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# Ethical Actualization of Scripture: Approaches toward a Prolife Reading

William Kurz
*Marquette University*, william.kurz@marquette.edu

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# Ethical Actualization of Scripture: Approaches toward a Prolife Reading

William S. Kurz, S.J.

Marquette University

A cacophony of conflicting moral opinions and judgments confuses contemporary moral discourse, even among moralists who claim to be using Scripture in their ethical assessments. This may be due not only to profound discrepancies regarding ethical presuppositions and methods, but also to a bewildering array of approaches toward exegeting, interpreting and applying Scripture to moral questions.[1] Although historical uses of Scripture for ethics have had a certain "ecumenical" effect, providing more of a common context and consequently a closer approximation of perspectives and judgments by Protestant and Catholic ethicists than if they had been derived solely from their respective denominational interpretive traditions, there remain some notable denominational differences in moral judments when consulting Scripture. Moreover, postmodern shifts beyond customary

[1] For a handy overview of issues in OT and NT ethics, see Temba L.J. Mafico, *D-G*, vol. 2 of *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, edited by David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 645-52; Pheme Perkins, *D-G*, *ABD* 2. 652-665. For quite diverse uses of Scripture, see, e.g., Willard M. Swartley, *Slavery, Sabbath, War, and Women: Case Issues in Biblical Interpretation* (Scottdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1983); Charles Curran, and Richard McCormick, ed., *The Use of Scripture in Moral Theology: Readings in Moral Theology, No. 4* (New York: Paulist Press, 1984).

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historical methods toward literary, liberationist, canonical and other approaches to Scripture have reintroduced further serious discrepancies in what ethicists claim Scripture is mandating, even within a single denomination, including among Catholic moral thinkers.[2]

Although such challenges to the supremacy of historical readings of Scripture for ethical questions have apparently not yet had a conspicuous impact on mainstream Catholic biblical-ethical publications, substantial new moral questions relating to human life at both ends of the life span necessitate a greater assertiveness in arguing for more holistic and canonical approaches. Otherwise we risk losing our moral compass in a sea of relativistic utilitarianism and failing to maintain continuity with our rich Catholic tradition of moral principles.

## Use and Abuse of the Bible Regarding Life Issues

A serious scandal in contemporary American Catholicism is the numerous publications by professedly Catholic authors which promote moral opinions (sometimes justified as based on Scripture) that directly contradict centuries-old Catholic moral positions, especially in sexuality and human life concerns. This scandal causes even more confusion among ordinary Catholics when these notions are preached or proposed in confession or pastoral settings. Nonacademic believers appropriately ask how after all these centuries, the Bible can only now be saying that it is all right to end one's own or a loved one's life when in misery, that homosexual actions can be loving and permitted, or that abortion is a woman's choice.

It is common knowledge how for decades the Bible has been a battleground over sexual and life issues in many denominations, including Catholicism, with both sides claiming support for their mutually contradictory positions. Conclusions have not infrequently been decided before Scripture was even consulted. The Bible has repeatedly been mined for confirmatory evidence and arguments with little attention to the context or original meaning of those passages. Al-

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[2] E.g., the energetic debates in Kevin Wm. Wildes, and Alan C. Mitchell, *Choosing Life: A Dialogue on Evangelium Vitae* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1997); Robert J. Daly, author & ed, *Christian Biblical Ethics. From Biblical Revelation to Contemporary Christian Praxis: Method and Content*, Terence J. Keegan, James A. Fischer, Anthony J. Tambasco (New York: Paulist Press, 1984).

though both sides have resorted to proof-texting, revisionists have also introduced a relatively new twist, a kind of "anti-proof-texting," as in arguments that all the biblical statements which seemingly condemn homosexual behavior actually do not apply to the current understanding and phenomena.[3]

A major catalyst for undermining traditional biblical moral absolutes has been the currently prevalent exegetical tradition that interprets NT moral statements as merely "parenesis" rather than commands or laws. Instead of a divine command which Christians must obey, NT statements are generally construed as "moral ideals" or exhortations, which are not necessarily expected to be executed in their fullness.[4] For example, prohibitions against divorce or adultery become moral ideals not necessarily attainable in all situations.

Paradoxically, another common approach to NT ethics also has a potentially relativizing effect, namely, the subordination of all explicit moral prescriptions and prohibitions (like not killing) under the "love command," to love God above all and neighbor as oneself. Under the love command the biblical injunctions to turn the other cheek and not to kill might both be treated as moral ideals, confusing the distinctly unequal demands they respectively make (exhortatory vs. normative) on the audience.

## Historical Critical Relativism: Biblical Norms as "Culturally Conditioned"

One of the most substantial concerns with historical critical applications of Scripture to ethical judgments relates to typical arguments that this or that statement by Paul or even Jesus is culturally conditioned, and therefore not pertinent to the current circumstances. One cannot, of course, deny the importance of being aware of historical contexts and how they influence the content or manner of bib-

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[3] For a concise overview, see David F. Wright, "Homosexuality," in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, eds. Gerald F. Hawthorne, and Ralph P. Martin, assoc. ed. Daniel G. Reid (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 413-15.

[4] See esp. Bruno Schüller, "The Debate on the Specific Character of Christian Ethics: Some Remarks," in *Readings in Moral Theology No. 2: The Distinctiveness of Christian Ethics*, eds. Charles E. Curran, and Robert A. McCormick (New York, N.Y.: Paulist Press, 1980), 207-33.

lical commands concerning moral or social issues. For example, it is self-evident that some biblical statements about slavery are culturally conditioned and related to a Greco-Roman environment which the tiny minority of Christians were helpless to change. However, this claim for the cultural conditioning, and hence the relativity of moral commands and judgments in Old or New Testament, continues to be aggressively expanded toward ever further revisionism of biblical and traditional social roles and moral judgments. More and more of what Paul or Jesus said is asserted to be culturally conditioned; less and less is treated as authoritative or even applicable to contemporary living. This too is a scandal or stumbling block to the faith of ordinary believers, leading to a widespread notion that social relationships and moral commands in the NT are for the most part irrelevant or even inappropriate for modern living.

This raises the specter of "political correctness" coming to replace the Bible as source of moral absolutes. "Nature abhors a vacuum," and it is already obvious in many university, academic, and political settings that the earlier biblical and traditional moral absolutes are being rapidly replaced by even more oppressive, non-negotiable, and intolerant politically correct absolutes. Witness the persecution that the Boy Scouts are enduring because they dare to make moral judgments about the kind of men they want leading their vulnerable boys, or the hostile intolerance toward and even persecution of pro-lifers in many academic and media settings and some political parties.

