimate authority of the triune God, and relative in that scripture’s authority functions in relation to other sources of authority that, while normed by scripture, are indispensable for its interpretation and contemporary embodiment by the community. Baptist laypeople and Baptist clergy read the Bible through the lenses of tradition and engage in moral discernment on the basis of what seems reasonable to them and what best accords with Christian experience. The pattern of theological authority for Baptist moral discernment is thus akin to the quadrilateral observable in John

39. See Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces*, 6: “Since the same rule of Christ can be experienced in assemblies of churches together, there is also the basis here for Baptist associational life, and indeed for participating in ecumenical clusters.”

Wesley. Scripture functions as the supreme source of authority in a larger pattern of authorities for moral discernment.

What is the importance of tradition in moral discernment? Several early Baptist confessions reference tradition in the form of the ancient ecumenical creeds and echo it in the form of doctrinal formulations of patristic rather than biblical origins. All sorts of tradition inform Baptist readings of scripture in often unacknowledged ways. Yet Baptists regard expressions of tradition as provisional – tradition is provisional as a fallible interpretation and application of scripture, and tradition is provisional in relation to new light that the Spirit may lead the community to discern in scripture and its connections with the contemporary world.

What are the other “key” sources for moral discernment? The sources upon which Baptists draw for moral discernment are not only “theological” – a category that includes scripture as the normative authority but also other sources in a pattern of theological authority that are normed by scripture, namely tradition and the reason and experience of the community that are brought to bear on the interpretation of scripture and the critical retrieval of tradition – but also “ecclesial” in the form of the local church community that gathers together to seek the Spirit’s leadership in discerning what the mind of Christ is for bringing their life together and their engagement of the world under the rule of Christ (this category also receives treatment below under “Structure”). In the ideal practice of “ecclesial” authority by Baptist churches, the theologically educated Baptist pastor would enable the congregation to hear and weigh the full range of what *Moral Discernment in the Churches* designates as “faith sources” and “sapiential sources” from beyond the local congregation that are relevant to the church’s deliberations regarding what it means to live together under the rule of Christ in today’s world.

What hermeneutical method is used? In relation to the theological sources of authority, a *suprema scriptura* hermeneutic is employed, but with a stress on scripture’s un-normed normativity. In relation to the ecclesial sources of authority, a congregational hermeneutic is practised in which the congregation functions as a reading community, listening together both for the guidance of the Spirit in interpreting and performing scripture and to the voices of other members of the congregation – and ideally, also to voices beyond the local congregation in the whole church diachronically and synchronically extended.

What is understood by “tradition”? While tradition is not always named explicitly as such, Baptists do depend on the efforts of the church in the past to interpret and perform scripture in both unconscious and conscious ways. There is a tradition of the preached word and practised faith that informs how

Baptists read the Bible, and some Baptist confessions of faith have drawn from the language of the ancient ecumenical creeds and from theological concepts traceable to the patristic tradition even while appealing to the Bible as the normative authority for the faith they confess. But Baptists are reluctant to point to tradition in the form of fixed content because they do not want to close themselves to the possibility that the Spirit may lead them to “fresh light that may yet break forth from the Word,” in the words of 17th-century English separatist John Robinson.

Structure

Which terms would you use to describe your structure? In the congregational ecclesiology of the Baptist tradition, authority for moral discernment is located primarily in the gathered local congregation. A local congregation may belong to translocal associations of Baptist churches at the regional, national, and international levels, but these translocal associations do not exercise authority over local Baptist churches, although an association of churches also has the freedom to determine which local churches are members of the association and to determine the bases for such judgments.

How do you understand representation in your structures for moral discernment? When translocal associations of Baptist churches engage in moral discernment through adopting resolutions about moral issues or making decisions about whether a local church's stance on moral issues places it outside the criteria for associational fellowship, they do so as a representative body of delegates drawn from the membership of local churches that belong to the association. However, there is usually no distinction between clergy and lay representatives in the body of delegates that may vote on such resolutions or decisions.

What is the relationship in terms of authority between local, national, regional and worldwide structures for moral discernment? The congregational ecclesiology of Baptists means that when Baptist communities engage in moral discernment, whether at the level of the local church, national union or convention, regional fellowship, or the BWA (the Christian world communion to which Baptists relate), these expressions of Baptist community may reach widely varying decisions as to how they will address a specific moral issue. Baptist congregational governance also means that while Baptist and ecumenical translocal expressions of church also function as ecclesial communities that seek to bring their life together under the rule of Christ, and while these translocal expressions of church may adopt resolutions or implement policies that are expressions of their own communal efforts at moral discernment, these resolutions and policies are not binding on local Baptist churches or on intermediate structures.

Other

To what extent does local context affect the structures and processes for moral discernment? Because the primary structure for Baptist ecclesial moral discernment is the local congregation, this discernment is necessarily related first and foremost to the local context. Baptist congregational freedom to discern what it means to bring their life together under the rule of Christ in relationship to their local context means that in many cases local context will be a determining factor in the diversity of local church outcomes of moral discernment regarding particular issues.

What is distinct about your tradition's structures and processes for moral discernment that isn't captured by the questions above? The freedom that local Baptist churches have to incorporate ecclesial gifts from other traditions into their own patterns of faith and practice through engaging in "receptive ecumenism" means that they are also free to take into account ecclesial voices from beyond the Baptist tradition when they engage in ecclesial moral discernment.

Is your tradition mainly doing moral discernment in one cultural context, in a national context, or worldwide? Baptists engage in moral discernment at all these levels, in relation to local and national contexts, but also inter-contextually in the international fellowship of the BWA.

12. The Role of Authority in Moral Discernment

Morag Logan

The intention of this chapter is to explore moral discernment within the Methodist churches, with a focus on the role of authority. For this paper, I am attempting to keep the focus on Methodist understandings of authority and moral discernment in general, rather than considering what (and how) Methodists have discerned regarding individual issues. Within Methodism, however, this sort of separation causes some particular difficulties, arising from the character of Methodism in its inception. The Methodist churches, as I shall explore more fully, started as a movement focused on holy life and living in an intensely pragmatic way, with little systematization or reflection on structures or authority outside of the context of particular issues.

Within this concentration on authority and moral discernment, I am taking up two main foci for this discussion. One relates to *what* is regarded as authoritative within Methodism, the second relates to *who speaks* with authority. The “what is authoritative” question involves a discussion of the nature or process of theological discernment within Methodism, concentrating on what is distinctive in the process. The “who” question involves a discussion of the structures of Methodist churches and, within this, where authority lies – that is, in what persons or groups of people. Both the “what” and the “who” questions have their complexities.

Methodists make up one of the world families of churches, with the worldwide Methodist community of churches present in more than 130 countries around the world. Methodism originated in the 1730s in England. While Methodism does not have a single founder, John Wesley is recognized as the principal early leader of the movement. Although initially an English movement, Methodism arose in the context of the period of evangelical revival in the 18th century in many parts of the world, with particular links between Methodism and various European religious movements and revivals (e.g., Pietism).

Originally, Methodism was a movement within the Anglican Church with the intention of the renewal of the church; in the earliest period, there was

no intention of forming a separate church. The earliest organizational developments within Methodism seemed to be pragmatic, and aimed to manage a growing movement in particular situations rather than to systematically establish a new church. This pragmatic, rather than systematic, nature of Methodist organizational development is also reflected in John Wesley's theological thinking and reflection. Wesley was a priest, preacher, leader, and organizer of the people called Methodists; he was not a systematic theologian.

Processes of Theological Reflection

Within Methodism, matters of moral discernment are difficult to separate from theological reflection itself. As Hauerwas argues,¹ there is no strong distinction between theology and ethics; what seems to be theological reflection is ethical thinking within Methodism.

This is an understanding Hauerwas sees suggested by Langford, who observes that for Wesley, "theology is never an end in itself, but should serve the interests of transformed living." Theology is primarily to be "preached, sung and lived." Wesleyan theology is, therefore, not abstract speculation but closely related to practical life and ministry, and ethical reflection is never far away.² In Hauerwas' words,

Methodist theological ethics brings those two modes of discourse – "theology" and "ethics" – into such a close identity that one cannot be decisively distinguished from the other. To understand and embody the good, we must know God. Ethics cannot be known or done well without theology. Theology cannot be done or known well without its performance in everyday life.³

The result of this difficulty in separating theology and ethics in Wesleyan understanding is that Methodist thought has not developed accounts of natural law, for example, that would be able explain ethics outside of specific theological doctrines. Methodist ethical thinking does not have a form of ethical thought or a morality based on reason alone. It is essentially scripturally and theologically based – based on the love of God and neighbour, based in understanding of law and the beatitudes. Hence, this discussion of what is authoritative within

1. Stanley Hauerwas, "Theological Ethics," in *The Oxford Handbook of Methodist Studies*, ed. James E. Kirby and William J. Abraham (Oxford University Press, 2009), chap. 37, 553ff.

2. Thomas Langford, *Practical Divinity: Theology in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1983).

3. Hauerwas, "Theological Ethics," 553.

Methodist moral discernment is, broadly speaking, also descriptive of what is authoritative in Methodist theological thinking.

Arising as a movement within Anglicanism, Methodism shares many features with Anglicanism. Through this connection, Methodism inherits many features from the broad stream of the reformed tradition. In particular, Methodism shares with Anglicanism and the reformed tradition the perspectives of *sola scriptura*, a particular understanding of the significance of tradition; and with Anglicanism it shares a particular understanding of the importance of reason. In addition to these three, however, Wesley also recognized the significance of human experience, particularly Christian religious experience in theological discernment. This addition of experience – added to the inherited elements of scripture, tradition, and reason – gave rise to the “Methodist quadrilateral”

The Methodist Quadrilateral

The Methodist or Wesleyan quadrilateral is a shorthand summary of Wesley’s understanding of religious authority, with the four elements of scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. The term “quadrilateral” does not date to Wesley, but was coined by Albert Outler in the 1960s. Outler was an American Methodist, a Wesley scholar, and a systematic theologian. He was of great significance in systematizing Methodist theological thinking, which has tended to remain pragmatic and practically focused.

Outler explains the term “quadrilateral” as follows:

Wesley’s understanding lies within reformed perspective of *sola scriptura*. In Wesley’s thinking scripture is given a unique place, and level of primacy as a religious authority. Scripture, however, is illuminated by the collective Christian wisdom of the ages (tradition), and understood through the disciplines of critical reason. Always, however, biblical revelation must be received in the heart by faith, the requirement of “experience.”⁴

All four of these elements are complex and worth considerable expansion. Regarding the understanding and significance of the three concepts of *sola scriptura*, tradition, and reason, Methodism shares much in common with reformed and Anglican thinking. It is helpful, however, to elaborate on the concept of “experience” in the quadrilateral and in Wesley’s thinking, as this is the specific Methodist or Wesleyan contribution.

4. Albert Outler, “The Wesleyan Quadrilateral in John Wesley,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 20 (1985), 11.

The reception in the heart by faith, the “religion of the heart,” is the “experience” on which Wesley bases his thinking in the practice of this element of the quadrilateral. What is meant is a profoundly religious experience, amounting to a personal and heartfelt conviction. The basic character of such an experience is most famously captured by Wesley in his relating of the “Aldersgate experience.” Wesley reflects on this in his journal as follows:

In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther’s preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while the leader was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.

This experience is often described as a “conversion experience,” and asserted with some force, even though Wesley was already a priest. The concept of conversion here is describing not the process of initially becoming Christian but an ongoing and repeatable event, a stirring in the heart renewing conviction, increasing commitment and the existential significance of faith. This sort of converting experience, this inward conviction, is what Wesley originally meant by Christian experience and is what is meant by Outler in the formation of the quadrilateral. In Outler’s explanation,

Real Christians are called beyond “orthodoxy” to authentic experience – viz., the inner witness of the Holy Spirit that we are God’s beloved children, and joint heirs with Christ. It is this settled sense of personal assurance that is “heart religion”: the turning of our hearts from the form to the power of religion. Christian experience adds nothing to the substance of Christian truth; its distinctive role is to energize the heart so as to enable the believer to speak and do the truth in love.⁵

This understanding of Christian experience is not without risks and limitations. It carries the significant risk of becoming solely an inward and pious disposition, separated from the world. Essentially, this would move the place and significance of experience into a form of quietism, stressing only the internal experience and conviction of salvation, rendering action in the world largely irrelevant. This would be a profound misunderstanding of Wesley’s experience and thinking about experience.

5. *Ibid.*, 9.

Wesley's concept of Christian experience, internal conviction, and the warming of his heart is balanced by his understanding of Christian life, which he sees as based in concrete action and is profoundly social and communal in character. This is reflected in the "General Rules" (with their instruction to do all the good one can at all times), in the basic structure of the Methodist societies (through their communal examination of life and practice), and in the understanding John Wesley received from his father that Christianity is essentially a social religion. This does not mean an expressed concern for social justice, but rather reflects a clear understanding that one cannot be a Christian alone in an internal personal world. One can only be a Christian in relation with other Christians, in communal reflection and considered action.

The Methodist quadrilateral is of great significance within Methodist theological thinking, and so it is of great significance within Methodist ethical thinking. As Outler explains,

This complex method, with its fourfold reference, is a good deal more sophisticated than it appears, and could be more fruitful for contemporary theologizing than has yet been realized. It preserves the primacy of Scripture, it profits from the wisdom of tradition, it accepts the disciplines of critical reason, and its stress on the Christian experience of grace gives it existential force.⁶

The quadrilateral, however, has also gained a life of its own in Methodist thinking, with a variety of uses and understandings that were never intended. Outler himself was to come to regret coining the phrase at all, as he felt that it had come to be widely misconstrued and misused. These misconstruals and misuses relate to common understanding of each of the elements and of the relationships between them.

One example of how understanding of the individual elements has shifted can be seen in cases where those who apply the quadrilateral understand "experience" to mean general lived experience – perhaps individual life experience and the understandings it brings or as reflections on the experience of others, either known to us or foreign. Reflection on lived experience is clearly of importance in moral discernment today, and much more broadly than the Methodist tradition, as reflected in paragraph 45 in *Moral Discernment in the Churches: A Study Document*. This thinking on lived experience, however, has little to do with the original conception of the element of experience in Outler's understanding of the Methodist quadrilateral – and would probably fall into Outler's category of misuse of the quadrilateral.

6. Ibid., 10.

Another application of the quadrilateral seen by Outler – and others – as a misuse is a certain understanding of the relationship between the elements of scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. The quadrilateral is commonly taken to refer to four equal and largely independent sources of religious authority. In this view, these sources are equally weighted or variously come into play at different points. This can result in theological judgments that dismiss the voice of scripture, relying instead on other elements of the quadrilateral. This is perhaps common in current Methodist thinking and theological reasoning, but it is not original to Wesley, who had a clear *sola scriptura* focus and understanding of the primacy of scripture. The idea of independent elements was also not part of Outler's thinking when he coined the phrase.

Outler is not alone in concerns about the use of the quadrilateral; this question of the relationship of the four elements is a complex discussion. Some (e.g., Abraham) would argue that the pattern of usage, that is, the relative autonomy given to each element, is a source of confusion and that the quadrilateral should be dropped. Others (Gunter) would argue that the misuse of the concept should not necessitate it being scrapped, but that the primacy of scripture as the rule and authority should be restored, perhaps with a “unilateral *rule* of Scripture within a trilateral *hermeneutic* of reason, tradition and experience.”⁷ Still others seek to amend or modify the quadrilateral by adding other elements to the four. Luis De Souza, for example, argues for a “pentalateral,” including creation as a fifth element.

Despite these various critiques, the quadrilateral continues to be commonly used in Methodist thinking as a powerful expression of religious authority within churches that identify as Methodist. This gives us a clear expression of elements of theological reflection regarded as authoritative within Methodism.

Who Speaks with Authority? Structures and Ecclesiology of Methodism

Methodist structures and ecclesiology can be complex and are difficult to describe, arising as they have out of a deeply pragmatic movement. This movement was not initially intended to form a separate church, and saw very different paths of development in the two primary regions where Methodism was formed. Some distinctive structures within the Methodist movement, however,

7. William J. Abraham, *Waking from Doctrinal Amnesia: The Healing of Doctrine in the United Methodist Church* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1995), 69; W. Stephen Gunter, “The Quadrilateral and the ‘Middle Way’,” in *Wesley and the Quadrilateral: Renewing the Conversation*, ed. W. Stephen Gunter, Scott J. Jones, Ted A. Campbell, Rebekah L. Miles, Randy L. Maddox (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1997).

led to distinctive patterns and character of moral discernment. Methodist ecclesiology is based on the foundations of the original societies, particularly on circuits for preachers with an understanding of itineracy; on the concepts of connections and connectionalism and the conferences that arose from these concepts; and on differing understandings of episcopal structures, all with distinctive contributions.

Societies

The earliest structures within Methodism were societies, occasionally mockingly called “holy clubs,” in the universities. John Wesley and Charles Wesley, who were both Anglican priests, were part of one such society in Oxford. The societies, which were often ecumenical, were seen as supplementing and supporting a dedicated Christian life – they were an exercise and aid to the practise of holiness, supplementing and not replacing religious observance within the Anglican Church.

These foundational societies were instrumental in setting the early character of Methodism and the place and significance of ethical reflection and moral discernment within Methodism. The Methodist societies were governed by the three general rules: do all the good you can; avoid evil of every kind; and avail yourself of the means of grace (i.e., attend church, receive the sacraments, and study the scriptures). It was possible to visit a society only three times before a commitment of joining the group was required. Membership brought a commitment to an individual examination within the society every three months that tested adherence to the general rules. Reflection on “doing all the good you can” was therefore central to an individual’s ongoing membership in the society. Members were also expected to contribute to local and regional programmes, established through the connections that each local society had with other societies in the region. These programmes included a range of forms of assisting the poor, including educational institutions, medical clinics, and providing loans and funds and housing assistance.

Despite the seemingly legalistic, rule-based framework for the societies, the emphasis of the societies was not on the application of rules themselves, and the practice of examinations did not focus on an overly disciplinary approach, seeking to find reasons to expel members. Rather, the examinations focused on mutual encouragement with a deep conversational style. This foundation in societies and conversational style is the basis of Wesley’s concept of Christianity as a social religion. In Wesley’s understanding, one cannot be a Christian alone.

