

# Developing a Liberal-Protestant Ethics in a Dynamic and Pluralist World<sup>1</sup>

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## 1. Introduction

‘How am I to live?’ is a timeless moral question; the specific moral answers to this question vary greatly, however. They vary over time, with contexts, and with personal biographies. Although the moral question is universal and some elements of the answer – e.g., precepts such as ‘do not kill’ – are universal too, the full answer to it is highly context dependent and person dependent.

Ethics, in its broad sense of encompassing both someone’s ethical or moral views and the actions connected with those views, always is a response to concrete challenges and problems that one faces.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, an ethics for a small-scale agricultural society cannot be identical to an ethics for a post-industrial globalizing society. In order to know what an ethics for our time should look like, we must analyze the most important characteristics of our societies and their most important problems.

In this article, I will focus on some specific characteristics of western European societies such as the Netherlands. These societies are secular, pluralist, individualizing, and highly dynamic. Many other characteristics should be mentioned for a full analysis – e.g., that they are complex, globalizing, post-industrial information societies – but for the purposes of this text these four characteristics will do. The question is what implications these characteristics have for the way we do ethics.

First, these societies are secular and pluralist. Morality is not embedded in one common religious tradition; there is a plurality of religious and non-religious traditions. In such a pluralist society – at least if people belonging to different groups live in close contact with each other – in moral discussions a direct appeal to religious

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was presented at the conference *Reshaping Protestantism in a Global Context*, Kampen., September 3, 2004. A full translation in French has appeared as, ‘Pour une éthique protestante libérale dans un monde changeant et pluriel’, *Revue de Théologie et de Philosophie*, 137 (2005), 193-209. A shorter version has appeared in V. Küster (ed.), *Reshaping Protestantism in a Global Context*, Münster: LIT, p. 145-153.

<sup>2</sup> I will treat the words ethics and morality as each other’s equivalents throughout this text.

foundations often is the end of the discussion, because this basis is not shared. Therefore, there is an in-built tendency to try to avoid appeals to controversial religious ideas whenever possible, not as a matter of principled exclusion (as some Rawlsians might defend) but as a pragmatic attempt to try to bridge differences in everyday communication. As a result, there is a tendency to reconstruct ethics as much as possible without reference to controversial religious ideas.

Second, these societies are individualizing.<sup>3</sup> Their ideology, in any case, contains that moral issues should be decided on by free and autonomous persons for themselves. We should not overstate the point. In reality, of course, people are highly conformist and share their moral outlooks with the members of their peer group. And despite some postmodernist claims, there is no shattered and fragmented morality – on most moral ideas there is still broad consensus. Nevertheless this individualization process has important consequences for the issue of how to do ethics. Morality cannot be proclaimed by moral authorities or based on tradition. We expect every person to be autonomous and – although in interaction with parents, traditions and peer groups – to develop her own ethical views.

Third, these societies are in continuous processes of change.<sup>4</sup> Modern technology, globalization, and informatization confront us with new moral challenges. In many respects, our ethics has to change in response to these challenges, just like the ethical views of the generations before us have undergone major changes – think of sexual ethics. This means that ethics is rather becoming a lifelong learning process than a set of timeless precepts learned at about the age of eighteen. Ethics itself has to be dynamic and open to change.

This brief analysis results in a number of practical requirements regarding the way we should do ethics in the twenty-first century. We should try to avoid appeals to controversial religious issues as much as possible and at least postpone them to later stages in the moral argument. This means that, for ordinary decision-making, our ethical views largely become secular in character – even for many devout Christians. Individualization requires that each individual citizen develop her own ethics autonomously, although not in isolation from others. This implies high requirements

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<sup>3</sup> For empirical studies of both the individualization tendency and the quite broad consensus on the most important issues in Western societies, see the publications based on the European Value Survey, e.g., P. Ester, L. Halman, and R. de Moor (eds.) (1994), *The Individualizing Society: Value Change in Europe and North America* (Tilburg: Tilburg University Press).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. R. John Elford (2000), *The Ethics of Uncertainty: A New Christian Approach to Moral Decision-Making* (Oxford: One World) and my 'Dynamic Ethics,' *Journal of Value Inquiry* 37 (2003) 1, 13-34.

for individual moral competence. And such an ethics should be dynamic and responsive to change and to contextual needs. This reinforces the requirements following from individualization. Not only should the individual be morally competent, but she should also be open and responsive to moral change throughout her life and thus be able to critically assess her moral views in the light of changing circumstances.

One caveat at the start. I am a philosopher as well as a Christian, but I am not a theologian. In this article, I try to avoid explicit religious and theological notions and literature. I hope to show by philosophical analysis that we need an approach such as that found in the liberal-Protestant tradition; but I will not make an attempt to articulate this approach in a theological or religious way – I will leave that to the theologians.