## Beyond Historical Criticism for the "Literal Sense" of Scripture

In some quarters, there seems to be an increasing realization that serious interpretive problems can be caused by the virtual identification of the "Literal Sense" of Scripture with the results of historical criticism, an identification which is common among American Catholic biblicists and apparently even implied by recent documents like Vatican II's *Dei Verbum* or the Pontifical Biblical Commission's (henceforth PBC) *Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (*IBC*).[5] Per-

[5] See the first part of par. 12 in "Dei Verbum: Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation," in *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, 1981 ed., edited by Austin Flannery (Northport, N.Y.: Costello Publishing Company, 1975), 750-65, and Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (Boston: St. Paul Books & Media, 1993).

haps the most serious pastoral consequence of such an identification of literal sense with historical-critical reading might be introduced by a saying of Jesus: "Woe to you lawyers! for you have taken away the key of knowledge; you did not enter yourselves, and you hindered those who were entering" (Luke 11:52, RSV). If the key to understanding the literal meaning of the Bible is historical criticism, and this in turn is the exclusive province of the modern lawyer-scribes (professional exegetes), then both the Church magisterium in Catholicism and the private interpreter in Protestantism have been displaced as final arbiters of Scripture's meaning. Even though academic exegetes themselves often show little interest in the meaning that the Bible has for either systematic or moral theology or for ordinary believers' lives, they nonetheless typically insist that non-biblical systematic and moral theologians and also ordinary believers obtain this key from them. This frequently has a paralyzing effect on preaching and theologizing from Scripture and on finding moral direction from it.

**Historical Methods as Protecting against Eisegesis and Biases**

This concern is not, however, to be construed as a rejection of historical criticism itself. Historical approaches will always have a very important function for the Church at large in helping readers be aware of the sometimes considerable distances between what an ancient text is saying and their own contemporary presuppositions and points of view. Providing critical distance between reader and text can help protect the text from the reader's eisegeses and biases. Such critical distance can also caution against premature, inappropriate or literalistic application of some biblical injunctions, such as "Slaves, be obedient to your masters," or against identifying the "mark of Cain" with skin color. Awareness of the meaning and function of *Haustafeln* or "household codes" can lend nuance to their application to a different social context today and can avert destructive literalistic attempts to pigeonhole women into narrow social roles within both families and communities.[6]

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[6] Cf. John Paul II, "On the Dignity and Vocation of Women" (*Mulieris dignitatem*), (Washington, D.C.: Office of Pub. and Promotion Services, U.S. Catholic Conference, 1988) § 24.

## Alienating Effects of Historical Criticism

Nevertheless, this beneficial provision of critical distance can also have a side effect of alienating the text from contemporary concerns and rendering it largely irrelevant for today's readers. If Paul's concerns, worldview, and social context were so radically different from those of believers today, then his commands, prohibitions, and suggestions can seem largely meaningless for contemporary Christian living. This alienation can be a negative by-product of the otherwise commendable avoidance of prooftexting by means of insistance on the historical and cultural contexts and conditioned meanings of biblical commands or prohibitions. Equally alienating, but in a quite different manner, is the kind of inverted revisionist prooftexting that tries to gather all the biblical commands that contradict the exegete's contemporary position and then contends that each of these commands refers to something other than the modern condition (e.g. homosexual orientation). In both scenarios, the explicit meaning of biblical statements or commands is rendered inapplicable and worthless for guiding contemporary life and morality.

## "Literal Meaning" of Scripture and the "Author's Intention"

Vatican II's 1965 document on revelation, *Dei Verbum* (art.12), relies on the notion of the human author's intention as a component of how it describes the human aspects of God's biblical revelation. "However, since God speaks in Sacred Scripture through men in human fashion,(6) the interpreter of Sacred Scripture, in order to see clearly what God wanted to communicate to us, should carefully investigate *what meaning the sacred writers really intended*, and what God wanted to manifest by means of their words" (emphasis mine). The notion of authorial intention in itself has certain difficulties which literary critics refer to as "the intentional fallacy."[7] The most apparent is that a written text contains what the author actually wrote, regardless of the extent to which those words correspond to his inner intentions, which are not detectable by other ordinary human interpreters. Perhaps with respect to this reservation, *Dei Verbum* tries to balance intention with actual execution: "The interpreter must investigate what meaning the sacred writer *intended to express and actually expressed in*

[7] E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967).

*particular circumstances*" (emphasis mine).[8]

As a way to ascertain "what meaning the sacred writers really intended," *Dei Verbum* in article 12 instructs the interpreter to attend to the literary forms of their time and culture: "due attention must be paid to the customary and characteristic styles of feeling, speaking and narrating which prevailed at the time of the sacred writer and to the patterns men normally employed at that period in their everyday dealings with one another.(8)" The historical meaning of words, phrases, idioms, genres, etc., in the time and culture of the original writing provide objective criteria for trying to approximate the originally intended meaning of the text.

From the perspective of developments in literary criticism and hermeneutics since 1965, some contemporary authors would add further cautions to this approach to the notion of a literal sense. Marcel Dumais argues against identifying literal meaning with authorial intention or even original meaning. He claims that this notion of literal meaning arose from romantic views going back to Schleiermacher and Dilthey. He refers to critiques of this notion by Hirsch, Heidegger, Gadamer, and Ricoeur, and by literary and reader-response critics.[9] Therefore Dumais includes plurality of meaning and even the "spiritual sense" within Scripture's literal meaning, and disputes the common distinction (as notably expressed by Raymond Brown), between what the Bible meant (equated with the literal sense) and what it means (actualization).[10] Dumais proposes that the spiritual sense is the literal sense of Scripture grasped in its depth. Under the expression "spiritual meaning" he would designate three realities: 1. the Bible as *word about God*, as a religious text with religious meaning; 2. the Bible as *Word of God*, which requires a predisposition of faith and openness to transcendence and to the Spirit who inspired it, and implies an

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[8] Compare the very similar approach in Raymond E. Brown, and Sandra M. Schneiders, "Hermeneutics," in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer and Roland E. Murphy (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1990), 1148.