The significance of the general rules have now largely been lost in Methodism. They remain part of the constitutional documents of a number of

Methodist churches, but are little known or have little force within the churches that make up Methodism. The basis of the whole movement in “societies” has also been lost, as the Methodist movement became separate and independent churches developed ecclesiology and congregational structures. Nonetheless, the social basis was constitutive of the Methodist movement and of what is quite distinctive about Methodism itself – where ethics and personal reflection are at the heart of the individual’s religious or holy life. Similarly, the idea that religion has an essential active element was critical to the understandings of the societies, with their basis in the three general rules. Other understandings, such as the mutual accountability at the core of the societies’ life and the increased pattern of lay leadership (with the quite striking leadership roles exercised by women) were also critical aspects of the societal basis of Methodism. These continue to affect the nature of Methodism today, including the distinctiveness of Methodist moral discernment and practice.

Conferences and Bishops

The Methodist movement spread to America in the 1730s, and both John and Charles Wesley travelled to the colonies at this time, especially to Georgia in 1737–38. This missionary visit was not regarded as successful by the Wesleys, and neither of the Wesley brothers ever returned to America. Methodism, however, continued in the then colonies, finding its home particularly in communities founded by European settlers from a Pietist background.

Methodism’s continued presence and indeed flourishing in America brought about one of the key points in the processes that led to the Methodist movement being a separate church. This moment also marks the creation of one of the major divides within Methodism in terms of ecclesial structures.

Following the American war of independence, the church in America was left in a devastated state. Many Anglican churches were destroyed or badly damaged in the war, and the Anglican clergy had been withdrawn. This left the Methodists groups and societies in America without access to sacramental ministry. Up to this point, John Wesley had not ordained any of the English Methodist lay preachers, refusing requests to do so. However, the need of the Methodists in America was such that he was compelled to act, and he set apart (essentially ordained) Francis Asbury and Thomas Coke as “general superintendents” for America.

This was a controversial and divisive action within Methodism at the time, as in doing this John was acting against the advice of Charles Wesley and others in the English Methodist conference. It was an action that caused a lasting rift in British Methodism. Although John Wesley did not approve of the American

use of the term “bishop,” the Methodist Episcopal Church in America adopted the term in 1787 on the basis that “bishop” was more clearly of scriptural origin than the word “superintendent.” It is clear that Wesley’s action in this “setting apart” of Asbury and Coke is in keeping with the threefold orders of ministry: deacon, priest, and bishop. This ordination was key both in the establishment of a new church in America and in its ecclesial structure. In this step, American Methodism became an independent and episcopal Church.

British Methodism’s separation from the Anglican church was much slower than American Methodism, and it followed a different path, resulting in a lasting difference in ecclesiology. British Methodists did not ordain ministers until 1836 (ordaining by laying on of hands) and it has never adopted the office of superintendent or bishop. The British Methodist Church, in various forms, understands the *episkopé* function to be a communal and collegial one, resting within the conference, the preaching circuits, and the congregations.

Place of Conferences

The concept of the Methodist conferences arose within Methodism as one part of the practice of “connectionalism,” another element foundational to Methodism and to Wesley’s thinking. The Methodist movement, and the early forms of the church, was not based primarily in its congregational forms nor in the individual persons of the preachers. Instead, it was founded in the connections formed between groups of preachers with each other, and originally with Wesley himself in Britain and primarily with Asbury in America. One critical part of this connection was forged by gathering in conference together, in more local regions in quarterly conferences, and more broadly in annual conferences.

Connectionalism is a complex structure with many complex meanings within Methodism. It emerges out of a strong social understanding, out of a commitment to each other by the preachers, out of the strength of mutual support and encouragement, and out of the understanding of discipline. The concept of connectionalism within Methodism developed in the conference structure, changing radically as it developed. Yet it nonetheless retained some of the original understandings and character of connectionalism, especially the significance of the conference in the strength of mutual support and encouragement, and the continuance of the style of deep conversation so significant in the early societies. From this basis of connectionalism, and the encouraging and conversational nature of the exchanges, it can be hard for outsiders of the tradition to clearly see the role of authority. This is also confused by the pragmatic nature and development of Methodist structures and the regional differences.

What developed within Methodism was the establishment in stages of a governing conference, with lay and ordained participation, that was understood to be a representational body. In essence, this body had the ability to decide with authority on all matters – including, but not limited to, most matters of moral discernment. This was a slow process, with many elements at play in the development. It does not seem to have been the subject of systematic theological reflection or development at any clear point in time or within any structure of Methodism. The end result of this slow development is that conferences within Methodism clearly have the authoritative voice and decision-making power for the church.

In its early stages, the Methodism movement and the concept of connectionalism was very different from the present-day practice and had a strong central and personal authority. Initially, this central authority resided in John Wesley, which lasted up to his death in England. However, in the American Methodist Church following the ordination of Asbury as superintendent/bishop, the connection with Wesley was broken, with Asbury taking on a clear personal authority. Asbury presided as bishop at conferences; he appointed, ordained, placed and disciplined preachers, consecrated bishops, and exercised oversight over the spiritual and temporal business of the conference. In England, Wesley exercised a similar role – with the exceptions that preachers were appointed and recognized instead of ordained and that the British Methodist movement had a non-episcopal structure.

This strong and authoritative role of the conference presider or bishop eroded over time, starting almost immediately after the deaths of Wesley and Asbury. While both Wesley and Asbury had presided over many conferences, this pattern changed, with few bishops or conference presidents presiding over multiple conferences. Within non-episcopal Methodism, the pattern that emerged was of a leader elected to preside only over one conference. Within the Methodist Episcopal Church, the practice of electing bishops has meant that it is rare for a bishop to preside over conferences. Conferences are less frequent; and bishops are elected to the role close to their retirement age, with few conferences ahead of them in their active ministry.

Conferences originally were an extension of the conversational form of exchange, basic to the societies. This was reflected in early conferences through the question and answer form of minuting the meeting, with the answers – both definitive and authoritative – coming from the conference presider. Over time, this also changed to the current practice where motions are debated and then voted on. An exception to this can be seen in recent moves within some Methodist or Methodist-related churches toward a consensus style of decision-making. This results in a reduced role and authority for the presider of the conference.

Originally, the conference was attended only by the preacher in connection. In America, this meant that only ordained people attended, with little role for the laity; and in England, this meant that only leadership attended. This practice has also changed across the world, reflecting the ongoing significance of lay leadership within Methodism. Conferences now have lay and ordained members participating in conferences as delegates.

With the erosion of the strong and authoritative leadership of the presider at conference, common Methodist understanding is that it is the conference itself that legislates, governs, directs, and disciplines the church. The conference thus speaks authoritatively on the church's behalf on all matters, including questions of moral discernment.

Nature of Methodist Episcopate

From the beginning of an episcopate in America, it was clear that the ultimate power and authority in American Methodism lay in the body of preachers – that is, in the then conference. This was obviously part of Asbury's understanding, as he refused to receive Wesley's ordination from Coke without first being elected to the office by the preachers. So the authoritative role exercised by Asbury as bishop was tempered by the understanding of the electing power of the conference.

The power of the conference over the bishops in the United Methodist tradition is limited only by the restrictive rules established by the third general conference, in 1808. These rules restrict the conference from any action that would remove the episcopate or destroy the established pattern.

The restrictive rules did not prevent the conference from exercising authority – and discipline – over bishops on matters of moral discernment. This was tested in 1844 over a moral question related to slavery. A bishop, James Andrew, had come into possession of slaves after his election to the episcopacy, and the United Methodist Church was opposed to slavery on ethical grounds. The conference decided to remove Andrew from the episcopate as long as he continued to own slaves. This decision was based on the thinking that because the conference elected individual bishops, it could remove them for the good of the church. This is a theory that has remained and has informed Methodist ideas of episcopacy ever since.

The bishops within the United Methodist Church do sit as bishops in council. While this council includes active and retired bishops, it is clear that it cannot speak for the church and so has no truly authoritative voice on questions requiring moral discernment. The voice of the council is limited to addressing the church through pastoral letters or position papers. The council has issued

both on various topics, including questions requiring moral discernment. Their voices, however, have no particular weight or authority beyond their ability to convince the conference.

Conclusion

In summary, in answer to the question of what Methodists find to be authoritative in moral discernment, Methodist thinking is primarily based on the Methodist quadrilateral, as expressed by Outler, of scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. However, within Methodism there are significant variations in the understanding of each of these elements and of their relationship to each other.

In considering the question of who speaks authoritatively on behalf of the Methodist churches, the primary answer is that it is the conference that speaks with this voice. This carries a number of complications given the distinctive style of Methodist conferences: the relatively rare meeting framework, the processes of decision-making, the wide representation and potential for factionalism, and the limited role accorded to bishops in the episcopal parts of world Methodism.

13. Disciples of Christ: Renewal, Unity, and Social Witness

Kristine A. Culp

A Brief Historical Overview of the Disciples of Christ

The Disciples of Christ emerged as a movement for reform of the church, biblical renewal, and Christian unity in the early 19th century and within the first few decades of the birth of the USA as a nation. It was formed from diverse protests against rigid denominationalism and efforts to bring renewal. Its founders included Barton W. Stone, who sought revival and objected to the use of creeds as a “test” of fellowship and as a source of disunity, and three immigrants from Scotland and Ireland, Thomas and Alexander Campbell, and Walter Scott. The Campbells, father and son, protested dogmatic sectarianism that kept Christians from observing the Lord’s supper together; Scott shaped the Campbell movement as followers separated from the Baptists. The movement they helped to create believed that the work of the Spirit in the church, together with a clear sense of scripture and devotion to Christ, could renew human life and help overcome tragic divisions in Christianity.¹

From the outset, the movement included enslaved and formerly enslaved African Americans, though it typically followed the segregated organizational patterns of 19th-century America. As the movement coalesced and matured, it continued to attract people from European immigrant roots who were settling throughout the southern, midwestern, and western United States and, in the 20th century, other immigrant groups, especially Hispanic/Latinx groups, Pacific Island/Asian-Americans, and Haitian-Americans. The movement emerged as a major Protestant presence in the United States at the turn of the 20th century but resisted calling itself a denomination, in part because its hope was to bring unity, not to create division. It developed outreach, missions, and partnerships that were global in reach; among these are Disciples of Christ

1. For another brief account, see “History of the Disciples,” website of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the United States and Canada, 2020, <https://disciples.org/our-identity/history-of-the-disciples>.

in Argentina, Paraguay, Mexico, Australia, New Zealand, both Congos, and Puerto Rico; Christians of Disciples heritage who are now integral constituents of United Churches (e.g., in Jamaica, the Philippines, India, and Japan or the United Reformed Church in the United Kingdom); and many ecumenical partnerships. Its full communion with the United Church of Christ is particularly noteworthy, with the two North American communions sharing a Common Board of Global Ministries, many clergy holding dual standing, and some local congregations holding dual affiliation. A full communion agreement with the United Church of Canada was celebrated in 2019, furthering an already effective partnership.

After the turn of the 20th century, the movement itself would eventually – and ironically – divide into the Church of Christ and the Christian Church, with the latter dividing again into the Christian Churches / Church of Christ and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). These three “streams” retain various connections, and are often referred to collectively as the Stone-Campbell Movement.

The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), seeking in part to better organize itself for participation in ecumenical organizations and conversations, constituted itself as a church in 1968 by adopting a document called *The Design of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)* (hereafter, *The Design*).² An identity statement expresses the importance of unity and the centrality of gathering at the Lord’s Table: “We are Disciples of Christ, a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world. As part of the one body of Christ, we welcome all to the Lord’s Table as God has welcomed us.” The identity statement is often accompanied by a vision statement: “To be a faithful, growing church, that demonstrates true community, deep Christian spirituality and a passion for justice (Micah 6:8).” These statements together suggest an orienting vision of the Disciples of Christ more as a movement or a way of life than as a structure. They also point to the conviction of the inseparability of practices of worship, welcome, spirituality, and justice in shared response to God’s grace in Christ.

Moral Discernment: Sources, Structures, Context

For the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and Disciples around the world, practical theological-moral reflection or discernment is situated in shared life and worship and in ongoing response to God in Christ and the world. Moral

2. *The Design of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)*, as revised by the 2017 General Assembly of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), <https://disciples.org/our-identity/the-design>.

discernment and witness are understood to be integral expressions of a pragmatic, reasonable, and experientially and biblically rooted faith. Disciples hold diverse positions on moral matters and give moral witness in diverse ways, but their stances are informed by shared sources and common practices. Those moral stances have coalesced and continue to coalesce in decisive ways. In fact, the Disciples' originating passion for unity should be understood as a moral stance against division and divisiveness and a moral conviction of the unity of Christianity. The current self-understanding of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the United States and Canada as an "anti-racist, pro-reconciling church" follows suit.

Disciples' witness and practice on specific moral matters are joined by consent and in covenant and fellowship rather than determined by specific moral or theological precepts or acceptance of magisterial teaching. Authority flows from consent of the members and among ministries rather than legislatively, dogmatically, or hierarchically.

Sources for Moral Discernment

The Use of Scripture

Disciples have prized freedom of conscience and valued common sense in interpreting the Bible and the Christian life. Disciples have sought to think as hard as they can, as honestly as they can, and as openly as they can in the quest to understand God's message in Jesus Christ as interpreted in the Bible and in the church – and to express that quest in renewed lives, church, and society.³

They privilege scripture over tradition as a source of authority in the Christian life, including in moral discernment. In fact, Disciples have often said "scripture alone" – while perhaps not being fully cognizant that they were following tradition in making that affirmation and that they were relying on common sense and reason as arbiters of the plain sense of scripture.

The principle of *sola scriptura* was paired with a Christocentric principle of interpretation in the memorable phrases of the movement's founders: "No creed but Christ. No book but the Bible." And, "Where the Scriptures speak, we speak; where the Scriptures are silent, we are silent." A theological construal of scripture (often, implicitly, a theological construal of scripture encountered and lived as "the Gospel"), with attendant hermeneutical approaches, including a Christological key and sense that the Holy Spirit through scripture

3. My discussion is indebted to M. Eugene Boring, "How Disciples Interpret the Bible," unpublished paper written for the Stone-Campbell Dialogue, Skillman Street Church of Christ, Dallas, Texas, 6 June 2005, and to Robert Welsh for sharing the paper with me.

continues to enliven and address present communities, is implied in even these simple affirmations. However, there is no single theology of scripture or biblical hermeneutic.

In matters of church order, faith, and moral teaching, Disciples of Christ have distinguished between essentials and non-essentials, typically relying on scripture for that distinction.

Whenever collective decisions are made, we carefully distinguish between those truly *essential* matters which the Gospel obliges (or forbids) us to affirm and those *non-essentials* on which wide diversity of thought and practice is embraced within the life of our church. This wording calls to mind a maxim that Disciples long ago incorporated into our heritage: “In essentials unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity.”⁴

Hermeneutical Method

Disciples are enlivened by a sense that God continues to address human individuals and societies in a life-giving way through the Bible, in the witness to Jesus as the Christ and particularly in preaching and observance of the Lord’s supper, and in the faith and life of congregations. They assume there is no access to the Bible without interpretation, that interpretation is ongoing and fresh, and that it involves reasoning, freedom of conscience, and the work of the Holy Spirit in community.

While there is no single hermeneutical method used for moral discernment, there are common characteristics of Disciples of Christ approaches. Arguably, the distinction between essentials and non-essentials, especially as it contributes to a correlative notion that practices and structures can nevertheless be “expedient” (pragmatic) even if “non-essential,” offers one guiding hermeneutic. (Many lay Disciples would recognize the principle if not the historic terms.) The closely correlated principle of freedom and charity is perhaps even more crucial for Disciples of Christ theological and moral discernment. Another characteristic hermeneutic is eschatological: the kingdom or reign of God features as an orienting horizon of justice and righteousness throughout the thought and practice of the Disciples of Christ, and lends a future-oriented character to Disciples’ interpretation and discernment.

4. Paul A. Crow, Jr., and James O. Duke, eds, *The Church for Disciples of Christ: Seeking to Be Truly Church Today*, (St Louis, Mo.: Chalice Press, 1998), 46.

Experience and Reason as Sources

Disciples have a lively sense of the movement and presence of the Holy Spirit in shared faith, life, order, and work, and this informs moral discernment and witness. That sense, combined with the eschatological tenor noted above, also results in an important role for experience and a pragmatic use of reason.

Disciples have a pragmatic, common-sensical approach to deliberation and discernment.⁵ This approach is reflected in a commitment to reasoning as a common human capacity that can promote tolerance, connect dimensions of life, and build bridges among people. It is also seen in a pragmatic bent of mind that insists that moral discernment promotes communion with God and the well-being of others. It shapes a disposition for unity, that is, to cooperate with, be guided by, and find common cause with other persons of faith and communions. It coordinates with a view of Christian faith and practice as a way of life to be followed rather than as a series of propositions or characteristics to possess. It is also evident in a reliance on and respect for conscience, individual and social, as a source and arbiter of moral judgment.

There is a connection between this pragmatic bent and the eschatological reference to the reign of God as an orienting horizon of justice and righteousness. At its best, Disciples hold themselves accountable not only to what has been but to what might emerge – to the unity, charity, and justice that might yet become manifest in response to God, others, and the world and made possible by structures, action, and witness.

The Use of Tradition

Disciples tend to view post-New Testament tradition and formulations to be of secondary rather than primary significance for Christian faith and practice – which is not to suggest a lack of significance. The appeal to the scripture principle has principally been in the service of the renewal of apostolic Christianity's faith, order, life, and work.

Explicit appeals to the authority of "Tradition" are relatively rare in Disciples' moral discernment. There are no bodies of teaching equivalent to, say, Catholic social teaching or Methodist social principles. Not difficult to find, however, are implicit appeals to tradition construed as biblical tradition, appeals to Christian tradition broadly construed, and appeals to tradition in the pattern of Christian life – particularly of corporate prayer, "outreach," and social witness, and practices of welcoming the stranger and gathering at the Lord's table, and so forth. In moral discernment and witness, these sorts of appeals

5. The classic statement is W. B. Blakemore, "Reasonable, Empirical, Pragmatic: The Mind of Disciples of Christ," in *The Renewal of Church: The Panel of Scholars Reports*, ed. W. B. Blakemore, vol. 1, *The Reformation of Tradition*, ed. Ronald E. Osborne (St Louis, Mo.: Bethany Press, 1963), 161–83.

would be to, say, justice and mercy in the prophetic tradition, or to love of neighbour and welcome to the stranger, or to ground practices of advocacy for structural change and against systemic injustice as basic aspects of ministry and the Christian community. In addition, what might be called ecumenical tradition instructs and invites Disciples' participation in ecumenical initiatives for justice and human dignity.⁶

Structures for Moral Discernment and Witness

In these remaining sections, I turn from sources and practices that might be recognizable in much of the Stone-Campbell tradition and throughout global communions that are part of the Disciples of Christ to focus on the current structures of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the United States and Canada.