## 2. *Ethics and Religion*

The challenge of developing an ethics for the twenty-first century confronts everyone equally, regardless of religious backgrounds. I want to focus here on the role religion can play and, more specifically, what the liberal-Protestant tradition can contribute. This may seem paradoxical, as I argued above that ethics in a secular pluralist society should try to avoid an appeal to a controversial religious basis as much as possible.

It is important, therefore, to emphasize that this attempt to exclude religious arguments in ethical debate (including the political debate) as much as possible is not intended as exclusion on principle, as for example John Rawls and Norman Daniels have suggested in their idea of political reflective equilibrium.<sup>5</sup> I believe such an exclusion to be impossible – morality and religion are too much connected, perhaps not for everyone, but certainly for a large group of Christians.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, there is a serious problem here. Religious people in a secular world are faced with two

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. John Rawls (1993), *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press), p. 97, and ‘The Idea of Public Reason Revisited,’ in: John Rawls (1999), *Collected Papers* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press), pp. 573-615; Norman Daniels (1996), *Justice and Justification: Reflective Equilibrium in Theory and Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. 144-175.

<sup>6</sup> For a criticism of political reflective equilibrium, see my ‘Dynamic Ethics,’ pp. 29-31. For a criticism of a strong autonomy of ethics as regards religion in general, see Jos Kole (2002), *Moral Autonomy and Christian Faith: A Discussion with William K. Frankena* (doct. diss. Kampen University) (Delft: Eburon).

contradictory tendencies in their views. On the one hand, as religious people they believe that their religion is in some way connected with their ethics.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, as citizens in a society, they may have to discuss ethical issues with their secularized neighbors, and they can only do so if they try to find a common ground as much as possible. If they appeal to their religion every time someone asks why they hold a specific moral view, dialogue will be difficult.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, they will try to postpone appeals to controversial religious tenets, and try to explain and justify their moral positions in secular terms. Perhaps, somewhere along the road, they will find an overlapping consensus with their neighbors on some intermediate principles or on some shared ideals or paradigm cases. In other words, they will put religion in the margin of their moral views, but only when and in so far as necessary to justify their views to others. This is not a principled exclusion but a pragmatic marginalization, forced upon them by the demands of communication in a pluralist and secular world.<sup>9</sup>

Although this tendency to marginalize religion merely originates from a practical, pragmatic attitude, it will inevitably have implications for the way people in a secular society see the relationship between morality and religion. As they get used to arguing in public in a secular way, they will internalize this attitude. When thinking about ethical issues, they will also internalize this secularized ethics and marginalize their religion in thinking about ethical issues. Appeals to secular ideas on human rights or tolerance will replace direct appeals to religious convictions. As a result, perhaps with an exception for some fundamentalists, religious people also tend to be partly secularized in their thinking about ethics.

This is a challenge that Protestantism, and especially liberal Protestantism, has to face. Protestantism is characterized by an individualist tendency, and should thus be able to respond adequately to individualization and pluralism. It should, however, also be able to deal adequately with secularization, as a characteristic partly internal to our ethical views.

### 3. *Dutch Liberal Protestantism*

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<sup>7</sup> I deliberately use this vague phrase, in order to include as many religious traditions as possible.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Kole, *Moral Autonomy*, p. 246. Kole's idea of conversational contextualism suggests that it depends on the discussion partner whether and, if so, in what ways appeals to religion can be made to justify one's moral views.

<sup>9</sup> Note that this mechanism only holds for pluralist and secular societies. In the United States, where pluralism is combined with a dominance of Christian religion, the situation may be different.

My starting point is that of the Dutch liberal-Protestant tradition, and more in particular that of the Remonstrants. The Remonstrant Church, founded in 1619 by the followers of Arminius, who had been expelled from the Dutch Reformed Church during the Synod of Dordt, is a small church which, over centuries, has developed a consistently liberal character.

A central characteristic of the Remonstrant tradition is its emphasis on individuality, personal freedom, and responsibility. This is, e.g., reflected in the custom that new members may write their own professions of faith.<sup>10</sup> It implies the recognition that there can be different legitimate ways to formulate religious beliefs. Such formulations can never be more than provisional and imperfect attempts (cf. 1 Cor. 13: 12). Therefore, religious beliefs should be open to critical testing, also in the light of modern science, critical scholarship, and contemporary culture. The Remonstrants are strongly committed to the ecumenical movement, among other things because ecumenical dialogue and practice are considered to be enriching (even if frustrating as well). The Remonstrants identify with the Christian tradition, though not exclusively; they are open to the wisdom embodied in traditions other than the Christian tradition and seek to establish an open dialogue with those traditions too. The ecumenical openness of the Remonstrants is reflected in the fact that they invite everyone to the Lord's Supper who sincerely wishes to take part in it, whether he belongs to the Remonstrant or another church or to no church at all.