[9] Marcel Dumais, "Sens de l'Écriture. Réexamen à la lumière de l'herméneutique philosophique et des approches littéraires récents," *New Testament Studies* 45 (1999), 311-14.

[10] Dumais, "Sens de l'Écriture," 314-16; Raymond E. Brown, *The Critical Meaning of the Bible* (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), 23-33.

affirmation of the text's truth and its correspondance to the extra-textual reality to which it refers; and 3. the *christological* as the ultimate *meaning of the Old Testament* [for a Christian]. Dumais cites the witness of Aquinas and many others to the literal sense being the basis or root of the spiritual.[11]

If Scripture is self-evidently a religious text with religious meaning, it seems reasonable that at least aspects of its spiritual sense or of its foreseeable and foreseen actualization and application might be incorporated within the primary literal sense. Insofar as Scripture is not merely a self-contained literary artifact but is meant to refer to extra-textual realities like God, believers, communities, and activities, it seems arbitrary to rule out a priori all spiritual senses from its literal meaning.

## Spiritual Senses and Actualization

To the extent to which the literal meaning of the Scriptures is linked to an "original" meaning expressed in the text by its (human) author, there is an obvious distance between that world of the text and its authors, and our contemporary world. To overcome this distance would require a second hermeneutical step of actualization or application to contemporary situations to make the original meaning significant for today.[12] But we have already considered some problems with an unnuanced distinction between what the text "meant" and what it "means." When the interpretive perspectives of readers are included in the hermeneutical equation, there has to be some "fusion of horizons" (Gadamer) between the text and readers. Ricoeur adds reference to a certain autonomy which a text once written attains with respect to its writer. As a writing, which is able to be read on multiple occasions by many prospective readers, the text as text has a certain distance from its original context of composition and a certain "surplus of meaning" beyond that original composition. Insofar as it is writing, its original meaning is decontextualized somewhat from its original context of composition, which permits it to be recontextualized or appropriated in the reader's different context.[13]

But there is also a second distance to be overcome, that be-

[11] Dumais, "Sens de l'Écriture," 329-30.

[12] Dumais, "Sens de l'Écriture," 315.

[13] Dumais, "Sens de l'Écriture," 318-19.

tween the text and its readers. To overcome this, Dumais cites Ricouer's reference to a circular process of scientific *explanation* (to protect against readers' projection of their own meanings onto the text) and personal *understanding* by the readers, which tries to integrate an objective dimension of methodological rigor with a subjective dimension of personal implication.[14] In addition, the distance between text and readers can be and has been approached either with affinity (understanding) or suspicion, and which approach a reader takes will seriously affect how he or she interprets, actualizes or applies a biblical text.

The movement from biblical text to readers can also be viewed from the perspective of the "spiritual sense" of Scripture, explained as the literal meaning understood in its profundity. We have already considered three aspects involved in this spiritual sense, the Bible as word *about* God, as word *of* God, and the christological meaning of the OT. Only the first two call for further mention at this juncture. Let us briefly consider both the hermeneutics of understanding or suspicion, as well as two implications of the spiritual sense, for overcoming the fundamental distance between text and reader.

## Appropriation of Scripture: Hermeneutics of Understanding vs. Hermeneutics of Suspicion

Especially in liberationist forms of interpretation, such as Marxist or feminist readings, the basic stance of readers to the biblical text is a "hermeneutics of suspicion." Although such a stance is professed to be objectively necessary as a corrective to the often unconscious economic or patriarchal bias of the human authors within their cultural milieu, it is hard to avoid the negative implication of the very name *suspicion*. It may be true in many instances that to arrive at a historically accurate reconstruction of events reported in a historical text, the interpreter has to be alert to the presuppositions and even biases inherent in the human author's recounting of them, and perhaps adjust one's judgment of those events with this in mind. It may be analogously true that ethical or religious directives and opinions expressed in a text might be similarly colored by the author's often unconscious presuppositions or biases, necessitating a similar adjustment in judging their relevance for readers in a different time and

[14] Dumais, "Sens de l'Écriture," 319.

cultural context. In terms of historical critical exegesis, historical or cultural reconstructions, sociological analyses of a text understood as coming from and belonging to the first century and to a culture quite different from that of the readers, there seems an obvious role for a hermeneutics of suspicion to play, as long as it also allows the text to have its legitimate say.

Nevertheless, the very expression "hermeneutics of suspicion" raises certain problematic questions when one wants to treat Scripture as God's word. It is hard to deny that to read with suspicion is to read with defensiveness or sometimes even with hostility, looking for bias and error in the expressed positions taken in the *text*, with little readiness to acknowledge that the bias or error might instead be in the *reader*. To read with suspicion seems self-evidently the opposite of reading with an openness to having one's own preconceptions challenged or even changed by the text. To read with suspicion seems self-evidently to deny in fact if not in theory any genuine authority to the biblical text. How can one read with suspicion what one sincerely believes is God's word, God's revelation to oneself? If my Creator and God is addressing me in this text, how can I read it with suspicion and not rather from a receptive or even obedient attitude? How can I read the Bible with suspicion and yet allow it to be what the *Letter to the Hebrews* (and the Church) claims it to be: "For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Heb. 4:12, RSV)? How can I allow the biblical text of God's word to judge me, the reader, if I the reader am suspicious of and in fact judging the biblical text? "All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work" (2 Tim 3:16-17, RSV). How can Scripture be useful for Christians' training or correction if they read it out of a suspicion that presumes their own preunderstandings and values to be correct when they differ from those of the text? For such reasons, authors like Peter Stuhlmacher have called for a Christian biblical hermeneutics of consent or a hermeneutics of understanding rather than one of suspicion.[15]

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[15] Peter Stuhlmacher, "Historical Criticism and Theological Interpretation," in *Historical Criticism and Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Towards a*

**Scripture as the Word *about* God**

Without treating the notion of the Christological sense of the OT, which is less material to this article, let us briefly recall (with Marcel Dumais) some implications of the spiritual meaning of Scripture for overcoming the initial distance between biblical text and reader. The notion of Scripture as "word about God" refers to the observation that God is the ultimate referent around which the Bible as a whole is organized. The world of the text relates especially to God and God's plan for humanity. Because of this, even the literal sense of Scripture is spiritual. But Dumais would prefer to refer to this as the "religious sense" of the Bible, corresponding to the fact that the Bible is a religious text.[16]

**Scripture as the Word *of* God**

This reading of Scripture is the kind that is done by a believer (Jewish or Christian). For a Christian believer, the Bible expresses God's presence in the history of Israel and in Jesus. Obviously, to understand Scripture as God's word requires the pre-understanding of faith as well as an openness to the Spirit who inspired Scripture. Faith and the Spirit create an existential link with the world of the text understood as God's word. They enable the referent of the text to be grasped as authentic. To grasp the spiritual sense of the text implies the truth of the text, i.e., that the text correctly expresses the extra-textual reality to which it refers. Previous knowledge by the reader of this extra-textual referent (God and his works) obviously makes it easier for that reader to understand this spiritual meaning of Scripture.[17] This insight seems related to the traditional Thomistic notion of connatural knowledge of God which enables further reading about God to be done with deeper insight.