A Mixed Polity That Remains Open to Revision and Renewal

The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the United States and Canada has a mixed, covenantal polity that is influenced by Anabaptist and Reformed roots and also by the context of American democratic experiments and participatory representative government. Its structure is elaborated in *The Design*, noted above. Authority is rooted both in congregations and in covenantal structures of regional and general ministries that bind congregations together in common mission.⁷ All three – local congregations, regions, and general ministries – are understood as “manifestations” or “expressions” of church in their own right rather than as “levels” of ascending or descending authority. A delegate assembly draws together all three manifestations, thus allowing the Disciples to pursue visible unity and other shared ecumenical mission, to make structural adaptations, and to advance common mission, including moral discernment. A general board makes decisions and gives oversight between the biennial assemblies. The general minister / president is empowered to speak to and on behalf of the church.

Global mission and witness are shared with the United Church of Christ (through a common board and personnel) and in covenant with international partner churches, many of which share roots in and are shaped by the

6. See William Tabbernee, “Theology and Tradition,” in *Chalice Introduction to Disciples Theology*, ed. Peter Goodwin Heltzel (St Louis, Mo.: Chalice Press, 2008), 45–53. On “ecumenical tradition,” Tabbernee refers to Max Thurian, ed., *Churches Respond to BEM*, 6 vols. (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1986–1988), 1:4.

7. There are currently 31 regions, which are defined geographically. General ministries are bi-national: the United States and Canada.

Stone-Campbell movement. In local, regional, general, and global contexts, ecumenism is prized, and ecumenical (and increasingly) interfaith cooperation are sought; indeed, to be committed to ecumenical relationships can be said to be an essential part of who the Disciples of Christ are and how they structure shared life. The work of the Disciples' advocacy and relief fund, Week of Compassion, is notable for its partnerships with national and global ecumenical and interfaith organizations to alleviate suffering and to build sustainable and just communities.

The Design itself points to a kind of experimental pragmatism in which "expedient" structures and modes of relating diverse manifestations of church are embodied, elaborated, and tested. Theologically speaking, this vision of church is not so much an ideality but rather a reality that is lived, enacted, shared, and always changing, even prone to renewal. This reality is almost always also ambiguous, often confounding, and liable to disorder – as implied by the drumbeat of concern about keeping covenant that is sounded throughout *The Design*. Whether motivated by the hope of renewed structures or by strains of mistrust and betrayal, this document elaborates a plan and procedures for the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) without claiming that they are changeless expressions of true Christianity.⁸ *The Design* places the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in a profound continuity of life, work, and mission with the universal Church through the ages, on the one hand, while describing its reality in multiple manifestations and in relation to the ongoing need for renewing change on the other.

Representation

Broad participation and balanced representation of laity, clergy, and congregations are provided for in structures of decision-making and discernment. All clergy are members of local congregations and also have a vote in their region's assembly and in the general assembly. Every congregation has lay representation in regional and general assemblies. Commitment to covenantal relations, broad participation, broad consensus, and the integrity of congregations inform shared decisions, discernment, and mission. In addition, regional and general governance structures endeavour for balanced representation also of diverse geographical areas, ages, genders, and race/ethnicities.

8. *The Design's* empirical, experimental approach replaces both Restorationist tendencies that pervade the early Stone-Campbell movement and liberal theologies' reliance on an essence of the church.

Authority for Moral Discernment

This 1998 statement still provides a good summary of authorizing structures:

To speak of the collective theological decisions of the church [including moral discernment and moral witness] is not to speak of any one individual or group legislating and then trying to enforce a uniform understanding of the meaning of faith [or of the Christian life] throughout the church. It is to say, instead, that the church as a whole is responsible for providing means, through its structure, for making collective theological decisions about the teachings and practices of our church. Our covenant conception of church requires that in devising these means we acknowledge that congregations, regions, and general [ministries] function as inseparable, interdependent, and complementary parts of the one body.⁹

The voice of the individual conscience – as shaped by study of the Bible, tradition, practical reason and wisdom, and the work of the Holy Spirit in community – is prized and safeguarded. Congregations, regions, and general ministries also discern corporately, shape shared conscience, and speak through their representative assemblies and leaders. A 1995 general assembly resolution, “Our Common Social Witness,” which was reaffirmed in 2015, explained that Disciples “are called upon to speak clearly about God’s justice and to live into God’s promised hope, and to do this in all of our manifestations: congregational, regional, and general.” The offices of the general minister and president and of domestic and overseas ministries are “the primary voices of the social conscience of the general manifestation of the church regarding advocacy for the oppressed, working for peace and justice at home and around the world, and effectively providing avenues for the witness of the whole church.”¹⁰

“Sense of the Assembly” resolutions allow each biennial general assembly to speak to all Disciples and to the wider faith community and world on pressing moral, theological, social, and political matters.¹¹ These resolutions are not understood to be binding on individual members and congregations but to be

9. Commission on Theology, *The Church for Disciples of Christ*, 46.

10. “Church Wide Task Force on the Sense of the Assembly Resolution Process,” 2015 General Assembly, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the United States and Canada, website, 29 April 2015, <http://ga.disciples.org/resolutions/2015/1524-call-for-a-church-wide-task-force-on-the-sense-of-the-assembly-resolution-process>.

11. For example, resolutions at the 2015 General Assembly addressed the Black Lives Matter movement, environmental racism, solitary confinement, Armenian genocide, reunification of the Korean peninsula, welcome and support for persons with mental health issues, and more.

statements of that particular assembly. At its best, the resolution process fosters educative and interpretive processes that serve to promote dialogue, discernment, and action within congregations and across the church and thereby to enable a more lasting and comprehensive response.

But there have been continued concerns about how well the moral discernment and social witness of the Disciples is served by the resolution process, for example, whether in fact resources and opportunities for meaningful dialogue are provided. In addition, “the exact status and purpose of Sense of the Assembly resolutions are often misunderstood by the media and by our own members to be official doctrine, stances, or statements.” Moreover, “this misunderstanding can cause unnecessary confusion and dissension among and within our congregations.”¹² In the mid-1990s, a more robust “discernment process” was introduced alongside the resolution process that allowed for shared study and action on selected issues, including biblical authority, racism, and “the participation of gay and lesbian persons in the life of the church” (as it was then less than satisfactorily phrased). The specified process of discernment was not intended to culminate in a vote on a specific policy or action, but instead to invite spiritual disciplines, study, prayer, dialogue, greater understanding, and response.

Contexts of Moral Discernment

The emphasis on congregations and the relative independence they have for shaping their life and programmes gives rise to varied practices, forms, and characteristics of moral discernment. Moral discernment is shaped by worship, fellowship, Bible studies, religious education, etc., in local congregations and also in outreach to their local communities (e.g., in response and relief to disasters, involvement in ecumenical and interfaith food pantries, homeless shelters, advocacy for fair housing, antiracism, and pro-reconciliation work).

Of course, individual members of congregations also bring diverse perspectives and involvement to moral matters. This diversity, together with respect for freedom of conscience, often results in real tensions and conflicts around moral and theological matters – both within a congregation and also between congregations and between congregation and other expressions of the church. Those tensions can be productive or divisive; the challenge is to not avoid or to “manage” conflicts but rather to find ways that allow for productive disagreement within the congregations and within the broader church, including in processes of moral discernment.

12. “Church Wide Task Force.”

Although the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) is a relatively small communion, its local congregations exemplify and are embedded in the full range of cultural, political, economic, geographic, racial, and ethnic diversity that can be found in the United States and Canada. Because of this diversity within North America, anti-racism and pro-reconciliation efforts, which are themselves processes of moral discernment, have particular salience. In addition, close ties with the Disciples in Puerto Rico, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and other global contexts, as well as close global ecumenical partnerships, resonate within and infuse the Christian Church in the United States and Canada. For example, the general assembly symbolically and substantively reflects the global nature of these partnerships and connections, and its formal resolution and moral discernment processes are extremely mindful of them.

14. Word, Spirit, and Discernment

Cecil M. Robeck, Jr.

Classical Pentecostal Bodies and the Role of Scripture

Moral discernment is an ongoing process within the Pentecostal Movement, and while important decisions on moral issues are made from time to time, there is remarkable, long-term consensus on most issues among them. When, for instance, the Pentecostal World Fellowship (PWF) representing over 60 trinitarian Pentecostal denominations around the world states, “We believe that the scriptures, both the Old and New Testaments, are verbally inspired of God and are the revelation of God to man, the infallible, authoritative rule of faith and conduct (2 Timothy 3:15-17; 2 Peter 1:21),” it can be said to speak for virtually all trinitarian classical Pentecostal churches worldwide – as many as 250 million people.

The PWF goes on to note, “We believe in the practical application of the Christian Faith in every day experience and in the need to minister to people in every area of life, which includes not only the spiritual, but also the social, political and physical.”¹ In this way, the PWF understands the Bible as providing the primary resource and the ultimate standard by which all moral decisions are to be made and governed, and it believes that what scripture says is intended to meet or minister to a wide range of human needs. When scripture calls us to live lives worthy of our calling (e.g. Eph. 4:1; Col. 1:10), that includes making moral decisions consistent with God’s revelation.

The World Assemblies of God Fellowship (WAGF), which is part of the PWF, includes over 69 million members and adherents worldwide. It views itself not as “a legislative organ to any national entity,” but as “a coalition of commitment for the furtherance of the Gospel to the ends of the world,” which works “to advance biblical, theological, and moral standards among the

1. These two statements are points 1 and 9 of the Statement of Faith of the Pentecostal World Fellowship, <https://www.pwfellowship.org/about-us>.

members.”² As such, the standards adopted by one group are very close to those adopted by all other member churches.

While each national church is autonomous, the general council of the Assemblies of God, with its headquarters in the United States, is the most influential of the World Assemblies of God bodies. It has over 3.2 million members and adherents, of which 53 percent are under the age of 35, and 43 percent are ethnic minorities.³ Its statement on scripture echoes the sentiments of the PWF statement. “The Scriptures, both the Old and New Testaments, are verbally inspired of God and are the revelation of God to man, the infallible, authoritative rule of faith and conduct.”⁴ Scripture is understood to be God’s revelation to humankind in written form, having ultimate authority over all moral questions.

A second branch of Pentecostalism, known as “Oneness” or “Apostolic” Pentecostalism embraces a modal understanding of God. The largest group is the United Pentecostal Church, but the Pentecostal Assemblies of the World is also substantial, and there are literally hundreds of smaller “Apostolic” denominations. Oneness Pentecostals take similar positions when it comes to the authority of scripture and moral discernment. They differ, however, in their rejection of most early church councils.⁵

While Pentecostals recognize that scripture was written in another time and in different contexts, they contend that God continues to speak by means of the Holy Spirit in a variety of ways.⁶ While the Holy Spirit is the one who inspired or breathed the scriptures (2 Tim. 3:16), it is not a book from which the Spirit of God is now absent. As was noted by the Pentecostal team in the International Reformed-Pentecostal Dialogue report in 2000: “Through the Holy Spirit, the Bible speaks the Word of God. The indispensable action of the Spirit makes the text into a living and life-giving testimony to Jesus Christ,

2. This statement appears in the description of “Fellowship” on the World AG Fellowship website, <http://worldagfellowship.org/fellowship/>

3. “Statistics: Statistics on the Assemblies of God (USA),” Assemblies of God website <http://ag.org/About/Statistics>.

4. See “Assemblies of God 16 Fundamental Truths,” on the Assemblies of God website, which sets forth the “Statement of Fundamental Truths” for the Assemblies of God, <http://ag.org/Beliefs/Statement-of-Fundamental-Truths>.

5. The best treatment of the Oneness Pentecostal Movement is David A. Reed, *“In Jesus’ Name”: The History and Beliefs of Oneness Pentecostals* (Blandford Forum: Deo Publishing), 2008.

6. Cecil M. Robeck, Jr., “A Response to David Adesanya,” in *Sources of Authority, vol 2: Contemporary Churches*, ed. Tamara Grdzeldze (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2014), 39-51.

transforming the lives of people, for Scripture is not a dead text.”⁷ Scripture calls the people of God to continue to listen as the Holy Spirit speaks through its words, and it calls them to act upon that which they hear, as the word of God comes to them, whether through reading, preaching, teaching, prophesying, or by any other means of communication.

Pentecostal Interpretive Methods and Expectations

Pentecostals recognize the need to interpret scripture within their own times and contexts, and they know that there are different ways of interpreting the text. Their typical hermeneutical method is not so narrow as to exclude other sources of authority such as reason, experience, conscience, science, culture, etc. from consideration, nor do they rely simply upon a literal interpretation. However, regardless of what other sources of authority may offer in the moral decision-making process, the final word on the subject belongs solely to scripture.

As Pentecostals discern what the Holy Spirit is saying through the living text of scripture, they also recognize that all interpretation must be done in humility. Even in places where a “magisterial interpretation” of scripture might be invoked, Pentecostals recognize that like the apostle Paul we still “see in a mirror, dimly” and we “know only in part” (1 Cor. 13:12). The best human interpretations still fall short of God’s intentions for humankind. Thus, all human interpretation must be done in humility.

At the same time, Pentecostals understand that scripture is not so full of riddles and dark sayings that ordinary people cannot understand it. It does not typically require sophisticated theological study to determine the mind or will of God revealed in scripture. Thus, the Assemblies of God contends that “Any level of formal academic achievement (diploma or degree) shall not be a requirement for [ministerial] credentials”⁸ because the Holy Spirit continues to speak through that Word, enabling those who have “ears to hear what the Holy Spirit is saying” (Rev. 2:29). In short, the Spirit and the word go together and

7. “Word and Spirit, Church and World: Final Report of the International Pentecostal-Reformed Dialogue 1996–2000,” in *Growth in Agreement III: International Texts and Agreed Statements, 1998–2005*, ed. Jeffrey Gros, Thomas F. Best, and Lorelei F. Fuchs (Geneva: WCC Publications / Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 482.

8. *Minutes of the 57th Session of the General Council of the Assemblies of God Convened in Anaheim, CA, August 7–11, 2017 with Revised Constitution and Bylaws* (Springfield, Mo.: Office of the General Secretary, 2015), 156. All subsequent references to the *Minutes*, *Constitution*, and *Bylaws* of the general council will be taken from this edition unless otherwise noted. See *Bylaws*, Article 7, Section 2, Point h.

the Holy Spirit makes plain what God intends to communicate through the written word.

Pentecostals are asked to read their Bibles prayerfully on a regular basis, and they are strongly encouraged to bring their Bibles when they attend church services so that they have both an aural and a visual experience of the word of God. These practices stem from 17th-century Pietism, but Pentecostals would argue that they are important in the discernment process in which the community of faith holds the person, who preaches from that word, accountable.⁹ These practices also provide protection against those who may adopt “private” or “individual” interpretations of a text. Scripture is not primarily a book written for individuals; it is a series of divinely inspired texts that belong to the whole church, just as discernment belongs to the entire church.

As in most other church families, there are those whom the churches recognize as leaders specially gifted in handling the biblical text. The Assemblies of God, for instance, notes that

A divinely called and scripturally ordained ministry has been provided by our Lord for the fourfold purpose of leading the Church in: (1) Evangelization of the world (Mark 16:15-20), (2) worship of God (John 4:23-24), (3) building a Body of saints being perfected in the image of His Son (Ephesians 4:11, 16), and (4) meeting human need with ministries of love and compassion (Psalms 112:9; Galatians 2:10, 6:10; James 1:27).¹⁰

What this suggests is that the interpretation and application of the biblical text lies first in the hands of those who are recognized as members of this “divinely called and scripturally ordained ministry.” The *Bylaws* regarding ministry spell out that

Christ’s gifts to the Church include apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers (Ephesians 4:11), exhorters, administrators, leaders, and helpers (Romans 12:7-8). We understand God’s call to these ministry gifts is totally within His sovereign discretion without regard to gender, race, disability, or national origin.

9. Philip Jacob Spener, *Pia Desideria*, ed. and trans. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia, Pa.: Fortress Press, 1964), 87–92.

10. *Constitution of the General Council of the Assemblies of God*, 125; Article 5, Section 11—The Ministry.

All ordained, licensed, and certified ministers holding current ministerial credentials are authorized to perform the ordinances and ceremonies (sacerdotal functions) of the church.¹¹

Through the years, Pentecostals have used several hermeneutical methods. In their earliest years, they often employed a literal method. Later, some Pentecostals argued for adopting the historical critical approach. The latter method, however, was not always helpful when addressing questions of Pentecostal identity. While most Pentecostal lay people might still be most comfortable with a literal method, Pentecostal biblical scholars now embrace a more meaningful post-critical, narrative approach to the Bible. Since Pentecostals practice a form of spirituality that values personal testimony or narrative, this approach takes seriously both the scholar and most members of the local congregation.¹² It supports a community approach to biblical interpretation. At the same time, Pentecostals reject more radical or revisionist conclusions such that Paul was “wrong” when he made certain statements, a position that would call into question the nature of biblical inspiration and the integrity of those who wrote the scriptures.

Institutional Structures for Discernment

The polities of Pentecostal churches vary widely. Older Pentecostal denominations such as the Church of God in Christ, the Church of God (Cleveland, Tennessee), and the Pentecostal Holiness Church have an episcopal structure for ministerial appointments. Their annual or biennial assemblies address issues of doctrine and ethics, where moral positions are adopted. In Scandinavia, Pentecostal churches emphasize the autonomy of the local congregation. The role of the national body is consultative and coordinating, rather than, strictly speaking, governing. Within each congregation, the board of elders is the governing body. The pastors and elders from all congregations within each Scandinavian country meet annually for prayer, Bible study, and doctrinal discussions. Doctrine and major recommendations regarding moral and ethical issues are set at these annual assemblies.

The Assemblies of God has a hybrid form of governance. At the local level, the Assemblies of God is congregational. Each congregation has the freedom

11. *Bylaws of the General Council of the Assemblies of God*, 155; Article 7—Ministry, Section 1—Ministry Described.