The Remonstrants have always been responsive to society and culture. They aim for a connection between religious spirituality and practical action. Even if the word orthopraxis does not fit the Remonstrants (as there are various legitimate ways to put a religion into practice), there is a strong orientation toward spiritual and ethical praxis. Many Remonstrants are, therefore, very active in society and in societal reform movements. Both in society at large and within the church, Remonstrants stand for equality, freedom and tolerance, a democratic culture, and human rights. This is, for example, exemplified in the relatively early acceptance of women ministers (1915) and in the decision in 1986, as the first church in Europe, to allow blessing ceremonies for homosexual and lesbian couples.

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<sup>10</sup> There are no orthodox confessions members must subscribe to; they only need to sign the Statement of Principle, in which freedom and tolerance have a prominent place:  
"The Remonstrant Brotherhood is a community of faith which, rooted in the gospel of Jesus Christ and true to its principle of freedom and tolerance, seeks to worship and serve God."

What does this imply for ethics? In various respects, this liberal-Protestant tradition offers interesting starting points for thinking about the relationship between religion and ethics in our society. Its individualism and openness to pluralism and to personal and contextual variation suit the characteristics of contemporary society. Its openness to criticism and its responsiveness to developments in culture and society correspond well with the need for a dynamic ethics. Its opposition to religious fundamentalism and its openness to dialogue and mutual enrichment show a possible approach to incorporating pluralism and secularism into a religious perspective. Finally, its strong orientation toward religious and ethical praxis rather than to orthodox dogma provides a perspective that, in my view, fits well into the way many modern men and women actually experience their religion. It is especially this theme that I want to explore in the next sections.

#### 4. *Two Models of Religion and Ethics*<sup>11</sup>

Dynamic phenomena can always be described in two ways that are not completely compatible. A well-known example is that of the electron, which we can regard as a particle or as a wave, but not as both at the same time. The former model of the electron gives us insights that are less easily seen in the latter model, and vice versa.

This general idea also holds for social phenomena such as ethics or law. We may conceive of ethics as a collection of propositions with regard to norms and values for the good life and the right action – as an ethical code. Examples are the Ten Commandments and the two principles of justice as formulated by John Rawls. However, we may also conceive of ethics as the good life and the right action themselves, as the ‘lived morality.’ In this case, we address both the daily practices in which we try to act morally rightly and the more reflective practices in which we reflect on what might be a morally right action and a good life.

The former, static, model may be called a *product model* or a *doctrinal model*, because ethics is conceived of as a coherent collection or doctrine of norms and values formulated in propositions. This collection is the product of our minds, of our

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<sup>11</sup> The next two sections are partly based on my ‘Leer en leven. Een vrijzinnige visie,’ in: Theo Boer (ed.) (2004), *Schepper naast God? Theologie, bio-ethiek en pluralisme. Essays aangeboden aan Egbert Schroten* (Assen: Van Gorcum), pp. 120-133. I elaborated the idea of the two models in ‘Two Models of Law and Morality,’ *Associations* 3 (1999), 61-82.

traditions. The latter, dynamic, model may be called a *practice model* or a *process model*, because it deals with the practice of our daily life and its often implicit ethical dimension. This practice is a continuous process of action and thought. Both models focus on particular aspects of ethics; both models are required to understand ethics adequately. Both models are, of course, not completely distinct; they refer to each other. We may understand the ethics as we live it only in light of attempts to formulate it and, conversely, we may only understand the morality as we formulate it in light of attempts to realize it.

The same distinction between a doctrinal model and a practice model may be found with regard to religion. In that context it is better known as the distinction between doctrine and life. We may regard a religion as a grand narrative, as a coherent theory about the world (an ontology), about the future (an eschatology), or about how we should live and act (an ethics). Doing so, we focus on the doctrine. Theological and ecclesiastical conflicts are often about the right doctrine, e.g., about the character of God, predestination, or the meaning of the Lord's Supper. Such a doctrine is usually connected with the Bible and with particular creeds and confessions.

We may also regard religion as a set of practices and as a dimension of daily life. Thus we talk about recognizable religious activities such as liturgy, pastoral care, and social work and about the way in which believers in their daily life practice their belief.