**What is God's Message to Me?**

If the spiritual sense of Scripture is ascertained by a reader only within a stance of faith and openness to the possibly transcen-

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[15 Contd.] *Hermeneutics of Consent*, trans. Roy A. Harrisville (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977).

[16] Dumais, "Sens de l'Écriture," 329.

[17] Dumais, "Sens de l'Écriture," 329-30.

dent message of Scripture, than it is hard to see how it can be grasped from within a hermeneutics of suspicion. Though such a hermeneutic has a certain relevance and usefulness in the domain of history and sociology, it hardly seems an appropriate stance for believers when they are approaching Scripture as God's word to themselves as they seek guidance for their own lives. In such situations, believers are trying to hear what God's message is for them as they read Scripture with this disposition. They are open to what Scripture tells them about God in relation to his chosen people and, through Christ, to them as God's adopted daughters and sons. They read Scripture as God's own word, God's own message to them for living their lives according to and within God's loving plan for them.

Yet how can believers do this responsibly, without prooftexting or reading their own pre-conceptions into what the text is trying to express?

**Ethical Biblical Argumentation: Beyond Prooftexting**

A timely example of concerns about prooftexting in moral arguments using the Bible is that of Catholic pro-life arguments. It is true that some Catholics, without realizing the implications of what they are doing, simply quote convenient texts from the Bible that seem to support their pro-life point, without asking whether this was the meaning of the text in its original context. This is what is meant by proof-texting. Other Catholics, who have heard sharp criticism of pro-life proof-texting, which is often labelled "fundamentalism," are intimidated from appealing at all to Scripture to support their pro-life positions, out of fear of proof-texting or of misusing the Bible in some other way, or of being accused of doing so. However, as a professional, I argue that the Bible does have a significant amount of relevant evidence to which ordinary Christians can appeal when presenting and defending Catholic pro-life positions.

I would like to try to free Catholics from being thus intimidated from using Scripture as it is actually meant to be used, as God's word. Although I acknowledge and share exegetes' concerns that Scriptures not be proof-texted out of context, I would like to propose an approach that is at once more holistic, simpler, and more suited to the Scriptures as God's word to us than pure historical-critical exegesis. This approach does not require every Catholic to become a trained professional exegete but can be used by anyone who takes the trouble to read the Scriptures with some carefulness and openness to the texts

as God's revealing word to them in their lives and situations. For if Scriptures are God's word or message to his people, then his people as a whole, including ordinary believers, should be able to be guided by God's word without a crippling dependence on professional exegetes.

**Biblical Perspectives on Human Beings and Life**

This article will try a different approach from many of the usual approaches in the literature on the Bible and ethics. Many publications on biblical foundations of Christian morality, including many Catholic publications, treat standard *topoi* such as the ten commandments, the love command, topics like the Bible and sexuality or life issues.[18] Others focus on either NT or OT moral teaching.[19] A typical NT ethics might include Jesus' moral demands in relation to his proclamation of God's Kingdom and Jewish moral teaching; the Sermon on the Mount; the great commandment; motives Jesus gave for his demands; ethical models; the early Church's moral teaching as related to its eschatological outlook, or as administrating Jesus' legacy (vis a vis the Law, discipleship, development of the great commandment); innovative NT principles and decisions (regarding liturgy, attitude to public authorities, marriage, family, slavery); or the moral teaching of individuals such as Paul, John, James, and "other examples of early Christian exhortation."[20]

This article will pursue a more inclusive canonical (and yet more instinctive) horizon, one based more on a typical biblical world view of first-century Christians. Instead of focusing narrowly on particular cases, laws or commands, it will situate individual issues within this biblical worldview as lived and developed by Christians. As is clear from both Jesus' teaching and example in the Gospels, and from letters and other NT writings, early Christians generally took over the biblical worldview from Judaism, but with a special concentration on the risen Jesus' influence on this perspective.

Thus early Christians viewed the world and life from their (Jewish) biblical perspective of the one God, who created the universe

[18] Raymond F. Collins, *Christian Morality: Biblical Foundations* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986).

[19] Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Moral Teaching of the New Testament*, J. Holland-Smith and W.J. O'Hara, reprint, 1965 (New York, N.Y.: Seabury Press, Crossroad Book, 1979).

[20] Schnackenburg, *The Moral Teaching of the New Testament*, 5-7.

good (not evil, as for some gnostics), and who created humans "in the image of God" (Gen 1:27 RSV). To these humans God gave dominion over the rest of material creation, but a dominion subordinate to that of their Creator. This perspective on the goodness of God's original creation, and on a genuine but qualified human authority over other material creatures, is tempered by the awareness of human sin and the skewing of the relationships between humans and God, among themselves and with other creatures. The history and condition of sinful human rebellion from God's ways modified the moral universe in which they found themselves. Some things proper to their original state (e.g., the innocent nakedness of Adam and Eve) were no longer appropriate (thus their clothing themselves out of shame).

The biblical perspective is based on belief not only in creation and sin, but also in God's rescuing humans from the consequences of sin, as through the exodus from Egypt, through salvation from foreign oppression by the instrumentality of the judges and later kings, and through covenants between God and the chosen people. This perspective includes God's teaching and disciplining this people throughout the ages, and revealing his identity and will, especially through commandments and laws, through positive and negative *exempla* of behavior in the Torah and historical books, and through exhortations of prophets and reflections of wisdom writers.