12. The best treatment on how Pentecostals approach Scripture is Kenneth J. Archer, *A Pentecostal Hermeneutic for the Twenty-First Century: Spirit, Scripture and Community* (JPT Supp. 28 (London, England: T&T Clark International, 2004), especially 154–91.

to call or suspend a pastor, elect its own board, purchase, lease, or sell its own property, and conduct other such business as is appropriate to the congregation. Its doctrinal and moral stands, however, are dictated by its affiliation with the national body, the general council. At the sectional, district, regional, and national levels, congregations relate to one another through elected presbyteries. The general council convened to conduct the business of the fellowship occurs on a biennial basis. Between these biennial councils, corporate officers and elected presbyters conduct the business of the fellowship.

In each general council, there is a General Presbytery. In the United States, it comprises about 290 presbyters. It recommends policy, sets salaries and allowances for executive officers, acts as a final court of appeal for disciplined ministers, reviews decisions of the Executive Presbytery, and the like.¹³ While it is viewed as a “policy-making body” and it may discuss both doctrinal and moral issues and make recommendations to the general council on such issues, its authority in these things is limited to recommendations.¹⁴

The Assemblies of God also has an Executive Presbytery, composed of 21 ordained ministers.¹⁵ This group functions as the board of directors for the Assemblies of God between general councils.¹⁶ While it is authorized to interpret policy and may make recommendations to the general council, once again, it has no authority to establish or change any doctrinal or moral position. The authority to adopt or change doctrine or make decisions on moral issues rests entirely with the voting constituency of the general council.¹⁷

As of 26 May 2017, the Assemblies of God in the United States had 13,017 congregations, and as of 1 January 2018, it had 20,733 ordained ministers and 11,196 licensed ministers for 44,933 credentialed individuals who were eligible to vote in a general council.¹⁸ In addition, each general council affiliated

13. *Constitution of the General Council of the Assemblies of God*, 127–28; Article 9—Officers and Presbyteries of the general council; Section 3—General Presbytery. Points a–h spell out the composition of the General Presbytery.

14. *Bylaws of the General Council of the Assemblies of God*, 145; Article 3—Duties of Officers, Presbyters, Executive Leadership Team; Section 8—Duties of the General Presbytery.

15. *Ibid.*, 143; Article 2—Election of Officers and Presbyters.

16. *Ibid.*, Article 2—Election of Officers and Presbyters, Section 7a Duties of the Executive Presbytery.

17. *Constitution of the General Council of the Assemblies of God*, 132; Article 13—Amendments.

18. *Ibid.*, 126; Article 7—Membership, Section 3 Voting Constituency. Section 3 reads as follows: “The voting constituency at a General Council shall consist of all members of The General Council of the Assemblies of God holding a current fellowship certificate who are present and registered and those delegates chosen by churches affiliated with The General Council of the Assemblies of God who are present and registered, each church being entitled to one delegate.”

church is allowed up to one lay delegate, as an official voting representative to any meeting of the general council.¹⁹ Only the voting constituency, present in the biennial general council, is eligible to make official decisions about changes in the constitution and bylaws, including all binding doctrinal or moral decisions. Indeed, one of the “prerogatives” of the general council is “to approve scriptural teachings and practices, and to disapprove unscriptural teachings and practices.”²⁰

How Are Moral Decisions Made?

Article 4 of the *Constitution of the General Council of the Assemblies of God* spells out three important “Principles of Fellowship.” The three principles include “unity, cooperation, and equality” between its members.²¹ Membership in the fellowship is both “voluntary” and “cooperative.” These terms are carefully defined and they apply to all of the fellowship’s ministers.²² Essentially what this rubric does is to anticipate that all ministers voluntarily agree to stand together (cooperate) in all positions taken by the Assemblies of God, or they will withdraw from the fellowship. A clear procedure is spelled out for the discipline of those who violate this rubric and/or refuse to withdraw when there are disagreements.²³ The primary purpose of this discipline is intended to be redemptive and restorative, not retributive.²⁴

All Pentecostal denominations have teachings and moral positions that they consider to be settled. In the Assemblies of God, the doctrinal position is spelled out in the constitution, Article 5—Statement of Fundamental Truths.²⁵ Ministerial credentials, sometimes referred to as “fellowship certificates” must be renewed annually, subject to a recommitment to the Statement of Fundamental Truths, and agreement to be governed by the constitution and bylaws of

19. The selection of the church delegate is left to each local affiliated congregation.

20. *Constitution of the General Council of the Assemblies of God*, 120; Article 3—Prerogatives. Point g also notes that a list of these “disapproved doctrines and practices” may be found in articles 9 and 10 of the Bylaws. See *Bylaws*, 166–73; See also Article 10, Section 3—Causes for Disciplinary Action.

21. *Constitution of the General Council of the Assemblies of God*, 120; Article 4—Principles for Fellowship.

22. *Bylaws of the General Council of the Assemblies of God*, 156; Article 7, Section 2—Basic Qualifications, letter g—Voluntary Cooperation and Commitment to the Fellowship.

23. *Ibid.*, 173–81; Article 10—Discipline.

24. *Ibid.*, 173; Article 10—Discipline, Section 1—The Nature and Purposes of Discipline.

25. *Constitution of the General Council of the Assemblies of God*, 121–26; Article 5—Statement of Fundamental Truths.

the fellowship.²⁶ At the same time, the fellowship allows for another channel of study that enables it to take up theological, moral, and ethical issues that are not addressed in the denomination's "Statement of Fundamental Truths" but which many participants in the fellowship believe it is important to address. This is also true for the World Assemblies of God fellowship.

While in the United States, "any three or more general presbyters may have a matter such as a moral question added to the General Presbytery agenda at any time during any duly called General Presbytery meeting,"²⁷ it is much more common to find questions of moral and doctrinal decisions originating with the Executive Presbytery. The *Bylaws* also allow both the General and Executive Presbyteries to appoint various committees,²⁸ but in the USA, the committee whose work it is to deal with issues of biblical interpretation and which takes up doctrinal, moral, and ethical studies at the behest of the Executive Presbytery is the Commission on Doctrinal Purity.²⁹ It is composed of ten members appointed to four-year terms of service by the Executive Presbytery.³⁰

The Commission on Doctrinal Purity was formed in 1979, when some leaders wanted to assure the fellowship's doctrinal position would be safeguarded, in light of potential shifting positions on scripture.³¹ The commission did not become anything like the "court of inquisition that some feared": it became a commission where pastors, church executives, and theologians could meet to provide words of wisdom regarding a range of theological, moral, and ethical issues.³²

Since its beginning, a number of "Position Papers" have been issued, of which one-third address moral or ethical issues.³³ The Executive Presbytery has assigned most of these studies, which are written by members of the Commission

26. *Bylaws of the General Council of the Assemblies of God*, 163; Article 7—Ministry, Section 10—Credential Renewals and Reinstatements, b—Expiration Date.

27. *Ibid.*, 145–46; Article 3—Duties of Officers, Presbyters, Executive Leadership Team, Section 9—Duties of the General Presbytery, f.

28. *Ibid.*, 148; Article 4—Committees, Section 6—Other Committees.

29. *Ibid.*, 147; Article 4—Committees, Section 4—Resolutions Committee, c—Scriptural Interpretation.

30. *Ibid.*, 166; Article 9—Doctrines and Practices Disapproved, Part A—Commission on Doctrinal Purity, a—Authorization and Purpose, and b—Appointments and Terms of Office.

31. Edith L. Blumhofer, *The Assemblies of God: A Chapter in the Story of American Pentecostalism* (Springfield, Mo.: Gospel Publishing House, 1989), 2:183–84.

32. Gary B. McGee, *People of the Spirit: The Assemblies of God* (Springfield, Mo.: Gospel Publishing House, 2004), 470–71.

33. All position papers may be found on the Assemblies of God website under "Beliefs," www.ag.org.

on Doctrinal Purity. The general Presbytery has approved them. From time to time, these papers have been updated, as new scientific or legal information has come to the fore, or related theological issues have arisen. These position papers have no legal standing; they are only advisory. Many ministers generally hold these papers in high regard, though none of them has ever been approved by the general council, and neither the constitution nor the bylaws mention these papers. Taken together, the Executive and General Presbyteries and the Commission together form what approaches a “magisterium” though they are only advisory, and the language of a *magisterium* is foreign to the fellowship.³⁴

The Moral Discernment group in Faith and Order should note that the various position papers make clear that scripture plays the defining role in the positions taken and in keeping with the Pentecostal understanding of scripture as the *all-sufficient rule* for faith *and* practice. While the Commission on Doctrinal Purity takes seriously a wide range of authorities other than scripture in reaching their conclusions, the ultimate measure for acceptance of their statements rests in the discerning power of the general council on how well it accords with scripture.

In my review of Pentecostal groups around the world, I found no group that left decisions on the establishment of doctrine or the treatment of moral issues to a level lower than the national level, whether it be a general council, or a National Assembly, or an annual convocation. Local congregations cannot make independent moral decisions. Among the various umbrella organizations such as the WAGF and the PWF, positions adopted by one national body may ultimately work their way up to the international body, though that is not always the case.

34. Cecil M. Robeck, Jr, “An Emerging Magisterium? The Case of the Assemblies of God,” *Pneuma: The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies* 25:2 (2003), 164–215, published as “Die Entstehung eines kirchlichen Lehramts? Der Fall der Assemblies of God,” in *Handbuch pfingstliche und charismatische Theologie*, ed. Jörg Haustein and Giovanni Maltese (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014), 160–208.

Appendix 1

Note to Readers

Faith and Order studies and texts are offered to the churches and become authoritative only insofar as they are received by the churches and prove helpful in addressing issues of theology and practice which continue to divide them. Faith and Order texts are distributed widely in order to promote the broadest possible discussion among the churches of issues related to unity. But not all texts are at the same stage of development or have the same “status” in relation to the Faith and Order Commission itself.

The Commission on Faith and Order emphasizes that its texts – as all texts – should be read in light of their origin and intended purpose. One can distinguish between reports of specific consultations which reflect the discussion and degree of agreement among those present, and study texts which have been reviewed and revised as part of a larger study process by the Faith and Order Commission. Some study texts may be sent formally to the churches, especially if they seek further convergence. Other study texts are the result of the discussion process within the Commission on Faith and Order and are offered to the wider public as an input to further ecumenical conversations.

Another category of Faith and Order texts are convergence documents of the Commission that have developed over longer periods of time from earlier study processes, including their reports and study texts in dialogue with the churches through their responses to them.

Convergence texts, such as *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* and *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, are sent to the churches for an official response “at the highest appropriate level.”

Moral Discernment in the Churches: A Study Document

Faith and Order Paper No. 215

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INTRODUCTION

One of the major challenges in the 21st century is the division that exists between churches – and within churches – over moral issues, divisions that threaten the aim of Faith and Order for visible unity in one faith and one eucharistic fellowship. While the Faith and Order movement agreed to move beyond the comparative method since the third World Conference on Faith and Order in Lund (1952), the complexity of factors that contribute to division over moral issues make it necessary to engage in preliminary tasks before work toward convergence on moral issues can even begin. Debates about moral issues reflect the following realities that complicate the task of ecumenical dialogue:

1. Moral questions reflect deeply-held theological beliefs about sin and human nature.
2. Moral questions are often encountered within the context of personal experience and are therefore deeply emotionally charged.
3. Certainty about the rightness or wrongness of one's own or another's position on a moral issue – whether based on the authority of church teachings, spiritual guidance, or individual discernment – can make dialogue across lines of difference extremely difficult.
4. Churches engage in the process of moral discernment in culturally and ecclesiological distinct ways that are often not known or understood by one another.

The difficulties that arise from this complexity are reflected in all levels of discourse about moral issues – from the individual to the community, as well as within churches or church families and across communions. While churches draw on many common sources in the process of moral discernment, the ways in which they engage these sources and the authority that they give to them vary from church to church. In some churches the approach to moral questions will vary depending on the nature of the question as well as which sources are appealed to in addressing the issue.

Status of the Text

This study text does not focus on moral questions per se, but rather on the *discernment process* (cf. §§9, 18, 20, 23, 25). This is a necessary *prerequisite* for ecumenical dialogue about specific moral issues. To that end, this study identifies sources that churches use for moral discernment (cf. §§30–48) and articulates some of the causative factors of the disagreements within and between churches over moral issues as a prolegomenon to ecumenical dialogue that seeks unity (cf. §§49–85).

This study aims to be a tool to aid churches in both developing a deeper self-understanding of their own processes of moral discernment and offering a framework within which dialogue about moral disagreements can take place (cf. §§86–110).

In no way does this document recommend particular methods for moral discernment or attempt to advocate any moral position that any church would need to take. The text contains many examples that describe different moral positions held by different churches. However, it acknowledges that different churches hold different positions on moral issues, and in no way intends to suggest that all positions are morally equal (cf. §§85, 102). There is a general recognition of the existence of universal truths (cf. §30).

The purpose of the study is to *describe* the causative factors of disagreement over moral issues and to prepare the ground for future ecumenical dialogue around moral issues. The present text can be seen as a report on the *first stage of a study process* that is called to continue, in particular by studying how the churches of different traditions arrive at moral discernment, decision-making and teaching.

As with all Faith and Order work, the ultimate aim of the study is to facilitate ecumenical dialogue that seeks the visible unity of the Church.

Orthodox Addendum

The Orthodox participants of the Faith and Order Standing Commission meeting in Penang (June 2012), who then also met in Bossey (November 2012), where the final draft of *Moral Discernment in the Churches: A Study Document* was presented, valued the work contained in the text. The study document, from the academic point of view, could be used in Orthodox theological schools and academic circles. It contains tools to understand different causative factors that divide churches over moral issues.

However, the Orthodox members of the Standing Commission expressed their concerns regarding the whole study process. The Orthodox read the text in ways that do not reflect their tradition; in particular, they identify the following areas:

- working methodology of the study leading to the relativistic approach
- the same methodology applied to church unity
- overemphasis on the non-theological academic approach
- lack of broader ecumenical approaches
- lack of spiritual and theological aspects, for example, experience of the people of God in the Church, *consensus fidelium*
- assumptions running throughout the paper that should not be made.

The same relativistic approach is applied also to the sources; but for the Orthodox there are three initial capital sources for moral discernment: the Holy Trinity, the holy scripture and the holy Tradition. These sources cannot be placed at the same level with the other sources.

The Orthodox participants of the Faith and Order Standing Commission meeting in Penang suggest this text go to the 2013 WCC Assembly as a preliminary step in a more extensive study. Their recommendation is that the Faith and Order

Commission in the future place on its agenda further theological discussions in the field of Moral Discernment.¹

Background

1. Moral and ethical questions are closely linked with ecclesiology and are thus a matter of faith and order. They have been on the agenda of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches since the early 1990s, when issues in the field of moral theology and ethics resulted in a new awareness of controversies in and between churches, some of which even threaten their unity.

The Way toward a Study on Moral Discernment

2. An awareness of ethics as an integral aspect of ecclesiology developed in the beginning of the 1980s. A study on “The Unity of the Church and the Renewal of Human Community” was proposed at the Faith and Order Standing Commission meeting in Annecy (France) in 1981, discussed at the Plenary Commission meeting in Lima (Peru) in 1982² and confirmed by the WCC assembly in Vancouver in 1983³ with the aim “to clarify the theological inter-relation between two fundamental ecumenical concerns: the quest for the visible unity of Christ’s Church and the implementation of the Christian calling to common witness and service in today’s world.”⁴ As a result of this study process the Commission on Faith and Order published the 1990 document *Church and World*,⁵ which focuses on the understanding of the Church as oriented toward the kingdom of God and therefore as a prophetic sign.

3. Parallel to these activities, the Joint Working Group between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches started, as early as 1987, to look into topics that would potentially be sources of new divisions between and in the

1. Catholics would share concerns similar to those mentioned in this Orthodox addendum. They therefore endorse the recommendation, included in the “Introduction” to the text itself, that it go to the 2013 WCC assembly as a preliminary stage of a study that Faith and Order might continue into the future.

2. Cf. *Towards Visible Unity: Commission on Faith and Order Lima 1982, Volume I: Minutes and Addresses*, Faith and Order Paper No. 112 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982) 11–124; *Volume II: Study Papers and Reports*, Faith and Order Paper No. 113 (Geneva: WCC, 1982) 121–230.

3. Cf. David Gill, ed., *Gathered for Life: Official Report VI Assembly World Council of Churches, Vancouver, Canada, 24 July – 10 August 1983* (Geneva: WCC Publications 1983), 50, §24.

4. Commission on Faith and Order, *Minutes of the Meeting of the Standing Commission 1986 Potsdam, GDR*: Faith and Order Paper No. 134 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1986), 28.

5. *Church and World: The Unity of the Church and the Renewal of Human Community: A Faith and Order Study Document*: Faith and Order Paper No. 151 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1990).

churches. In the course of its work it focused on personal and social ethical issues, which resulted in a study document on “The Ecumenical Dialogue on Moral Issues.”⁶ This document describes how potentially or actually divisive issues “may best be approached in dialogue . . .”⁷ with the purpose of being able to give common witness. Consequently it offers “guidelines for ecumenical dialogue on moral issues.”

4. In 1993 the participants at the 5th World Conference on Faith and Order in Santiago de Compostela recommended on the one hand a study on “Ethics and Ecclesiology,” “which should be directly linked to local experiences of the interconnectedness of faith and action and move between an investigation of the moral substance of traditions and the moral experience of the people of God today.”⁸ Secondly it recommended work on anthropology and the theology of creation,⁹ adding that

it is essential for the churches to recognize that the threats to human survival on this planet are real and that the tasks before us, in response to God’s sustaining and redeeming work, are urgent. . . . The urgency of the hour demands a renewed Christian anthropology as well as a renewed emphasis on the call that Christians have to participate in God’s healing of the broken relationship between creation and humankind.¹⁰

5. The work on “Ecclesiology and Ethics” was done jointly between Faith and Order and the WCC Unit on Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation and resulted in three study documents: “Costly Unity,” “Costly Commitment,” “Costly Obedience.”¹¹ These texts pointed out the close link between ethics and ecclesiological reflection and named “the ethical dimension as a datum of ecclesiology.”¹² The Church was characterized as a “moral community,” a notion that was further developed as being expressed “in the practice of ‘moral formation.’”¹³ This led finally to understand the ecumenical movement itself as a “moral community.”¹⁴

6. Published in *The Ecumenical Review*, no. 48 (1996): 143–154.

7. *Ibid.*, Foreword.