For Christians, this perspective is further transformed through their understanding of biblical history and revelation from the viewpoint of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, through their reception of the Holy Spirit, and through their life within the Church. Yet there remains a basic continuity with the theological and moral horizons from their Jewish scriptures (more than revocation thereof). Basic biblical moral principles remain in effect, such as the goodness of material creation (and thus of material goods and sexuality), the need to obey their Creator and to repent of their sins. Many biblical laws and directives also retained their force, such as the Ten Commandments and their epitome in the love of God and neighbor. Even when Jesus is portrayed as modifying received moral tradition, as in his rejection of divorce, his changes are often based on how things were "from the beginning" (Mark 10:2-9; Matt 19:3-6), i.e., on the order of creation in the Torah.[21]

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[21] The very phrase, "in the beginning" echoes the beginning and title

**Genesis: Creation of Humans in Dominion over the Earth**

Especially as an antidote to prooftexting and special pleading, the enduring authority for biblical ethical judgments of the Genesis (and Torah) account of the creation, fall, and God's plan of salvation through his people needs to be acknowledged. The Genesis portrayal of the place and role of humans in the material universe carefully balances human authority over all other material creatures with unambiguous limits to this authority. Human dominion over the earth is delegated and finite. Humans are stewards, not owners or masters, of the earth and its creatures. Their authority is exercised not in their own name but as representatives of God. They are held accountable by the Creator for how they exercise this God-given authority. Thus, the portrayal of Adam as naming the animals and of the first couple as tending the garden of Eden under the friendship and supervision of God their Creator (Genesis 2) provide a powerful foundational symbol for the biblical principles regarding proper use of animals and material goods, as well as respect for the environment. Later laws of the Israelites build on this foundation, such as those that forbid cruelty to animals and enjoin consideration for them (e.g., "You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain" (Deut 25:4).[22]

**In the Image of God.**

Especially foundational for biblical ethics, particularly concerning human rights and life issues, is the Genesis portrayal of humans as created in the image of God. After creating the animals (and declaring them good and therefore worthy of respect and proper treatment) God is depicted as saying, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion" over the other living things in the sea and air and on the earth (Gen 1:26 RSV). It is as God's image that humans have dominion. "So God created man in his

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[21 Contd.] of Genesis. Cf. the pope's lecture series, "Original Unity of Man and Woman:Catechesis on the Book of Genesis," in John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body: Human Love in the Divine Plan*, forward by John S. Grabowski (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 1997), 25-102.

[22] Two NT quotations of this commandment continue to treat it as ethically authoritative (1 Tim 5:18 and 1 Cor 9:9), although the Corinthian use of the quotation argues that the principle applies more to human laborers than to animals (1 Cor 9:7-14).

own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them" (Gen 1:27 RSV).

The Creator is then shown blessing these creatures who were newly created in the divine image and likeness: "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth" (1:28 RSV). As frequently in the Jewish Scriptures, a blessing by God or by a (grand)parent can also comprise the person's vocation.[23] Here in the creation account, the human images of God are called, first, to propagate the human race throughout the world and, second, to subdue the world and all that is in it. This two-part commission, which is repeated in even more radical form in the post-flood authorization (Genesis 9), forms the basis for most of the later biblical commandments and ethical directives.

Whereas the account apparently presumes that other material creatures will reproduce themselves according to their natural instincts and of necessity, without need for any explicit divine directive, human sexual activity and reproduction is from the beginning treated as free activity which God has to guide through commandments and directions for humans to follow. A component of the human task of subduing and having dominion over the world and of creatures in it is their God-given commission of propagating their race throughout the world. Since propagation is mentioned first, one can argue that it is even the more important component of their two-part commission of subduing the world.

As images of God, and as commissioned by God, humans are indisputably placed at the top of the biblical hierarchy of material creatures. To fulfill their mission as God's stewards to manage the material world and all the living creatures in it, the original couple obviously has to extend their presence throughout this world, which is done through propagating their race according to God's command. Thus the biblical worldview has no room for a radical ecology that would advocate killing human offspring for the sake of the ecological

[23] E.g., to Sarah (Gen 17:15-16); Isaac's blessing and charge to Jacob (Gen 28:1-4); Israel's blessing of Ephraim and Manasseh (Gen 48:14-20); and Israel to his twelve sons in Gen 49:1-28, "this is what their father said to them as he blessed them, blessing each with the blessing suitable to him" (v.28).

environment. On the other hand, the biblical worldview likewise has no room for irresponsible pollution and destruction of the environment out of selfishness and greed, for God had pronounced that environment "good" upon creating it and had commissioned his images to take care of that environment as his deputies and stewards. In this symbolic foundation for the rest of the biblical narratives and laws, the owner and principal master of the world is not humans, who are merely God's stewards and surrogate caretakers over other creatures, but God.

**Sanctity of Human Life: Human Rights and Killing.**

Since this biblical worldview clearly places humans at the pinnacle of God's creation as the only material creatures who are said to be in God's image, and as having dominion over other creatures on earth, it accords humans a unique status among this world's creatures. Human dominion over plants and animals and their commission to fill and subdue the earth implies indisputable human prerogatives over other material creatures, including rights distinctive to humans alone on the earth. Although life itself is obviously a gift from God, after God has given that gift and a living human exists, that human is protected by God against murder and other forms of abuse and oppression by his or her right to life because he or she is an image of God. Thus in Genesis 4, Abel's blood shed in murder cries out for retribution, and Cain is severely punished (though protected from revenge killing by others) for murdering Abel his brother.

"In the beginning," in a time of paradisiacal peace, both humans and animals are portrayed as "vegetarians," given plants by God for their food (Gen 1:29-30). In the ideal biblical universe of Eden, apparently neither animals nor humans were to be killed, only plants. However, in the world "as we know it," after the advent and havoc of sin, including murder and fratricide (e.g., Genesis 3-4), God now allows animals to be sacrificed (Gen 8:20) in atonement for human sin, as well as used for human food (Gen 9:2-3).

Nevertheless, murder (the killing of *innocent* human life) in all its variations remains forbidden (e.g., Gen 9:5-6) throughout both testaments of the Bible, most prominently in the Decalogue's commandment, "You shall not kill" (Exod 20:13 RSV).

Well before the Decalogue, however, in the "second beginning" after the flood, God's renewed prohibition of the shedding of human blood is based on the foundational truth of human creation:

"for God made man in his own image" (Gen 9:6 RSV). The expressed biblical reason why humans may not be killed is that they are in God's image; moreover, they persist as in God's image, even though the biblical account has just narrated the destruction of most of the sinful human race through the flood. The gravity of God's commandment not to shed innocent human blood is accentuated by the severity of the punishment for doing so (i.e., death), ironic though this may sound to contemporary sensitized ears, accustomed to hearing of the evils of capital punishment.

In fact, the fundamental and categorical biblical distinction between killing *innocent* human life and killing the guilty could not be more unquestionably expressed than by this primeval commandment: "For your lifeblood I will surely require a reckoning; of every beast I will require it and of man; of every man's brother I will require the life of man. Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for God made man in his own image" (Gen 9:5-6 RSV). The way that the Bible underlines the gravity of the commandment not to kill another human is to threaten the penalty of capital punishment for doing so. Although *Evangelium Vitae* and the revised *Catechism of the Catholic Church* argue against the need or propriety of capital punishment in virtually any contemporary circumstance, the biblical tradition and practice of both Jews and Christians (and almost all peoples) from ancient times to almost the present make clear that there remains a radical distinction between killing innocent human life and punishing those who do so with their own death.

Nevertheless, the Catholic magisterium (and facets of Catholic tradition) prevent Catholics from simply quoting the words of Scripture to settle a question like capital punishment today, even though it is explicitly (and frequently) enjoined by the Bible as punishment for grave offences. Still, the evidence of Scripture and Catholic tradition through the centuries is overwhelming that one cannot simply equate the evil of capital punishment with the evil of shedding innocent human blood, as in murder or abortion. The shedding of innocent human blood is *absolutely* prohibited; not so capital punishment, which originally is even prescribed to redress the disorder of murder (cf. *CCC* § 2266, and perhaps also to protect society against future murders), and against which recent arguments are instead relative to the circumstances.[24]

[24] Another way to put this is that while murder and abortion are

**Ethical Consequences of the Word Becoming Flesh**

Although Christians build their ethics on the foundation of the Old Testament, an important dimension is added in the New Testament perspective of the Word having become flesh, the Son of God having become incarnated as man like us in all things but sin. Not only does the Son of God's deigning to enter the human condition and "become flesh" confirm the goodness of material creation and the dignity of the human creature revealed by Genesis and the rest of the Old Testament. The New Covenant also provides a New Adam and a New Creation, an elevation of our human condition and added power from the indwelling Holy Spirit and within the community of Christ's Church to live God's commandments more fully. Matthew's Gospel symbolizes this new level of expectation in the antitheses of the Sermon on the Mount, where Old Testament commandments are said to be re-interpreted and radicalized, not abolished: "Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfill them" (Matt 5:17 RSV). The very first example of this fulfilling of the old law concerns "You shall not kill.... But I say to you that every one who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment" (Matt 5:22 RSV). Other words of Jesus call for non-retaliation and "turning the other cheek" (cf. Matt 5:39). Thus Christians continue to be bound by OT commandments like those against shedding innocent human blood, but in even a more radical form.

At least as important as the sayings of Jesus for Christian ethics is his example. Paul looked to Christ Jesus, Son of God, as a living example of how to live. He repeatedly counselled his communities to "be imitators of me as I am of Christ" (1 Cor 11:1, RSV). He asked the Philippians to "Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being

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[24 Contd.] always of their nature unjust, capital punishment can be just. But see the eloquent plea for the importance of mercy as well as justice in the pope's treatment of this issue in Kevin E. Miller, "The Role of Mercy in a Culture of Life: John Paul II on Capital Punishment," in *Life and Learning VIII: Proceedings of the Eighth University Faculty for Life Conference. June 1998 at the University of Toronto* (Washington, D.C.: University Faculty for Life, 1999), 405-42.

found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross" (Phil 2:5-8 RSV). Not only do Christians continue to obey the Ten Commandments, but they are to obey them even more definitively in imitation of the God made man, the Word made flesh who dwelt among us. This obedience is to extend far beyond mere performance of God's commandments into self-sacrificial obedience even "unto death, even death on a cross" (Phil 2:8).

Thus whereas OT texts have many pragmatic directives for an actual nation state (Israel) in which the prohibition against killing humans is not applied to divinely sanctioned wars nor to redressing seriously evil deeds, the NT example and words of Jesus lead to much more fundamental and complete rejection of killing, at times even of apparently legitimate forms of self-defense. The portrayal of even Jesus' disciples as dismayed by some of Jesus' sayings, such as his absolute prohibition of remarriage after divorce, indicates an awareness even by the NT authors and their first readers that following Jesus not only includes a continued obedience to the Ten Commandments but asks for sometimes heroic obedience beyond what was commonly envisaged in the Judaism of their time. Followers of Jesus are to avoid anger as well as murder, to turn the other cheek, to avoid not only adultery but even looking with lust, to forego remarriage after divorce, to sell all and follow Jesus if one wants to be perfect (beyond just keeping the commandments, Matt 19:21), and other demands that sound "unrealistic."

However, the NT does not focus only on the example of Jesus as New Adam and on his sayings which expand the limits of commonly accepted demands of the Jewish scriptures. To do so might discourage more than promote further heroic obedience and virtue. In the Gospels Jesus promises to send the Holy Spirit to empower his followers. The Acts of the Apostles and NT letters and Revelation presume the continuing and almost omnipresent action of the Spirit within both individual Christians and Christian communities and churches. These books also portray and presume strong communities where Christians assist and correct one another. This community support increases an individual's ability to live the augmented demands of the Gospel. Thus the power of the Spirit and supportive matrix of Christian communities enables Paul and others to endorse not only marriage but committed virginity, not only justice but sharing of goods, not only restricting but completely forgoing retaliation or taking a fellow Christian to court. Other NT texts require and even presume that

Christians who are helpless, such as widows and orphans, will be provided for. Logically, it would appear that similar care would be expected especially for women victimized by divorce and consequently trying to raise children alone, even if apparently that situation was not common enough to elicit explicit mention.