8. Thomas F. Best and Günther Gassmann, *On the Way to Fuller Koinonia: Official Report of the Fifth World Conference on Faith and Order*, Faith and Order Paper No. 166 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1994), 261, §38.

9. *Ibid.*, 262.

10. *Ibid.*, 260, §34.

11. Published in: Thomas F. Best and Martin Robra, eds., *Ecclesiology and Ethics: Ecumenical Ethical Engagement, Moral Formation and the Nature of the Church* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1997).

12. *Ibid.*, x.

13. *Ibid.*, xi.

14. *Ibid.*, xi.

6. This work was the basis for further studies of the Faith and Order Commission in the field of anthropology. While this issue had been mentioned at the 5th World Conference in Santiago de Compostela¹⁵ from the perspective of the integrity of creation, it also came up at the WCC assembly in Harare in 1998 from another angle, namely questions around human sexuality.¹⁶ The Faith and Order Commission discovered that the question had become a burning issue also in some of its studies during the 1990s, a fact which revealed that it was now time to undertake a study on theological anthropology.¹⁷

7. The result was a study document, published in 2005 under the title *Christian Perspectives on Theological Anthropology. A Faith and Order Study Document*.¹⁸ This text employed an inductive methodology that allowed participants to reflect “theologically on specific instances of contemporary human experience which challenge our understanding of what it means to be human beings, made in the image of God.”¹⁹ The results of the study process include “Ten Common Affirmations on Theological Anthropology,”²⁰ that are intended as a common starting point for ecumenical dialogue that touches on issues of human nature. The document ends with “A Call to the Churches,” which points out common understanding and differences, and proposes: “Most differences in understanding and strategy in the realm of theological anthropology need not prevent our churches from facing together the challenges to humanity today. In many areas of need, the churches can exercise a common (and therefore far more effective) witness to the world in defense of human beings made in the image of God.”²¹ As a follow-up, the Standing Commission on Faith and Order decided in 2006 to “conduct a study of the ways in which the churches formulate and offer teaching and guidance with respect to moral and ethical issues – especially those that are or may become church-dividing, e.g. human sexuality.”²²

15. Cf. footnotes 9 and 10 above.

16. Cf., Diane Kessler, ed., *Together on the Way: Official Report of the Eighth Assembly of the World Council of Churches* (Geneva: WCC Publications Geneva, 1999), 145.

17. “The issue of theological anthropology has emerged as an underlying theme in several of the questions addressed by the Faith and Order Commission (ethnic and national identity, baptism, authority and authoritative teaching, ordination of women), and in issues facing the WCC as a whole (human sexuality).” (*Minutes of the Meeting of the Faith and Order Board 15–24 June 1999 Toronto, Canada*, Faith and Order Paper No. 185 (Geneva: WCC, 1999), 89). Cf. also *Minutes of the Meeting of the Faith and Order Standing Commission 9–16 January 2002 Gazzada, Italy*, Faith and Order Paper No. 191 (Geneva: WCC, 2002), 69.

18. *Christian Perspectives on Theological Anthropology*, Faith and Order Paper No. 199 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2005).

19. *Ibid.*, 15, §21.

20. *Ibid.*, 51f, §127.

21. *Ibid.*, 50, §123.

22. *Minutes of the Standing Commission on Faith and Order, Faverges, Haute-Savoie, France 2006*, Faith and Order Paper No. 202 (Geneva: WCC, 2006), 107

The Study Process on Moral Discernment in the Churches

8. This study was started under the working title “Moral Discernment in the Churches” at the meeting of the Standing Commission in Crans-Montana in 2007.²³ The Commission decided to “explore the various ways churches make decisions about moral issues. Through this study we hope to identify principles and practices of moral discernment we hold in common as churches and to discover where we diverge. Our goals are to claim the common ground we share, to help us understand how and why we often come to different conclusions, and to search together for ways to prevent our principled differences from becoming church-dividing.”²⁴ The purpose of the study was later clarified: “to gain a deeper understanding of the nature of theological difference and disagreement in order to develop study material and resources that facilitate difficult conversations and theological discussions about moral issues.”²⁵

9. At Crans-Montana it was also decided to employ a case study approach as the foundational method for the study. Consequently a consultation of the Standing Commission’s Working Group for the study on Moral Discernment, held in March 2008 in New York, first harvested and reflected on work that had already been done on the issue in bilateral and multilateral documents, within the academic world, and within WCC. Secondly the meeting set out a study process, subsequently approved by the Standing Commission in Cairo in June 2008, which in a first phase would “provide a descriptive account of the issue that offers examples of how particular communities of Christians engage in moral discernment in relation to particular moral issues.”²⁶ For this purpose the group refined the case study method by developing criteria for cases, which would help to understand the differences and the commonalities in the different standpoints in moral discourse and to develop an awareness and sensitivity for how conflict emerges. Although the case studies would deal with a variety of moral issues, their purpose was not to solve the respective issue, but to bring the different standpoints on a certain issue into a discussion in a narrative way, in order to facilitate the analysis of the different factors involved in various potentially church-dividing moral issues.

10. Consequently four case studies were produced that highlighted different forms of ecclesial division – intra-church division (within churches or church families), inter-church division (between different churches), division between churches in the global North and the global South, and divisions between different cultures. The topics were: (a) the use of stem cells in research with a focus on the discussion between the Catholic and Protestant churches in Germany; (b) issues related to

23. *Minutes of the Standing Commission on Faith and Order meeting in Crans-Montana, Switzerland 2007*, Faith and Order Paper No. 206 (Geneva: WCC, 2007), 43.

24. *Ibid.*, 43.

25. *Minutes of the Standing Commission on Faith and Order meeting in Cairo, Arab Republic of Egypt 2008*, Faith and Order Paper No. 208 (Geneva: WCC, 2009), 54.

26. *Ibid.*

human sexuality with a focus on homosexuality and the struggle within the Anglican Communion over the issue; (c) the issue of neoliberal economic globalization and its discussion at the 24th General Council meeting of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches in Accra, Ghana in 2004; (d) the ethical issues involved in mission work and evangelism, especially as they are experienced by some churches as proselytism in Russia.

11. In October 2009 the Plenary Commission on Faith and Order at its meeting in Crete discussed the case studies in small groups, with each Commission member engaged in the study of one of these cases. They were asked to “analyze the dynamics of the case with the intention of identifying the points of divergence and disagreement and discussing potential strategies and resources for helping the churches continue to stay in dialogue with one another in the midst of their disagreement.”²⁷

12. In June 2010 the Working Group on Moral Discernment in the Churches met in Armenia to analyze and discuss the results of the work at the Plenary Commission meeting. The following text results from this analysis and from further discussions at a drafting meeting in Erfurt (Germany) in February 2011, the meeting of the Standing Commission in Gazzada (Italy) in July 2011, another drafting meeting in Bossey (Switzerland) in April 2012 and the meeting of the Standing Commission of Faith and Order in Penang (Malaysia) in June 2012. It was finalized in November 2012 at a joint meeting at the Ecumenical Institute Bossey of members of the study group with the Orthodox participants of the Penang meeting. The text is offered as a study document based on the findings of the study group. Included in the text is a set of suggestions for facilitating constructive discussions on controversial moral and ethical issues. The usefulness of these suggestions in contributing to moral discernment processes needs to be tested further.

27. *Ibid.*, 56.

CLARIFICATION OF TERMINOLOGY

In order to engage in a common discussion of moral discernment in the churches across a variety of traditions and cultures, it is necessary to clarify the use of some common terms in this study text.

a. While the term *moral* has several definitions and usages, and sometimes is equated with “ethics” (see definition below), “moral” refers here simply to aspects and expressions of human life that pertain to “right” and “wrong” or “good” and “bad.”

b. *Moral decision-making* here refers to the process of assessment and evaluation of a moral problem, question, or situation that leads to a response or resolution. In this study, moral decision-making refers to the common human phenomenon of making such judgments, without necessarily utilizing a faith perspective or appealing to sources that are authoritative for persons of faith.

c. *Moral discernment* here refers to moral decision-making that occurs within the Church. It is the process by which a person or community of faith attempts to discover God’s will for understanding and responding to the dilemmas and questions that human beings face when seeking the “right” and the “good.” The task of moral discernment is an essential aspect of the Christian life. For most Christian communities, as “moral communities,” the process of moral discernment is not simply one of prayer, meditation, or supplication before God, but it involves two additional elements – the turning to various sources and the use of critical thinking to animate and guide the discernment process.

d. *Moral reasoning* here describes several different general approaches to moral decision-making and moral discernment. One general approach, for example, centres on a person or a community’s duties when pursuing the “right” or the “good.” Another approach centres on the consequences, or states of affairs, that result from human choices and actions. Still another sees character and the formation of character as the locus of moral discernment. Christian communities may draw on more than one form of moral reasoning, or may utilize different forms of moral reasoning in response to different situations and issues.

These three approaches are known in the field of ethics as deontology, teleology, and virtue ethics.

e. Finally, the term *ethics* refers here to the study of human behaviour in relation to moral issues, moral decision-making, and moral reasoning. Ethics typically takes one of two forms, “normative ethics” and “descriptive ethics.” *Normative ethics* centre on asking what is “right” or “good” and why. Normative ethics are prescriptive, expressing how persons or communities should respond or behave. When persons or faith communities strive to articulate and defend a moral position on an issue through the process of moral discernment, they are engaging in normative ethics. *Descriptive ethics*, in contrast, centres on asking and answering the questions: “What is going on in this moral situation?” “What is believed to be right/wrong or good/bad by the involved persons and communities?” And “what is the basis for their moral positions?” Descriptive ethics thus examines and analyzes both the context of moral dilemmas and the processes used by individuals, communities, and churches to engage, understand, and respond to moral issues.

The Challenges of Moral Discernment In and between Churches

13. The history of the Church, its achievements and its failures, can be read as the story of how the Church and its members have dealt with moral issues. Theological reflection, ecclesial structures, liturgical practice, and personal conversion have all, at times, been developed in response to the moral questions of the day. Likewise, theology, ecclesiology, liturgy, and spirituality have played an important role in identifying the moral significance of issues and in offering the language and interpretive frameworks from which to take action to address them, be it at the level of the broader political community, the church community, or the individual believer.

14. Sometimes, in this history, moral issues identified in society, in the Church itself, or even at the level of personal lifestyle, and the Church's efforts to deal with them, have led to painful and often costly divisions within and between churches that are inconsistent with the Lord's own prayer for the Church that "they all may be one" (John 17:21). In the search for visible unity in the Church, the role of moral issues as a church- and community-dividing factor should not be underestimated. Addressing questions of how moral issues become church-dividing can contribute to increased unity as well as help to avoid the pain and human suffering that often results from such division.

15. Today, as before, moral questions and the issue of moral discernment have been and are being discussed in many churches as well as in the ecumenical movement. There are many similarities between churches or between factions within churches, as well as differences concerning the appropriate sources for moral discernment, the relative authority of these sources, and indeed the foundational theological and philosophical assumptions that should guide moral reflection.

16. Moral discernment in the Church is complicated by the fact that the church does not operate in a vacuum: it is part of wider society. Sometimes developments in the wider society challenge the Church to reflect anew on some of the moral stances it holds; sometimes the Church calls moral developments in society into question. Sometimes the Church is a persecuted minority, and develops its moral teachings accordingly; sometimes it is closely tied to the political majority and wields power and influence in ways that can hinder good moral discernment.

17. The process of moral discernment in the churches is a complex one. On the one hand, it is persons who engage in theological reflection, persons who work through ecclesial structures, persons who worship in liturgies, and persons who pray. So too, it is persons who encounter, discern, and act upon moral questions. These human persons are, moreover, fundamentally moral beings. That is, they engage in a moral world, and their moral behaviour is an important factor in their own self-understanding as being a good or a bad person, as being a person living a meaningful and purposeful life, or a person in the depths of despair. The interests of individuals and

of communities – both internal and external to the church – will always exert an influence on how moral debates and decisions are made in and between churches. On the other hand Christians believe that the Holy Spirit works through the community to guide and assist moral discernment.

18. Given that both differences and similarities in moral positions and in processes of moral discernment appear to exist in and between churches, between the Church and broader society, and between the individuals who constitute all churches and society, this study aims to address the preliminary issues that lay the groundwork for future discussions about moral issues that are potentially church-divisive. To this end, emphasis is placed on identifying the factors that lead to these differences and especially to church division on moral issues. A future issue that needs to be addressed is: How might church members at all levels and in all contexts engage constructively in a dialogue about moral issues that witnesses to the visible unity of the church while also seeking to avoid the often painful and costly consequences that sometimes flow from division?

19. Earlier work by the Joint Working Group between the WCC and the Roman Catholic Church, in a study on ecumenism and moral issues,²⁸ identified *different* “pathways” churches use for reaching ethical and moral decisions based on the *same* sources as well as on *different authoritative means* for moral discernment.

20. The current study, while building on these earlier results, analyzes the causative factors for the similarities and differences and makes suggestions about how to resolve them. The goal is neither to develop any explicit moral judgments of its own nor to resolve any specific moral issues, but rather to facilitate constructive dialogue and minimize exclusion, animosity, and division.

21. The present document consists of four parts. The first part introduces three important methodological assumptions that underpin the present study and explains the case study method that was used to analyze the causative factors of differences in moral discernment. The second part presents the first of the study’s findings, namely, a descriptive account of the various sources appealed to when engaging in moral discernment. The third part presents, in light of part two, the causative factors of difference and division on moral issues that this study has identified, together with brief illustrations of how these might work. A fourth part summarizes the study’s conclusions and brings together the “suggestions for reflection” that correspond to the individual causative factors of division listed in the previous

28. “The Ecumenical Dialogue on Moral Issues: Potential Sources of Common Witness or of Divisions,” *The Ecumenical Review*, no 48 (1996): 143–154; And in: Jeffrey Gros, Harding Meyer and William G. Rusch, eds., *Growth in Agreement II: Reports and Agreed Statements of Ecumenical Conversations on a World Level, 1982-1998* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2000), 900-910.

section. These suggestions are offered as a foundation for further reflection in the churches about how to navigate moral discernment within and between churches.

I. METHODOLOGY AND METHOD

22. Perhaps even more than doctrinal disagreements, conflicts over moral issues are often perceived as being controversial and divisive, even when communities on different sides share substantial common ground. The desire for developing a deeper understanding about why Christian communities disagree about moral issues is influenced by the assumption that engagement in more critically aware ethical discourse yields deeper understanding about self and other that can contribute to more faithful Christian dialogue that witnesses to love of neighbour and compassion for the other. By achieving a more nuanced understanding of the causes of the disagreements, Christian communities will be better able to engage in more faithful dialogue that promotes understanding and respect.

Three Methodological Assumptions

23. The scope of this study is bounded by the desire to identify causal factors of moral difference and to facilitate moral discussion, and not to resolve any particular moral issue, be it church-dividing or otherwise.

Moreover, given the historical fact that church division and moral issues have often gone hand in hand, this study in no way proposes to be able to provide a solution to all church division. In light of the scope of this study, then, three methodological assumptions guide its workings.

24. First, it has been noted that all communities, ecclesial or otherwise, are constituted by human persons. Therefore, any study of moral discernment must begin with a clear articulation of the assumptions from which it proceeds regarding the nature of the human person. Following the study on “Christian Perspectives on Theological Anthropology” this study affirms:

- a. Human persons are created in the image of God and called to relationship with God.²⁹
- b. As such, each human person has a unique dignity and is “called to live and find fulfillment in the human community and to experience and preserve harmony with all creation.”³⁰
- c. In their pursuit of this fulfillment of meaning and purpose in life, human persons, as part of God’s good creation and as created co-creators, are capable of goodness.³¹

29. *Christian Perspectives on Theological Anthropology: A Faith and Order Study Document: Faith & Order Paper 199* (Geneva: WCC, 2005), 51.

30. *Ibid.*, 48, § 117; 52, §127, point 4.

31. *Ibid.*, 11, §10; 19, §29; 31, §70; 39, §91.

- d. At the same time, bound by the limitations of the created world and sin, human activity is often characterized by brokenness, both individual and corporate.³² As a result, human persons, though desiring goodness, frequently fall short in their concrete attempts to realize it.
- e. In addition to the affirmations (a)–(d) based on the Faith and Order study on “Christian Perspectives on Theological Anthropology,” the present study further asserts that it is this being in relationship to all things in a limited and historical world, together with the desire to realize goodness through a meaningful and purposeful life, that makes the human person a fundamentally moral being. That is, morality, as the discernment of and acting for the good and the right, is the way in which human persons navigate through both the meaning-affirming and meaning-threatening relationships in which they find themselves. Thus, though united by a common desire to realize meaning through goodness, individuals and communities, limited and historical as they are, may find different ways to navigate toward what they variously believe embodies this goodness. Sometimes, these different goals and ways will be complementary; at others, these different goals and ways may lead to conflict.

25. Second, ethics, as the discipline of studying human moral behaviour, can be divided into two kinds of activity, as outlined above (box following §12). *Descriptive ethics* is concerned with what human persons *actually* do in their moral reflection, judgment and activity; it *describes* what the case is. *Prescriptive* or *normative ethics* is concerned with what human persons *should* do in the moral reflection, judgment and activity; it *prescribes* what ought to be the case by developing *norms* for human moral behaviour. Accordingly, this study aims to engage in descriptive ethics to identify and describe the factors that contribute to differences regarding moral issues. This descriptive task is in no way normative in that it does not seek to develop prescriptive norms about what should be done about particular moral issues or about church-dividing situations. Rather, the purpose of a descriptive study is to help the churches gain deeper insight into the causative factors of disagreement with the hope that a deeper understanding of difference and division can pave the way for improved ecumenical dialogue about moral issues. Given the limitations of human personhood described above, it is hoped that if a common witness on moral issues cannot be achieved in and between churches, then an improved understanding of the causes that underlie divisions, and the often irresolvable nature of these divisions, will at least help to avoid the frequently unnecessary pain and costs associated with church divisions over moral issues.