In brief, there seems no evidence that NT Christians expected to have lesser obligations than what the OT Ten Commandments had required, nor that they would be exempt from keeping any of them. On the contrary, they apparently operated out of a presumption that Christians are to obey the commandments even to a heroic degree, in imitation of Christ's self-sacrificing obedience and empowered by his Spirit and supported by the Church. In light of all this, it seems legalistic to argue that because certain sins are not explicitly mentioned in the NT (sometimes neither in the OT), that it does not forbid those sins, or at least that one cannot appeal to the NT when arguing against such sins. An especially significant example is abortion. Even though the NT probably never unambiguously mentions abortion as an example of the command not to kill innocent human life, explicit extracanonical Christian condemnations of abortion and infanticide, which date back to the very first century, support the presumption that abortion was so alien to the first Christians' worldview and practice and so obviously identified with despised pagan sins, such as widespread infanticide, from which non-Jewish Christians had been converted, that the NT writers never thought it necessary in their particular contexts to mention it.[25]

In short, although on occasion the words of Jesus disallow a practice (like remarriage after divorce) which Jewish religion had permitted, even those instances are generally either grounded "in the beginning," in the unfallen state of original creation revealed in Genesis and the Torah, or on the "new creation" brought about by the Word made flesh and his death, resurrection, and pouring out of the Holy Spirit "upon all flesh" (Acts 2:17). Not only do they not weaken the force of the OT moral teaching, but they even make it more stringent, even to the explicitly mentioned dismay of Jesus' disciples.

Although there is a new focus and some more exacting de-

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[25] Michael J. Gorman, *Abortion and the Early Church: Christian, Jewish and Pagan Attitudes in the Greco-Roman World* (New York, N.Y.: Paulist Press/ InterVarsity Press, 1982), 47-62, 108-11.

mands made in the NT, the fundamental world view of these early Christian nevertheless remains that of the Scriptures which they inherited from Judaism, but now seen as fulfilled in the Word made flesh, the New Adam and firstborn from the dead, the Son whom God sent not to condemn but to save the world.

**Another Approach to Biblical Ethical Argumentation about Life**

To test and apply these general principles based on the biblical worldview, it will help to compare the perspective given above to another representative biblical approach to ethical questions, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* by Richard Hays. This is a generally balanced, respected, and widely-used textbook in NT ethics from a Protestant author's perspective.

Hays lists four different modes of appeals to Scripture in ethical argument. Moralists appeal to Scripture as a source for the following: *rules*, *principles*, *paradigms*, and a *symbolic world*. Each of these kinds of appeals appears within Scripture as well as in scholars' reflections on biblical ethics. Besides these inner-biblical ethical warrants, Hays argues for the necessity also of extra-biblical sources of authority, *tradition*, *reason*, and *experience*, since even *sola Scriptura* Protestants cannot interpret Scripture in a vacuum.[26] Among the biblical appeals to Scripture, Hays's description of a *symbolic world* most closely approximates my own treatment of the biblical worldview, especially when combined with his notion of "moral judgment as metaphor-making."[27]

In his chapter on abortion, Hays's predilections and biblical ethical discussions are generally opposed to and restrictive toward abortion. Nevertheless, as is probably to be expected in comparing a Protestant methodology to a Catholic one, Hays's approaches differ sharply from mine, particularly with respect to the use of extra-biblical warrants. For example, Hays categorically denies the notions of the sacredness of human life, and the biblical relevance of rights language, denying not only "modern rights" like the right to privacy, but even the right to life. Regarding the right to life, Hays argues that life

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[26] Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation; A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (New York, N.Y.: Harper Collins Publishers, SanFrancisco, 1996), 208-10.

[27] Hays, *Moral Vision*, 298-304.

is not a right but a gift from God, which may be granted regarding a creature vis-a-vis the Creator and before the actual existence of a particular individual human person.[28] He is also reluctant to draw principles from biblical narratives and laws and to argue to conclusions from them. He is even hesitant to extend the prohibition of murder to abortion as a sub-species of killing innocent human life, because of conflicting biblical evidence such as OT treatments of accidental miscarriages as pertaining more to property matters than to any stated right to life of the fetus (Exod 21:22-25). In his reference to OT laws for (accidental) killing of a child in the womb, Hays does not appear to take the same kind of account of a possible NT development beyond these particular OT insights, for which in other questions like war and peace he does not hesitate to argue much more aggressively. However, he does acknowledge that the Septuagint translation and some rabbis and postbiblical Jewish writers introduced a distinction between a formed and unformed fetus, and applied *jus talionis* and murder laws to the killing of formed fetuses.[29]

Regardless, it does not seem to be eisegesis to argue from the biblical evidence that after God has freely given the gift of life to a human, that that particular human, as God's image, now possesses a right to life which other humans must respect. This right to life is revealed or at least implied and protected by the stern biblical commandment against killing innocent human life (murder), which is enforced by the severity of the death penalty for such murder. Without this basic foundational right to life, no other rights can exist among humans and the weak would always be at the complete mercy of the strong. Therefore the burden of proof would seem to lie with anyone who denies that such a right to life is biblical.

It is one thing to argue that humans as creatures (and sinful ones at that) have no rights claims on God their creator. That seems a reasonable consequence of the theological standing of any creature before its Creator, as well as of the belief that our salvation comes from God's grace and by faith and is not earned by our own works. From this perspective, it is obvious that a creature cannot make rigorous demands on its Creator. It is quite another issue to deny that the Bible promotes basic human rights among human beings, rights which

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[28] Hays, *Moral Vision*, 454.

[29] Hays, *Moral Vision*, 446-47.

do make strict demands on other humans, and which are the essential foundation of all human protection and civilization and of local, national and international law. This right to life even seems to be implied by the very commandment not to shed human blood, with its accompanying rationale, "for God made man in his own image" (Gen. 9:6 RSV).

Closely related to this fundamental difference over whether the right to life is "biblical" is Hays's failure to mention any moral absolutes that might be applicable to the treatment of abortion. He treats the "hard case" scenario of a potential Downs Syndrome child to a forty-ish couple as a prayerful decision, which seems to imply a spiritual discernment among two permitted (because moral even if "tragic") choices, rather than as a more fundamental question whether or not this option to abort is morally permitted at all. His approach does not sound like a matter of discovering what God commands in this case, nor like an application of an absolute divine command or an absolute moral principle to this decision. The fact that abortion is not explicitly and absolutely condemned in Scripture seems to provide a kind of unconscious *sola scriptura* justification, in an argument from silence, for treating abortion as something much more contingent upon circumstances. Such an approach seems to presume without question that "hard cases" can warrant exceptions to the general biblical ideals of not killing and of being welcoming to life in the womb.

However, if one reads the Bible as a convinced member of the ecclesial community of the Catholic Church, one will spontaneously fill in biblical silences and gaps such as the non-mention of abortion with fundamental Catholic moral principles and the historical tradition of Catholic moral practice going back to the earliest centuries. When Catholic readers also reflect on the contemporary magisterium's re-affirmation that there are moral absolutes that must be obeyed in all circumstances without exception, not even for "hard cases," and on the principle that "one may not do evil in order to attain good," they would be very slow to treat biblical silence about abortion or some other significant and commonly treated moral issue as a warrant for discerning whether an exception can be made to an apparently absolute prohibition.

For Catholic readers searching the Scriptures about abortion with such "pre-understandings" from their moral tradition and practice, texts which do not explicitly address abortion can still be quite relevant for illuminating how the biblical worldview and perspective

would pertain to a question like abortion. Although it is true that the commandment "You shall not kill" does not answer the question whether abortion is included in the prohibition of killing, the commandment does clearly set some stringent parameters for the further argument over what is permitted. Other texts that provide insights into whether the biblical worldview considers and treats the fetus as human can legitimately be adduced to support the inclusion of a fetus under the general prohibition against killing innocent human life.[30]

Thus Psalm 139:13-16, by portraying a symbolic world in which God is active in forming human life in the womb, sheds light on abortion, even though it is a poetic rather than propositional statement. Though such passages as this and Jer 1:5 encompass God's foreknowledge of humans even before conception, they certainly also include God's care, knowledge, and calling of humans in the womb, to which Paul appeals in his own case (Gal 1:15). In the further canonical light of the treatment in Luke 1 of Jesus' conception and of how "the babe [John] in my womb" leapt when "the mother of my Lord [Jesus]," appeared before Elizabeth (Luke 1:43-44, RSV), which clearly imply the humanity of both Jesus and John in the womb, it is not tendentious to argue that the biblical worldview treats the fetus as a human person. Admittedly this goes beyond mere historical exegesis of the passage, nor is it yet an argument against abortion; however, it certainly provides significant evidence to make that case.[31] It is hard to deny that by the NT period the biblical worldview has developed significantly beyond the treatment of the fetus under the rubric of property law in the law cited in Exod 21:22-25. It seems certain that by the time of the NT, a fetus is spontaneously and customarily regarded as a "babe in the womb" and as a human person for whom God has love and even a vocational calling and plan. If that is so, the step to including abortion as a species under the genus of killing which is forbidden by the fifth commandment is a rather instinctive one.

## Conclusions

This article has suggested a usage of Scripture that goes beyond the minimum sense discovered by historical-critical exegesis. It recommended the need for interpreting, actualizing, and applying Scrip-

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[30]Hays, *Moral Vision*, 446-48.

[31]Hays, *Moral Vision*, 447-48.

ture from the vantage point of our Catholic pre-understandings of the Bible. As a help to doing so responsibly, without "proof-texting" passages out of context, it historically reconstructed and proposed a "biblical worldview" shared by the first Christians, as an overarching exegetical interpretive context for applying biblical passages to contemporary ethical concerns.

With the help of this easily understood context of an early Christian biblical worldview, I am convinced that ordinary Catholics who are not professionally trained exegetes need not be hesitant to appeal to Scripture to answer contemporary ethical questions. This recommended approach is neither proof-texting nor slavish use of historical criticism. Rather, I strongly recommend that Catholics read and appropriate and use the Scriptures frankly and openly as Catholics, at least when addressing other Catholics. Unlike some Protestant approaches to ethics, which insist on more exclusive use of the Bible to argue any issue, including a moral question, there is nothing disgraceful about Catholics turning to official Catholic overviews like the *CCC* and to the persuasive Catholic tradition of moral theology and ethical philosophy, as well as to explicit magisterial Church documents on fundamental and applied moral issues, to guide them in their interpretation and application of ancient biblical texts to contemporary Catholic needs and concerns. Using the Vatican II guidelines on reading and interpreting Scripture "in the light of the same Spirit by whom it was written,"[32] Catholics can follow Vatican II's recommended three approaches for doing so: "1. Be especially attentive 'to the content and unity of the whole Scripture'"; "2. Read the Scripture within 'the living Tradition of the whole church'"; "3. Be attentive to the analogy of faith."

Within this Catholic context for interpreting, actualizing, and applying Scripture, the fundamental biblical worldview proposed above can provide a more holistic yet intrinsically biblical context for individual issues. In the instance of abortion, which is not explicitly addressed in the NT, the persistent and consistent biblical viewpoint on human beings as images of God and the consequent absolute biblical prohibition against shedding innocent human blood can enable Catholics without proof-texting to discuss the relevance of individual pas-

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[32] *CCC* § 111, *DV* 12 §3.

[33] Ibid.

sages that mention God's care and calling of humans from the womb, as well as examples of attitudes toward life in the womb like the interaction in Luke 1 between the two babies in the womb, Jesus and John. Contemporary believers can reasonably actualize and apply such passages to new and different situations, like abortion, which are admittedly outside those original concerns and situations discovered by historical critical exegesis. This is one way to base biblical moral discussions more holistically and canonically on God's broader biblical revelation of the meaning of human beings as images and potential daughters and sons of God, on God's creating, welcoming, and blessing of new human life, and on God's protection of innocent human life through absolute prohibitions against shedding innocent human blood. Within such a life-affirming biblical context, it is not unwarranted to apply the Bible to contemporary questions. For instance, within this context and biblical application, it is not unwarranted to argue from the universally accepted major premise that the Bible forbids killing innocent human life, for the minor premise that in the NT, life in the womb is human and innocent and loved by God, and that therefore abortion is killing innocent human life, to the conclusion that abortion is prohibited.

Therefore, Catholics who are not professional exegetes need not be afraid to use and apply Scripture to contemporary moral topics. Even biblical texts apply earlier biblical texts to unprecedented circumstances in ways that go beyond the original point of the earlier texts. Non-professional Catholic believers can unquestionably apply the Scripture as God's word to their lives, for that is the very reason why the Scriptures were written and canonized! Even when certain contemporary topics such as abortion are not explicitly or adequately addressed in the Bible, Catholics need not be afraid to apply related biblical evidence to this critical contemporary concern. They need not hesitate to forthrightly extend the biblical prohibition of killing innocent human life to killing by abortion, as in fact the Catholic Church has done for some twenty centuries.

Fr. Kurz specializes in study of the New Testament and teaches in the Theology Department at Marquette University. One of his books is entitled *Reading Luke-Acts:Dynamics of Biblical Narrative* (1993).