26. Third, this study affirms that Christian morality, understood both in terms of discernment and activity in relationships, should always be understood in light of the unavoidable limitations of the physical world and the eschatological hope of the ultimate realization of the reign of God with the following provisions:

32. Ibid., 15, §22; 52, §127, points 2 and 5.

- a. Since a person's self-understanding as having a meaningful and purposeful life is dependent on the extent to which he or she believes that he or she is realizing goodness, human moral discernment and activity are characterized by the hope that what is done does in fact contribute to that realization of goodness.
- b. For the Christian, this hope is a hope for the end of inhumanity, injustice and suffering in the world through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.³³
- c. This hope, together with the brokenness that plagues human existence and activity, means that all moral discernment, judgment and action is necessarily conditioned by the fact that, though one hopes otherwise, one may nonetheless be wrong.
- d. Consequently, this study is characterized by a humility that seeks first to understand why and how people and churches engage in moral discernment. Real insight into this why and how is necessary if one is to avoid the pitfalls of moralism, i.e., the destructive division of people into them and us, the bad and the good, the demonic and the truly human, the damned and the chosen, and so on. From this insight, it is hoped, will flow instead a readiness to agree to love even those who differ from one's own moral point of view, especially where no conclusive argument exists for one position or another. This love, it is hoped, will likewise be a humble love, characterized as a genuine willingness to appreciate the other as one like oneself, seeking the realization of God's reign of goodness in the world.

Method: The Case Study Approach

27. In order to determine the causative factors of division on issues of moral discernment in and between churches, a case study approach was employed. This approach is in line with the methodological assumptions outlined above in that it aims to derive an inductive description of the sources of morality that churches and individuals appeal to in moral discernment as well as an account of the causative factors of difference and division.

28. Four cases were written based on contemporary church-dividing moral issues.³⁴ The aim of the cases was to present a narrative representation of debates around particular moral issues that provide an accurate depiction of the different positions in the debate, the sources of morality to which they appeal, and the kinds of moral reasoning they employ. These positions were represented by various characters in the fictional narratives that open each case study.

29. The first phase of the case study process involved submitting the case studies to small groups comprised of members of the Plenary Commission on Faith and

33. *Ibid.*, 25f, §52

34. Cf. §10 above.

Order. These groups were asked to analyze the case studies and to identify and explore the causative factors that contributed to misunderstanding, difference, and discord. These results provided the initial findings of the study, which were compiled into a supporting document for the cases studies that discussed the various sources to which people appealed and the differences in forms and styles of moral discernment. In a second phase, the case studies were distributed to volunteer participants at university faculties in a number of countries. These volunteers organized analyses of these case studies with groups of students and reported their findings. For the most part, this second phase confirmed the findings of the first phase and offered nuanced insight into several of the categories. The combined result of both phases is presented in this document.

II. SOURCES FOR MORAL DISCERNMENT

30. The task of moral discernment is a complicated process through which churches, communities, and individuals consider and analyze a moral challenge and seek to find an answer in a responsible manner. For Christians, moral discernment also involves a desire to act in agreement with their belief, the centre of which is faith in the triune God. Engaging in a process of moral discernment implies, therefore, taking recourse to a wide variety of sources, some of which originate from what might be considered distinctively Christian or faith related sources, while others might be used by all who engage in moral decision-making. Whereas churches would agree on the existence of these sources, they might differ in the authority attached to them, and, depending on the moral dilemma being confronted, on the way in which they should be used.³⁵ While there is general recognition of the existence of universal truths, there are different positions in different churches about how these truths are revealed and known. Furthermore, Christians may also disagree about what role universal truths play in the process of moral discernment. The listing of the sources below is neither exhaustive, nor intended to rank relative authority of sources in a definitive hierarchy. Of course, when churches engage in moral discernment they do rank these sources. What follows is a description of a variety of sources that faith communities consult when engaging in moral discernment.

A. Faith Sources for Moral Discernment

31. Faith sources are ways through which Christians access the ultimate source of truth and authority, which is God as revealed in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit.

35. While each of these sources has generated their own bodies of scholarship, the brief descriptions presented here represent a necessarily succinct identification of the source for purposes of establishing a common vocabulary for this text.

a. Guidance of the Holy Spirit

32. All churches believe in the working of the Holy Spirit within individuals, as well as in the community, as a source and assistant in the process of moral discernment. Churches might differ in the ways in which they identify the working of the Holy Spirit. In some churches, it is understood that the Holy Spirit might “inspire” a particular individual with wisdom, to which the rest of the church community needs to listen. For some, the Holy Spirit is best discerned and encountered in the gathering of the faithful, at a congregational meeting or synod. Others, again, hold that the Holy Spirit works in the whole church, but that those who exercise oversight or exercise teaching authority have a special role in discerning the authenticity of the Holy Spirit, and in determining the corresponding binding force of a certain doctrine. All believe, however, that the Holy Spirit assists God’s people to discern, develop and possibly even reconsider moral evaluations, as was, for example, the case with regard to slavery.

b. Scripture

33. Holy scripture is an essential source for moral discernment in all the churches. It is the inspired witness to the life and meaning of Jesus Christ, the living word of God. Scripture never stands alone and is always interpreted within the life of the Church. Within the Church there are different ways of reading the scriptures and different hermeneutical keys for opening them up. These include exegesis, historical critical method, semantics, and so on. There are also different ways of using scripture: either as starting point or as secondary source after a social analysis, for example. The ways in which the scriptures are used in relation to issues of moral discernment are not all the same, even though all the churches agree in turning to scripture for wisdom on moral and ethical issues.

c. Tradition

34. The word “tradition” refers to that which has been handed on. In 1963 Faith and Order stipulated distinctions between the terms “Tradition,” “tradition,” and “traditions.” At that time, “Tradition” was defined as the “Gospel itself, transmitted from generation to generation in and by the Church, Christ himself present in the life of the Church.” The lowercase, “tradition,” was defined as the “traditionary process,” or the process of handing on the community’s beliefs and practices. Finally, “traditions” was defined as the different denominations or “confessional traditions.”³⁶ Consequently those churches that recognize scripture as the exclusive source of Christian life would agree that they also use some kind of tradition or authorities from the past (especially their own confessional past) for consulting within the process of interpretation of scripture.

36. Patrick C. Rodger and Lukas Vischer, eds., *The Fourth World Conference on Faith and Order: The Report from Montreal, 1963*, Faith and Order Paper No. 42 (London: SCM Press, 1964), 50.

d. Teaching Authority

35. All churches have some form of teaching authority, which has the responsibility to preserve the faith in moral convictions, determine the binding force of a doctrine, and consequently identify whether, or to what extent, diversity on a given moral issue is possible. This teaching authority, however, has different forms and bears different weight in the different churches (e.g. *magisterium*, synods, presbyteries, general assemblies).

e. Spirituality

36. In all churches, prayer plays an important role in decision-making, whether at the individual or communal level, and prayer is a central aspect of moral discernment in the churches. For some, this will be experienced most profoundly when one Christian falls on his or her knees to seek the guidance of God in a very difficult situation, demanding a moral answer. For some, the moral principles of the faith are carried within forms of common prayer and liturgy. These both express and shape the kinds of decisions that are made. Liturgy and hymnody are the living memory of the Church and they exercise a powerful authority in which the wisdom of the faith becomes part of the memory. Given that the paschal mystery is central to most Christian worship and liturgy, it can be said that because Christian spirituality commemorates the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, it is a fundamentally ethical spirituality, calling Christians to an imitation of Christ's self-sacrificing love.³⁷

f. Church Culture (Customs, Habits, Identity)

37. In addition to the shared doctrines and practices that define each of the Christian traditions, a church community – either in a geographical region and/or across regions – often has additional unwritten or unofficial practices, beliefs, or values that reflect a particular ecclesial culture or ethos. This church culture may, at times, be deeply influenced by the broader culture within which a Christian community lives; however, at other times, a community's church culture may contrast sharply with the broader culture's norms and customs. In the context of moral discernment, members of a church may appeal to "the way they do things" or to their church's culture as a source for responding to moral issues.

B. Human Reason and Other Sapiential³⁸ Sources for Moral Discernment

38. Churches not only use what may be called faith related sources, but also other sources of authority that are, indeed, neither particular to specific church communities, nor exclusively Christian, but which Christians believe are sources through

37. *Christian Perspectives on Theological Anthropology*, 52, §127, point 3.

38. "Sapiential" here denotes sources of moral relevance that derive from human attributes and capacities.

which the wisdom of God may be discerned, and in which the Holy Spirit is at work as well.

a. Reason

39. Human reason is required for moral discernment in general. Any act of moral decision-making involves the faculty of reason. However, in some cases, reason is given a particular authority. The authority of reason derives from two distinct, though compatible, arguments. First, the “reasonableness” of an argument is reflected in its logic, cohesiveness, cogency, and so on. Second, the human faculty of reason, the ability to think rationally, is understood as a central aspect of human nature that was created by God.

40. Though all churches accept that reason is central to moral decision-making, they may differ in the relevance and weight they give to the use of reason relative to other sources of authority. Some would identify reason as authoritative, arguing that it is God who has given us our rational nature, and who has made creation in such a way that it conforms to patterns that can be rationally discerned. For others, reason is to be used with much caution, and always in the context of faith. For others, again, human reason is not always to be trusted, because of human sin and our capacity for self-deception.

b. Natural Law

41. A specific instance of the appeal to the authority of reason is found in the theory of natural law. Natural law draws its moral authority from the claim that human beings, endowed with reason and free choice, can participate in the eternal law that constitutes God’s rational plan for creation. It is called “law,” precisely, to denote the claimed authority of the moral precepts derived from the application by reason of the principles of practical rationality, insofar as these precepts are seen to participate in the eternal law. These precepts are further held to be knowable and binding for all human beings because all human beings have both a natural inclination to the good and particular goods, and the faculty of practical rationality. This fundamental inclination and the faculty of human reason enable human beings, first, to recognize, and, secondly, to articulate as normative that which is good for human flourishing. There has been, and continues to be, a great deal of debate about how and whether the natural law should be applied in concrete moral issues. Often these differences on how the natural law should be applied are heavily influenced by different styles of moral reasoning.

c. Moral Reasoning

42. Moral reasoning concerns the methods that one applies in assessing a moral issue. There are various methods of moral reasoning at one’s disposal. Typically these are categorized into three groups: those that focus on questions of the actors intentions and character (virtue ethics); those that focus on the moral goodness

or badness of particular actions in themselves (deontological or value ethics); and those that focus on the consequences or outcomes of an action (teleological or consequentialist ethics).³⁹ These methods of moral reasoning have, over time, developed into distinct schools of thought in their own right, and people may appeal to the apparent authority of a well-established school or prominent thinker as a source of moral discernment. Sometimes, this can be done in an uncritical, axiomatic way, such as an appeal to Immanuel Kant's categorical imperative as an authoritative source. At other times, engaging critically with this body of knowledge, worked out over thousands of years, can be very fruitful in obtaining a better understanding concerning what is at stake in a particular moral situation and a useful aid to moral discernment.

d. Natural, Social, and Human Sciences

43. Science may include natural, social and human sciences. Just as science has challenged some of the aspects of Christian faith, and led to their critical reappraisal and valuable theological reflection – concerning, for example, the place of the Earth in the universe – so too, new findings of science concerning, among other things, gender and sexuality, moral culpability, human impact on the environment, the causes of violence, the nature of mental and physical illness, as well as possible cures, and so on, call for theological and moral reflection. Development in these sciences can present new moral challenges. Sometimes, the findings of science may be appealed to in a normative ethical manner; sciences sometimes claim to show not only what is done or what can be done but also what ought to be done. More often, however, they form the data for moral discernment about what ought to be done in light of what is known from science. Thus, the findings of the sciences may also assist churches or individuals in the moral discernment process. Disciplines like biology, economics, psychology, sociology, medicine, and anthropology have enormous potential to contribute to the process of moral discernment. As Christians evaluate scientific developments through the lens of their faith, they often adopt different approaches in using them.

e. Conscience

44. The term “conscience” is used in other religious and non-religious contexts, but it also has explicitly Christian meanings. In the context of moral decision-making, “conscience” is used in at least three different ways, all of which pertain generally to a moral sense or awareness internal to human persons. First, conscience sometimes refers to a human being's capacity to will the good, distinguish right from wrong, and accept responsibility for a course of action. A second usage stems from references in both the Old and New Testaments to the moral law written on human beings' hearts, and thus refers to a person's God-given awareness of right and wrong.⁴⁰ A

39. Various combinations also exist. For example, rule utilitarianism focuses on maximizing the goodness of the outcomes (and is in this sense teleological) but proscribes certain means to achieve those outcomes (and is in this sense deontological).

40. This is sometimes known as “natural law,” see §41 above.

third meaning of conscience is manifest in common parlance, where it refers to honouring deeply-held moral convictions (e.g., being a “prisoner of conscience”).

f. Experience

45. The lived experience of individuals and groups directly involved in particular moral issues is a critical component of the process of moral discernment. It can affect how people perceive, understand, and define the problem, as well as what they understand to be at stake in the moral issue. For some, experience can make a problem life-threatening or life-affirming in such a way that it compels action, possibly even to the point of self-sacrifice. Experience can give false perspectives or even prejudices; but experience, well interpreted (often with the wise direction of others) can be an important source for moral discernment. For some Christians, and indeed perhaps for all in certain ways, it is into their own experience that God speaks. Respect for and listening to the experiences of others (particularly those who have very different lives from our own) can radically affect our discernment of moral issues. Human experience has always to be interpreted (like a living document), but it can often be a place of insight into God’s design.

g. Civil Law and Human Rights

46. Civil law is one of the ways in which human beings govern behaviour. Different countries have different legal systems and different laws in place to govern a vast array of activities that are morally relevant. In addition, international law and legal instruments, such as multinational agreements, govern relationships that can also have moral consequences. Since laws are intended to govern moral behaviour, they are often appealed to as if all laws are always and everywhere morally binding. For example, a person might say that something should not be done because it is illegal. More nuanced approaches to the law recognize laws as codifications of human moral wisdom, but not as immutable or incontrovertible. Additionally, it should be noted that the history of international law sometimes reflects the dominant power relationships embedded in colonialism and has sometimes been used in ways that harm minorities. Either way, laws and legal language frequently find their way into moral discourse and discernment.

47. Some kinds of legal instruments do not so much regulate specific activities as offer a normative moral vision of how activities should be regulated by governments and their laws. This is typical of the language found in national constitutions, bills of rights, and international documents like the United Nations 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the 1966 Covenants on Civil and Political Rights and on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Human rights, together with associated concepts like human dignity, are internationally endorsed standards that reflect inalienable rights due to individuals based on a recognition of their status as human beings, and that are assumed to contribute to human flourishing. In moral discernment, some will recognize their Christian beliefs as expressed in human rights language; others will appeal to human rights because they hold the

status of regional or international law and/or authority. While some highlight the rights of individuals, others point more to the duties and responsibilities related to human rights.

h. Culture and Cultural Artifacts (and Language)

48. The social structures, language, narratives, values, practices, media, and works of art that together constitute a culture or cultural heritage have an inescapable impact on a society's members. More specifically, the surrounding culture influences persons and communities engaged in moral decision-making in both subtle and profound ways, influencing not only people's beliefs about what is right and wrong, or good and bad, but also about what even constitutes a moral issue or problem. In addition, people frequently appeal to elements and artifacts of a culture (e.g., civic rituals, popular culture, works of literature) as being authoritative sources for moral decision-making. Christians, too, may find valuable sources for moral discernment within their local culture. Yet, Christians may also encounter moral dilemmas when real or perceived cultural expectations are in conflict with their faith commitments thus making it important to recognize and differentiate this source.

III. Causative Factors in the Disagreements between and within Churches

49. The case study approach employed in this study (as described in §§9 and 27–29) yielded two categories of factors that typically contribute to disagreement. The first category includes social and ecclesial factors that shape and affect communication. The second category includes factors stemming from different approaches to moral discernment. It should be noted that in the practice of moral reasoning these factors overlap. For purposes of analysis these factors are highlighted separately. The discussion of each factor will address how it can contribute to confusion and misunderstanding, and will be followed by an example presented in a grey box. These examples are intended as illustrations of the specific causative factors of disagreement to help the reader follow the point. They are *not* intended to be authoritative or exhaustive in any way. Each section concludes with a suggestion for reflection by those engaged in moral discernment. These suggestions for reflection, while responding to specific factors, often have relevance beyond the specific situation discussed.

A. Social and Ecclesial Factors That Shape and Affect Communication

50. Conflicts over moral issues are often affected by social and ecclesial factors (e.g. tradition, culture, interpretation, experience) that contribute to misunderstanding and disagreement. It is neither possible, nor always desirable, to eliminate these

factors. Nevertheless, increased awareness of them and how they shape and affect communication can lead to more effective ways of discussing and resolving moral differences that allow participants to recognize the humanity and integrity of the other, while engaging in meaningful dialogue about the substantive points of disagreement.

a. Influence of Historical and Cultural Contexts

51. Moral discernment is a uniquely human activity that is associated with the human capacity to take cognizance of, reflect upon, and act in the world. As people engage in the process of moral discernment they are inevitably influenced by historical, cultural, and other contextual factors. This is also true when they do so as representatives of their churches. The human realities of ethnicity, race, class, gender, disability, and personal experience, for example, shape not only a person's identity but also her or his moral perspective. People's locations in the world shape how they are treated, what they experience, how they learn to think, and even how they live out their Christian faith.

Example 1: When the World Alliance of Reformed Churches debated the "Accra Confession" (2004), although all delegates came from the Reformed tradition, they varied in their support of whether or not they agreed that neoliberal globalization was "sin." Delegates who rejected naming neoliberal globalization as sin were primarily from wealthy, developed countries in the global North, where capitalism and neoliberal globalization have not only generated great amounts of wealth, but where they also play a strong role in shaping domestic and foreign policy (particularly related to economic aid and poverty relief). However, many delegates from the global South have had a very different experience of neoliberal globalization and share the criticism of neoliberal globalization expressed in the Accra Confession. For many of the delegates from the global South, their experience of neoliberal globalization has been one of neocolonialism and continued exploitation leading to impoverishment. In this situation, people's cultural context and personal experience influenced their assessment of the morality of neoliberal globalization.

52. *Suggestion for reflection: Developing an increased attention to how one's own historical and cultural context and experience affects one's position on controversial issues can increase the understanding of one's own position. Seeking to understand, appreciate, and respect the influence of similar factors on others' positions can increase empathy and deepen recognition of our common humanity.*

b. Differing Understandings of What Is at Stake

53. In some situations, communication fails and tensions arise because different groups or persons understand what is at stake in different ways. In some cases, the discrepancy arises when two or more groups or individuals frame, understand, or label the same situation in radically different ways. Different accounts of what is at stake in a particular situation might reflect different ways in which actors use or are influenced by various sources.

54. In other cases, people engaged in dialogue may use shared terms but hold radically different understandings of the meaning of those terms. Different understandings of the problem might result in people talking past each other instead of talking with each other. In such situations, the real differences are rooted in preconceived definitions of the terms of the debate.

55. Agreeing to a shared understanding of the problem contributes to the possibility of meaningful dialogue. Sometimes, when a shared understanding of the problem is impossible, the conversation about the nature of the problem can lead to increased clarity about the problem when it helps people gain a more accurate understanding of the position and argument of the other side.

Example 2: Controversies have arisen in traditionally Orthodox territories when evangelical churches have moved in with an aim toward “evangelizing” the local populations after the fall of communism. Many Orthodox, however, understand such evangelical activities as “proselytism.” The label of “proselytism” versus “evangelism” signifies the conflicting accounts of what is at stake in this scenario. Evangelical missionaries see people who, in their understanding, have not been taught the gospel and are not practicing a Christian life. Out of concern for their neighbour and from evangelical zeal, they want to respond to God’s call in Matt. 28, and do so in a way that reflects their church culture. The Orthodox, in contrast, see a group of Christian outsiders moving into their territory who are seeking to convert members of the Orthodox Church to a foreign form of Christianity, sometimes using immoral methods, and who are introducing ways of thinking and practicing Christianity that are inconsistent with the ecclesial ethos, or church culture, of Orthodoxy. While both the Evangelicals and the Orthodox are acting out of a genuine desire to enhance the spiritual well-being of the people, their sharply different accounts of what the issue is (evangelism versus proselytism), tends to preclude their acknowledgement of this shared concern, and to entrench them in positions that lack the common language necessary for authentic dialogue.

56. *Suggestion for reflection: Carefully reflecting on the terms, definitions, and presuppositions used to frame one's understanding of the problem helps to adequately identify what is "at stake" in a given situation. Engaging in dialogue that seeks to reflect on the same issues from the other's perspective and to search for a common language can help to express what is at stake for the dialogue partners. In this process, identifying shared concerns can provide a foundation for mutually respectful dialogue. In addition, it can be helpful to acknowledge the role that a church's culture or ethos plays in how problems are perceived and in how appropriate responses are developed and assessed.*

c. Emotional Intensity of Moral Issues

57. Experiences and expressions of emotion are an intrinsic aspect of dialogue and debate about moral issues. Emotional knowledge can be an expression of human intuition; it can also be an expression of knowledge that grows out of personal experience. In many situations in which emotional intensity is expressed, it can have the positive effect of creating awareness that there is a moral issue at stake, as well as an awareness of the depth of the problem.

58. Attitudes about emotion are often culturally marked, in such a way that people from different cultural backgrounds may possess different levels of comfort or understanding of the appropriateness of emotional intensity or expression as an aspect of moral discernment. These differing attitudes about emotion can generate cross-cultural misunderstandings and tensions.

59. Church-dividing moral issues are often issues that evoke strong emotional responses, even as those responses are expressed in a wide variety of culturally distinct ways. One factor that many church-dividing issues share is a connection to personal identity. Issues of personal conduct often provoke highly emotional reactions precisely because they are rooted in people's experience, and because they relate both to an understanding of self and to one's understanding of salvation. The emotional investment associated with identity and salvation can impact the intensity with which people believe in the correctness of their moral beliefs.

60. Sometimes, this emotional intensity can complicate and even obstruct the process of dialogue. At other times, to the extent that emotion underpins the human capacity to develop and express empathy and compassion, it can also play a positive role in building relationships and understanding across lines of difference. When empathy enables movement toward tolerance and the willingness to live with ambiguity in the midst of human brokenness, it can function as an important aspect of moral community building.

Example 3: Debates over slavery, the role of women in the Church, and homosexuality are three issues that touch on and provoke emotions, and that have caused rifts within and between churches. While all churches join together in rejecting slavery, there are wide-ranging debates in the churches regarding the ordination of women and the morality of homosexual behaviour. Some churches regard the ordination of women as a doctrinal question while others see it clearly as a moral issue. Some churches make a distinction between homosexual orientation and homosexual practice while other churches regard committed homosexual relationships as morally acceptable. Debates over each of these issues are particularly emotionally charged because they are rooted in deeply personal experiences of human identity, human dignity, and salvation. Each of these debates has involved emotionally charged arguments and testimonies that can make the possibility of constructive dialogue difficult for some and devastating for others. Righteous indignation at the treatment of slaves and slave uprisings, for example, helped to establish that there was a problem in the first place. Similarly, the ability to empathize with those in such situations contributed to finding resolutions. The real challenge faced by churches over discernment on emotionally charged topics underscores both the potential for disagreements to escalate quickly, and the need for Christians to take seriously the emotional intensity that can attend the process of moral discernment.

61. *Suggestion for reflection: Recognizing and identifying the ways in which moral issues may affect people at a personal level, whether in terms of personal identity or soteriological understandings, can help those engaged in dialogue better understand the emotional quality of a debate or the emotional response of participants. It can be helpful to recognize that those with whom one disagrees are created in the image of God and to seek to talk with them in the spirit of “agape” as witnessed through the life of Christ. In some situations, the emotional quality of an issue can help to identify the problem and evoke empathy.*

d. Cultural Protocol in Debating Moral Concerns

62. Misunderstandings of cultural norms in debating moral issues can lead to breakdown and division when parties around a table come from different cultures. These cultures may be ecclesial or social. The social and the ecclesial dimensions may also overlap, such as when members of a particular church from one part of the world, governed by its own cultural norms, speak to members of the same church from a different part of the world. As a result, attention may be drawn away from the main points of the issue. Such culturally defined misunderstandings can take

two forms: those that arise from the style of engagement, and those that arise from the approach to reaching a decision.

63. Many different cultures have different protocols regarding the style with which a debate should be conducted. In some, demonstration of emotions is not only acceptable but is essential if one is to be taken seriously. Displays of anger, standing on one's dignity, and even insults are quite acceptable in some cultures, whilst, in others, such behaviour is deemed irrational, confrontational, and rude. When these two worlds collide, effective communication is often impossible, ending in dismissals of the other party as unworthy of further engagement.

64. Many different cultures and political communities have different protocols regarding how a decision should be reached, which affects how they engage in moral debates. For some cultures, a decision can only be arrived at by consensus. This means listening carefully to what each party has to say and slowly constructing a position that takes all views into account, such that each feels they can take ownership of the final decision of the group. Where no consensus is reached, no decision is made, and dialogue must continue. For other cultures, a decision is reached once there is majority support for a particular position. The minority is expected to accept this as the will of the group. In still other cultures, the final, decision-making authority is given to a person or group of persons who are deemed to hold a leadership position. The members of the group are expected to follow the leader's decision. The degree of consultation with other members in which the leadership is expected to engage can vary widely. When members of different communities meet – a consensus community and a democratic community, for instance – conflict and division can arise when a decision is arrived at in a manner that is counter-cultural for the other party.

Example 4: Great advances have been made in understanding the origins of humankind, the migrations of human beings all over the globe, and genetic diseases through the use of human genetic material. However, conflicts have arisen regarding how this genetic material may be taken, stored and used for further research. One such conflict has to do with cultural norms regarding decision-making on moral questions. In many democratic cultures, today, the right of the individual to decide about issues that affect their own body and person is widely accepted. The widespread use of “informed consent” in adult biomedical ethics in many such countries exemplifies this. However, in many genetically related communities in these same countries, such decisions are not up to the individual as they concern “genetic information” that belongs to the group. One's DNA can, in a sense, be seen to constitute part of one's cultural as well as biological heritage. As such, a decision to participate in genetic research must be

reached by group consensus or possibly through the definitive decision of the group's leader. Researchers operating out of a culturally insensitive "informed consent" paradigm can unwittingly cause great division and conflict in such communities.

65. Suggestion for reflection: Recognizing the cultural norms that define one's debating style and approach to group decision-making can improve cross-cultural communication. It can also be helpful to critically reflect on the benefits and shortcomings of one's own style and approach as well as the styles and approaches of dialogue partners. Different styles and approaches may be used by different people in different settings, such as work, home, and church. This means that it is sometimes easier to agree on norms for a particular discussion than it might at first appear. Taking time to discuss these matters openly with dialogue partners can enhance mutual understanding before embarking on discussions about moral issues.

e. Different Structural Characteristics of Churches

66. Disagreement about moral issues is not inherently church-dividing. In fact, some moral issues allow for a diversity of responses without causing tensions between communities. However, sometimes it is the case that the way that one communion allows for diversity among its churches is in conflict with the way other communions understand the limits of diversity. This discrepancy may reveal ecclesiological differences that relate to authority and church structure. For instance, some communions may allow for a limited diversity, leaving it to (local) communities to find a response while accepting and respecting that other communities might arrive at another conclusion and thus act differently. In other circumstances, some issues will not allow for diversity, because it is held that these issues should not be decided by groups within a community; instead, a consensus across the whole church is required. These scenarios exist due to different intra and inter-church understandings of who has the responsibility and authority to decide. The range of acceptable divergence over moral issues differs across churches as it is indeed often tied to their ecclesiology.

Example 5: In a dialogue project about "The Church local and universal" between Protestant churches, the Roman Catholic Church and the Old Catholic Church in the Netherlands, the question of ecclesiology and its implications for moral decision-making arose: the discussion focused on the question whether topics such as women's ordination and ministers living in a publicly recognized homosexual partnership require a consensus of the whole church (or synod), or if for example the synod could decide to allow for it while at the same time leaving implementation up to the local congregations. The discussion revealed that the ecclesiology of the Reformed tradition – being more congregational in nature – would allow

for the latter, whereas for Roman Catholics such a discussion, because it also involved ministry, would need to be made by the Church universal and would then bind the whole Church. Furthermore, the issue of women's ordination is not considered a moral issue by the Roman Catholic Church, but, rather a doctrinal issue. What appeared first as a mere moral decision-making process, turned out to have deeply ecclesiological aspects, which in turn had a consequence for determining who has the ecclesiological authority to make the decision.

67. Suggestion for reflection: Recognizing how the ecclesiology of a community or church influences the decision-making process can sometimes help illuminate the potential source of disagreement. In some cases it can be helpful to determine who, with respect to the moral issue at stake, has the ecclesiological authority to make the decision. It may also help to figure out whether the issue is of such a nature that ecclesiological implications are involved.

f. Power

68. Conflict on moral questions is frequently associated with issues of power. Human persons are embedded in relationships characterized by differing degrees and kinds of power associated with roles, affiliations, and expectations. The result is that persons frequently have to negotiate balances and imbalances of power between persons and groups in an effort to discern the best course of moral behaviour.

69. It is important to distinguish between power and authority. In the Church, faithful moral discernment might become clouded by the assertion of naked human political power, or worse yet, human power interests veiled in the language of divine will, the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and so on. This is distinct from a discernment that is enlightened by assent to grace-filled authorities. Christians are seeking the "mind of Christ" and the "will of God" – not seeking to "win" an argument. Identifying the individual and political power interests at stake in a moral issue is an important step in avoiding uncritical acceptance of existing power relations as "ordained by God."

Example 6: In the context of apartheid in South Africa, both theology and morality were strongly tied up with power interests that manifested themselves in unjust structures and sometimes violent rebellion. In 1985, the Kairos Document identified different kinds of power at work in apartheid in South Africa. The first of these was "State Theology," in which Christian sources were used to justify apartheid and maintain the status quo. The apartheid government styled itself as the defender of Christianity and

freedom, against the atheism and totalitarianism of communism. Secondly, “Church Theology” describes the practice of some churches, usually governed by whites, to spiritualize Christian belief on the one hand, and to appeal to concepts like non-violence on the other, in order to justify their own inaction against the injustices of apartheid. Finally, the document calls for a “Prophetic Theology” that challenges the abuse of power and of theology by the state, and explicitly identifies itself with the dormant power of oppressed peoples. Such a theology highlights the power of the people to determine their own destiny and not to accept the illegitimate power of tyranny. Thus, one’s theological and moral outlook in apartheid in South Africa was often a product of the power interests with which one identified.

70. Suggestion for reflection: Analyzing where power is located, how power is being used and who is benefiting from the power in a particular moral situation can help participants think more carefully about some of the social aspects of moral questions. The link between power and a moral position may not always be illegitimate. The power of the people to resist unjust oppression by a minority is a good example. Nevertheless, it is helpful to critically and humbly examine how power should be used and the role it should play in moral discernment.

g. Stereotypes

71. Stereotypes are qualities assigned to groups of people due to race, nationality, sexual orientation and so on. In most cases, stereotypes are perpetuated by power and status. Stereotypes can be used to generalize people’s behaviour leading to discrimination. They carry with them bias, prejudice, and prior assumptions about groups of people that often inhibit the recognition of individual human dignity. They can exaggerate and magnify differences between groups and minimize similarities. When engagement with moral issues is shaped by stereotypes, there is a danger of discrimination and stigmatization. Groups that are socialized in ways that draw on or perpetuate stereotypes may fail to see others’ viewpoints, thus failing to come to terms with the experiences of those who are marginalized.

Example 7: HIV and AIDS are often shrouded in stereotypical thinking that leaves churches with judgmental attitudes toward particular groups of people. Global responses to the pandemic are also in some cases driven by false stereotypes that tend to associate the disease with particular groups or contexts. Stereotypical thinking around HIV and AIDS includes: feminization of the pandemic (commonly found in areas where more women than men are infected with the pandemic); associating HIV with homosexuality,

drug related behaviour, promiscuity, and poverty; identification of HIV and AIDS as a neo-colonial plot to control fertility in the developing world. Moral dialogue in the churches should be informed by accurate scientific and epidemiological information, not stereotypes. Stereotypes like these can generate a stigmatizing process that undermines dialogue and creates negative attitudes toward others, leading to the possibility of divisions between and within the churches. These assumptions and stereotypes also impacted churches in Africa. Some churches and church members ostracized HIV-positive people as sinful and justly punished by God, thus denying them the right to belong. Other people left their churches because they felt stigmatized and rejected. This rejection and ostracism sometimes resulted in a denial of a moral duty to care for the sick and dying.

72. Suggestion for reflection: Developing an increased consciousness of the pervasiveness and perniciousness of stereotypes and how they function in moral debates can help to prevent stereotypes from interfering in moral discourse. Working to minimize the influence of stereotypes can help prevent veiling issues of moral significance and can help create an all-embracing Church that reflects God's gracious love.

h. Attitudes toward Otherness

73. Attitudes toward otherness can be seen in two forms among groups of people; those who are generally open toward otherness and those who often view otherness with suspicion or believe the acceptance of difference will threaten their own identity. Positive or negative views of otherness are influenced by factors such as family upbringing, socio-cultural conditioning, and personal experience. The kind of socio-cultural values one grows up with may shape the way one embraces or excludes otherness. Churches can play a normative role in either perpetuating a negative attitude toward otherness, or helping people to be more accepting and inclusive. In addition, differing attitudes toward otherness can themselves become divisive within churches, with some members seeking a more diverse and inclusive worshipping community and others resisting change and difference.

Example 8: The damaging results of negative attitudes toward otherness are evident in some of the ways in which imperialism and colonialism played out in the churches in Latin America, Asia and Africa. In most African countries, for example, imperialism and colonialism are associated with the introduction of mission churches into the continent. From a moral perspective, colonizers and imperial powers often enforced their cultural attitudes and perspectives on local cultures in ways that disrespected

the moral agency and cultural habits and attitudes of local people. In some cases, the introduction of Christianity was viewed as an imposition of Western culture and a rejection of otherness. Blocked by a mutual incapacity to appreciate and embrace difference, dialogue broke down between Africans and Europeans. Some Africans felt that the mission Church did not effectively address their cultural context (language barriers, values, norms, power, customs and so on). Consequently, they left the mission churches to start their own churches known as African Independent Churches (AIC). The problem here was not the Christian faith, but rather the perceived imposition of cultural uniformity on the part of the mission churches that failed to adequately respect and allow local practices to inform church culture. This ongoing difference between the North and South continues to cause divisions between and within churches where decisions are seen to be made by the North in matters that have significant impact in the South.

74. Suggestion for reflection: Diversity and otherness, like sameness and continuity, are intrinsic aspects of the created world. Affirming difference and otherness can enhance church community and human flourishing.

B. Factors Stemming from Different Approaches to Moral Discernment

75. In addition to the social and ecclesial factors that shape and frame our experiences of conflict over moral issues, there are factors intrinsic to the process of moral discernment that also contribute to disagreement, both within and between churches. The study process has revealed five main factors that, while not independent of the factors discussed above, are grounded in differences that are based more directly upon how moral positions are developed and defended.

a. Using Different Sources and Weighing them Differently

76. As described in part II above, a wide range of sources are available to those engaged in the process of moral discernment. When conflicts over moral issues arise, one common cause is that those involved appeal to different sources and attribute different authoritative weight to the sources they are using. While this factor sometimes reflects broad and long-standing differences between churches (e.g., on whether or to what extent the lives and writings of saints are authoritative), it also appears in more subtle ways, even within churches. The result can be a deadlock that escalates into division.

Example 9: Suicide has often been regarded as a voluntary act that directly violates the scriptural commandments “do not kill” and “love your neighbour as yourself.” This led to church law and liturgical practices prohibiting a church funeral or burial for persons who committed suicide. However, advances in medicine and mental health fields have led to a more nuanced understanding of depression and its impact on human freedom, calling into question the presumed voluntary character of many suicides. Increased attention has also been given to the experience of the families of those who died through suicide and to their pastoral needs. The inclusion of these “new” sources into the moral debate around suicide, as well as changes to the relative emphasis of their importance, has impacted discernment about what constitutes the “right” pastoral response to suicide. This example illustrates how the openness to knowledge from new or different sources – in this case to findings from natural and social sciences and human experience – has brought about a reconsideration of the moral evaluation of the culpability of suicide, leading to a revision of church law and liturgical practice in many churches.

77. Suggestion for reflection: Identifying what sources are being appealed to in different moral arguments and seeking to understand the moral argument that is being made can both be helpful strategies for engaging in dialogue. Avoiding accusing others of simply dismissing or disregarding certain authoritative sources can help involved communities recognize that appealing to different sources and weighing them differently can be a reflection of the complexity and richness of Christian ethical reflection. Recognizing that people make moral arguments in different ways is an essential procedural step in creating an atmosphere of open and productive dialogue. It is only when people are able to truly understand the argument their opponent is making that they will be able to recognize and appreciate where their differences lie.

b. Interpreting Sources Differently

78. In addition to using different sources, it is also the case that even when people utilize the same sources they often employ them in different ways. The moment the Bible is read, spoken aloud, or translated it enters the hermeneutical realm, the realm of interpretation. Since scripture does not exist in unmediated forms – it is always read and translated, necessarily interpreted – the question is: who and what is mediating the text? The answer to this question is, of course, different for different churches, communions, and regions of the world because each reading of sacred text is mediated through a variety of sources including the Church Fathers, the *magisterium*, science/reason, and human experience. While the most obvious example of this is the use of scripture, it is also true with regard to the use of all sources.

Example 10: In discussions on capital punishment among Christians, for example, all value scripture and recognize it as authoritative in their faith; however, their disagreement over whether or not the death penalty should be endorsed as a properly Christian punishment today for certain egregious crimes stems from how each of them read the Bible. For some, capital punishment is justified by appeals to multiple Old Testament texts and to New Testament passages like Romans 13. They argue that these texts, especially those in the New Testament, express timeless truths that Christians should support regardless of shifting cultural attitudes or other factors. For others, capital punishment should be rejected on the basis of Jesus' biblical example of non-violence and because of passages affirming the sanctity of life and dignity of all persons. They see the Bible as authoritative not because it provides timeless prescriptions for moral laws but because it provides theological and moral principles that, in turn, guide moral discernment.

79. Suggestion for reflection: In examining the sources that Christians and churches use in moral discernment, it is important to examine how scripture is being used and interpreted as a source of authority. Simply recognizing that different parties do value scripture, or another common source, as authoritative for the process of moral discernment could help to ease some of the tensions and open up avenues for advancing dialogue.

c. Conflict between Competing Principles

80. Churches are moved by their commitments to theological, ethical, and social principles about what it means to be Christians or to be the Church in a fallen world. "Protecting and promoting life," "growth in holiness," "solidarity with the poor," "liberating the oppressed," "respecting the local church," "bringing peace to the world," and "spreading the gospel," just to name a few, are principles that Christian communities strive to live out and honour in their responses to moral issues. In some situations, however, two or more deeply held principles may conflict and produce a moral dilemma, a situation in which it is impossible to avoid compromising at least one deeply held principle. Recognizing the moral argument of your opponent can help elucidate the reasons why another person or group holds a different position.

Example 11: Increased life expectancy, advancements in medical technology, and a rise in terminal conditions entailing long suffering have led to often heated debates about questions concerning the end of life. Sometimes couched in the confusing language of “euthanasia,” various positions exist regarding the moral legitimacy of ending a person’s life. Sometimes in these debates, different positions are taken based on different weighing of the moral principles that are deemed to be most important to respect and further in circumstances where a terminal condition can be foreseen to entail a long period of suffering. For example, some might argue that all active ending of life in such circumstances is morally bad because it contravenes the principle of the “Sanctity of Life.” Those who hold this position would argue that the sanctity of life is best preserved by allowing God to decide when a person’s life should end. Others might argue that the principle of “Respect for Autonomy” is the most important principle for Christians to uphold. From this perspective, if a person’s free choice concerning her own life – and how best to realize its meaning and purpose – is not upheld, one ultimately denies the humanity of the person and violates God’s gracious gift of freedom. In other words, here are differing positions on end-of-life decisions that arise out of an appeal to different principles, sanctity of life, on the one hand, and human freedom, on the other.

81. *Suggestion for reflection: Seeking to identify and discuss the core principles informing each stakeholder in the debate can offer common ground that increases understanding on the one hand, and provides a shared witness to the world, on the other.*

d. Applying the Same Principle Differently

82. In situations of disagreement over moral issues or dilemmas, the discomfort and even anger that people feel toward others can make it difficult for dialogue to occur. Even more distressing is the fact that these differences can make it appear as if different groups of Christians hold fundamentally different and, perhaps, competing moral principles. In some situations, however, groups on different “sides” of an issue may actually share the same fundamental principle but disagree about how to express or achieve it. This disagreement may be influenced by the way in which different groups engage in the process of moral discernment (e.g. the use of different sources, different interpretations of scripture), by differing historical or cultural perspectives, or even by differing human experience. Identifying what moral principles shape different moral arguments can help groups that disagree find common ground upon which to begin conversations and recognize the integrity of the other parties’ effort to live out their Christian convictions.

Example 12: Abortion is a classic example of a moral issue in which people and groups on different sides of the debate may actually share some common commitment to core principles. Among the many principles that may be invoked in this complicated issue, some people and churches appeal to the principle of “human dignity.” However, differing beliefs about when a distinct human life obtains personhood influences people’s opinions about the moral status of the embryo/fetus. This, in turn, impacts how they apply the principle of “human dignity” in the situation of the termination of a pregnancy. For instance, people who equate the moment of conception as conferring personhood would apply the principle of human dignity as fully to the embryo/fetus as they do to a baby that is already born. For others, the moment of conception, while beginning a process that may lead to the birth of a baby, does not, in and of itself confer the moral status of “personhood” on the embryo/fetus. In this instance, while the developing embryo/fetus is certainly valued, its moral status is not considered equivalent to that of the pregnant woman and it is only the pregnant woman who is recognized as fully warranting human dignity and the rights and privileges associated with the principle of human dignity.

83. *Suggestion for reflection: One way of searching for common ground within Christian tradition and values is to identify shared values and principles. This can be a first step toward building trust and improving the quality of the dialogue.*

e. Conflict between Different Approaches toward Moral Reasoning

84. Different methods of reasoning about a moral issue can lead to different conclusions, and so to conflicts and division, about what the right thing to do may be. Focusing on the consequences or ends of a particular course of action may yield a different conclusion than focusing on the rightness or wrongness of particular actions being undertaken to achieve those ends. A consideration of the rightness or wrongness of a person’s intentions may yield different conclusions about the moral rightness or wrongness of an action compared with a consideration of the rightness or wrongness of the action itself. Likewise a combination of an analysis of intentions, ends, means, and character, with or without a differential weighing of these aspects, may lead to a different conclusion and hence to conflict.

Example 13: Many churches, in their role as providers of healthcare, have become embroiled in debates about how to deal with problems associated with drug addiction, particularly with respect to drugs like heroin that are widely held to be illegal. This can lead to painful disputes and division. Many of those within churches who advocate the provision of safe heroin injection centres argue that, though this might be seen to be collaborating in bad acts, such efforts are necessary to prevent many of the fatal consequences of unregulated drug use, like the contraction of HIV and Hepatitis C from soiled needles. Moreover, they argue, these centres bring drug users into contact with people who can help them realize the dangers of drug use and provide them with treatment, instead of condemning them. These advocates are considering the consequences of providing heroin injection centres as the basis for arriving at their judgment. Opponents of heroin injection centres tend to focus on the act being performed. From this perspective drug abuse is always an intrinsically evil act and hence always morally wrong. Complicity in helping other people use drugs is therefore also always morally wrong and cannot be condoned regardless of the intentions of the helpers or potentially good consequences of their actions. Differing approaches to moral reasoning have thus led to different conclusions, and hence conflict in churches, on the moral rightness or wrongness of a course of action to address a moral issue.

85. Suggestion for reflection: Developing knowledge about different approaches to ethical reasoning can allow for deeper understanding across lines of difference. One might begin by identifying one's own approach to ethical reasoning and understanding clearly what factors play a role in favoring this approach over others. Whichever approach is preferred, it is helpful to try to understand as many of the aspects potentially involved in determining the moral rightness or wrongness of issues or courses of action, including intentions, consequences, circumstances, acts, and character. Respecting the sincerity of another person's approach to moral reasoning can open the way to dialogue.

IV. CONCLUSION

86. The current study reveals a wide range of social and ethical factors that contribute to divisions within the Church over moral issues. Identification of the various factors, as well as honest acknowledgment of their roles in real-life disagreements, is a necessary first step in moving dialogue in a constructive direction. Moral disagreements grow out of a complex web of causative factors that require patient, careful, and sustained consideration. It may seem, at first, that these factors will inevitably

undermine unity, that there is no hope for preventing deep divisions among Christians over claims about “right” and “wrong” human behaviour. To be sure, the social and ethical factors delineated above, as well as others not here developed, are formidable obstacles to ecumenical progress. However, the study has not only revealed obstacles; it has generated insight into common ground that Christians share in processes of moral discernment. The first portion of this conclusion highlights that common ground and calls on Christian churches to seek increased dialogue focused on the common ground that is shared as a foundation for seeking understanding of the other in the midst of perceived disagreements. The second portion of the conclusion represents the suggestions for reflection from the previous section as guidance for churches engaged in divisive moral debates.

A. Articulating Common Ground for Moral Discernment

87. The ecumenical dialogue generated by this study process confirmed that the churches share many common sources and common commitments. Recognition and affirmation of these commonalities allowed case study participants to identify common ground and shared values upon which they were able to build a conversation. An awareness of these shared factors and attitudes is important for the study of moral discernment in the churches and can help the churches claim common ground that can serve as the foundation for Christian witness and service.

a. Common Sources Provide Common Ground for Moral Discernment:

i. Scripture

88. All churches value the Bible as an essential source of moral authority, even though the use and interpretation of it may be sometimes rather different.

ii. Tradition

89. Similarly, all churches refer in one way or another to tradition when they are confronted with moral discernment and decision-making, though the concept of tradition and the authority attributed to it vary considerably from one confession to another.

iii. Human knowledge

90. Besides these more directly theological or ecclesial sources, all churches appeal to other sources in the analysis of concrete situations demanding moral discernment. All recognize the importance of human reason and critical thinking, conscience and experience, and the shared wisdom of humanity, as reflected in:

- natural sciences;
- medical sciences;

- human sciences that help us analyze culture, history, and contemporary experience;
- international law and human rights;
- and other disciplines of critical inquiry.

Though the churches draw from these non-ecclesial sources, they may weigh them differently in any given situation.

91. Recognizing that Christians share common sources in the process of moral discernment is a crucial step in helping to understand how different moral positions endeavour to be rooted in Christian faithfulness.

b. The Common Ground That Christians Share Leads to Common Commitments:

92. Sharing one baptism in the Triune God, Christians are committed together to follow Christ and to proclaim and serve the Kingdom of God, as good news to all humankind, offering hope to the desperate and light in the darkness. In the process of discussing the case studies, participants also found that they shared common commitments rooted in their faith. One example was the commitment to caring for the poor and vulnerable that Christians from the global North and the global South shared as they discussed issues of poverty and economics. Likewise, in the discussion about proselytism/evangelism both parties share a commitment to building up the body of Christ in the world and attending to the spiritual health and well-being of the members of the community. The value of identifying the common commitments that different parties share is a productive starting point for genuine dialogue that can lead to understanding.

93. This common ground is a central aspect of the unity that Christians share as followers of Christ. It reflects the “moral community” affirmed in previous Faith and Order studies on ecclesiology and ethics and demonstrates that there is much that Christians share in common, even in the midst of what appear to be significantly different perspectives on questions of morality. Claiming common ground can help the churches respond more faithfully to the command and the prayer of the Lord “that they may all be one...that the world may believe” (John 17:21).

B. Suggestions for Those Engaged in Moral Discernment

94. While the history of the WCC Standing Commission on Faith and Order has largely focused on doctrinal and theological issues, the past 30 years has seen increasing attention to the moral dimensions of ecclesiology. With tensions increasing in recent years, within and between churches, over the ecclesial positions of some churches and ecumenical bodies on various moral questions, churches have increasingly asked for guidance on how to deal with existing and potential divisions. Faith

and Order designed the Moral Discernment in the Churches study as a response to the significant threat to church unity posed by responses to divisive moral issues.

95. The majority of the participants in the process who responded to the study materials indicated that the case study methodology was a productive way to engage in dialogue about moral differences in ecumenical settings in order to increase awareness and understanding of the problems. The Standing Commission on Faith and Order affirms the value of the case study model and recommends that churches, ecumenical councils, and other interested groups study these cases and discuss them as a way of thinking more critically about the ways we disagree with one another.

96. Affirmation of the value of engaging in structured dialogues about the process of moral discernment is the greatest recommendation developed over the six years of the Moral Discernment in the Churches study. Through the case study process, feedback consistently indicated that participants valued their increased clarity about the process of moral discernment as well as careful study of the causative factors that contribute to moral disagreements. Through the development of additional study materials, the Faith and Order Commission and the World Council of Churches can help encourage and support churches, persons, and communities to engage in moral discernment processes that are more illuminative and less divisive.

97. As a result of the study process, the Faith and Order Standing Commission has developed a set of suggestions for the churches related to encouraging improved processes of moral discernment and dialogue. They are offered as a starting point for further reflection and testing.

98. Developing an increased attention to how one's own historical and cultural context and experience affects one's position on controversial issues can increase the understanding of one's own position. Seeking to understand, appreciate, and respect the influence of similar factors on others' positions can increase empathy and deepen recognition of our common humanity.

99. Carefully reflecting on the terms, definitions, and presuppositions used to frame one's understanding of the problem helps to adequately identify what is "at stake" in a given situation. Engaging in dialogue that seeks to reflect on the same issues from the other's perspective and searching for a common language can help to express what is at stake for both dialogue partners. In this process, identifying shared concerns can provide a foundation for mutually respectful dialogue. In addition, it can be helpful to acknowledge the role that a church's culture or ethos plays in how problems are perceived and in how appropriate responses are developed and assessed.

100. Recognizing and identifying the ways in which moral issues may affect people at a personal level, whether in terms of personal identity or soteriological

understandings, can help those engaged in dialogue better understand the emotional quality of a debate or the emotional response of participants. It can be helpful to recognize that those with whom one disagrees are created in the image of God and to seek to talk with them in the spirit of *agape* as witnessed through the life of Christ. In some situations, the emotional quality of an issue can help to identify the problem and evoke empathy.

101. Recognizing the cultural norms that define one's debating style and approach to group decision-making can improve cross-cultural communication. It can also be helpful to critically reflect on the benefits and shortcomings of one's own style and approach as well as the styles and approaches of dialogue partners. Different styles and approaches may be used by different people in different settings, such as work, home, and church. This means that it is sometimes easier to agree on norms for a particular discussion than it might at first appear. Taking time to discuss these matters openly with dialogue partners can enhance mutual understanding before embarking on discussions about moral issues.

102. Recognizing how the ecclesiology of a community or church influences the decision-making process can sometimes help illuminate the potential source of disagreement. In some cases it can be helpful to determine who, with respect to the moral issue at stake, has the ecclesiological authority to make the decision. It may also help to figure out whether the issue is of such a nature that ecclesiological implications are involved.

103. Analyzing where power is located, how power is being used and who is benefiting from the power in a particular moral situation can help participants think more carefully about some of the social aspects of moral questions. The link between power and a moral position may not always be illegitimate. The power of the people to resist unjust oppression by a minority is a good example. Nevertheless, it is helpful to critically and humbly examine how power should be used and the role it should play in moral discernment.

104. Developing an increased consciousness of the pervasiveness and perniciousness of stereotypes and how they function in moral debates can help to prevent stereotypes from interfering in moral discourse. Working to minimize the influence of stereotypes can help prevent veiling issues of moral significance and can help create an all-embracing Church that reflects God's gracious love.

105. Diversity and otherness, like sameness and continuity, are intrinsic aspects of the created world. Affirming difference and otherness can enhance church community and human flourishing.

106. Identifying what sources are being appealed to in different moral arguments and seeking to understand the moral argument that is being made can both be

helpful strategies for engaging in dialogue. Avoiding accusing others of simply dismissing or disregarding certain authoritative sources can help involved communities recognize that appealing to different sources and weighing them differently can be a reflection of the complexity and richness of Christian ethical reflection. Recognizing that people make moral arguments in different ways is an essential procedural step in creating an atmosphere of open and productive dialogue. It is only when people are able to truly *understand* the argument that their opponent is making that they will be able to recognize and appreciate where their differences lie.

107. In examining the sources that Christians and churches use in moral discernment, it is important to examine how scripture is being used and interpreted as a source of authority. Simply recognizing that different parties do value scripture, or another common source, as authoritative for the process of moral discernment could help to ease some of the tensions and open up avenues for advancing dialogue.

108. Seeking to identify and discuss the core principles informing each stakeholder in the debate can offer common ground that increases understanding on the one hand, and provides a shared witness to the world, on the other.

109. One way of searching for common ground within Christian tradition and values is to identify shared values and principles. This can be a first step toward building trust and improving the quality of the dialogue.

110. Developing knowledge about different approaches to ethical reasoning can allow for deeper understanding across lines of difference. One might begin by identifying one's own approach to ethical reasoning and understanding clearly what factors play a role in favoring this approach over others. Whichever approach is preferred, it is helpful to try to understand as many of the aspects potentially involved in determining the moral rightness or wrongness of issues or courses of action, including intentions, consequences, circumstances, acts, and character. Respecting the sincerity of another person's approach to moral reasoning can open the way to dialogue.

Appendix 2: Faith and Order

Study Group on Moral Discernment:

Members, 2015–2021

Co-Convenors:

The Very Rev. Dr Vladimir Shmaliy, Russian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate), Russian Federation

Prof. Dr Myriam Wijlens, Roman Catholic Church, Germany

Members:

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Rev. Dr Monica Coleman, African Methodist Episcopal Church, United States of America (until 2018)

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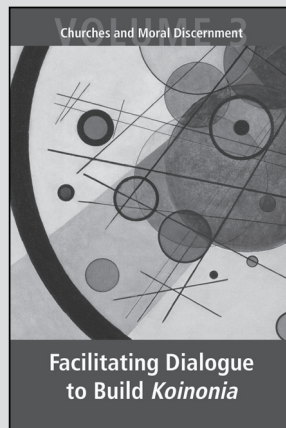
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Rev. Dr Simone Sinn, Faith and Order Secretariat, WCC (from 2018)

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Myriam Wijlens, a Dutch Roman Catholic theologian and canon lawyer, teaches at the University of Erfurt (Germany). Her research focuses on necessary reforms of canonical structures in light of ecumenically relevant ecclesiological developments. Among her publications is *Sharing the Eucharist*.

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