Like in ethics, the two models cannot stand alone. If the doctrine is not practiced in any way, religion is mere lip service. For a vital religious practice to be passed on to the next generation it is essential to formulate at least partly what inspires people. Most religions and theological theories try to do justice to both views on religion. However, because these models are essentially partly incompatible, usually the emphasis is on one of the two. Therefore, the two models are usually not present to the same extent in the religious practices of individuals and groups. For example, in the Eastern Orthodox traditions the emphasis in church services is on liturgical practices and ritual, whereas in the Protestant traditions the sermon, as a reflection on the Bible and doctrine, is central. In the Calvinist tradition, the right belief is often pivotal, whereas in the Mennonite tradition the emphasis is on the righteous life.

In the Netherlands, a country where even the Roman Catholics are strongly influenced by Calvinism, religion was usually perceived primarily in terms of doctrine. However, my impression is that in the actual religious experience of many Dutch – and certainly not only those who belong to liberal denominations – doctrine has receded into the background. Practice has come more to the forefront, both in the sense of liturgical practice, rituals, and mystical experience and in the sense of living a good life. Empirical studies of religion indicate that large groups of people believe in ‘something’ like a higher power or a deeper force; their religious notions, however, are not very precise. Perhaps this force or power is referred to as God, but classical ideas such as the Trinity or Salvation play little or no role in their religious views. They are completely indifferent to conflicts between theologians and churches on themes such as the meaning of the Lord’s Supper and who is welcome at it. Their emphasis is on religious experience – in church services, but also in meditation or spiritual retreats – and on a morally good life.

##### 5. *Deductivism or Pragmatism*

A second ideal typical distinction I want to introduce is one within the doctrinal model. How should a religious doctrine be developed and how should we justify religious beliefs? According to a deductivist approach, such a doctrine and such beliefs are based on an authoritative religious text (e.g., the Bible), on basic concepts and dogmas, and perhaps on a number of authoritative creeds and confessions.<sup>12</sup> These authoritative texts and dogmas are the basis of a comprehensive religious doctrine and of separate statements of belief. An ethical doctrine is developed in an analogous way in a top-down process of deduction from some general principles or values. In most forms of religious ethics, the ethical doctrine is a part of religious doctrine and is derived directly or indirectly from the same texts, dogmas, and precepts that the other parts of the religious doctrine are based on.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Examples are the various creeds or the so-called ‘Three Forms of Unity’ which have great authority among orthodox Calvinists in the Netherlands – a little less so among members of my own church, as one of them contains the ‘Five Articles against the Remonstrants’.

<sup>13</sup> Elford, *Ethics of Uncertainty*, pp. 47-70, argues that such a deductivist approach is dominant both in the Protestant tradition (esp. in Barthianism) and in the Roman-Catholic tradition (e.g., in *Veritatis Splendor*).

Such a deductivist approach is not unproblematic for various reasons.<sup>14</sup> First, there is the problem of the underdeterminacy of dogmas and authoritative texts. Neither the Bible nor the classical creeds and confessions offer much guidance with regard to biotechnology or contraceptives. Attempts to deduce positions on such issues are often quite unconvincing and arbitrary. Second, it is too static and universalistic. Believing in an agricultural and partly nomadic society of 2000 years ago does not mean the same as believing in 2004. However, if a deduction from a sacred text was valid then, it is logically still valid. Third, it leaves little room for pluralism. If concrete moral and religious norms are the result of strict deduction from indubitable starting points, then someone with a different opinion must be a heretic who must be converted to the true belief rather than an interesting discussion partner from whom one can learn. Religious doctrines and moral views then become immune to criticism.

The most important objection is, of course, a more fundamental one. Why should we presume that the Bible, the creeds and confessions, or statements by church leaders and institutions are correct and indubitable? Are they not merely man-made – even if perhaps inspired by God? If the starting points in a deductive system are not indubitable, the complete building of religious doctrine is undermined. It is especially this problem that makes the deductivist approach not very attractive to the modern mind.

A different approach is not deductivist but pragmatist. John Rawls introduced his famous idea of reflective equilibrium as a method for moral theory construction and moral judgment.<sup>15</sup> This idea can also be used to describe the construction of a religious conviction, of a religious doctrine. In a religious reflective equilibrium process, a variety of elements can be included in order to critically test and correct each other, in an attempt to achieve a more coherent formulation of one's religious views. Elements such as personal religious experiences – including those of others – moral experiences, tradition, the dogmas and stories from that tradition, and religious texts that are considered authoritative or at least inspired can all be brought into the

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<sup>14</sup> For a more elaborate presentation of several of these criticisms, see Kole, *Moral Autonomy*; Elford, *Ethics of Uncertainty*; Richard Holloway (1999), *Godless Morality: Keeping Religion out of Ethics* (Edinburgh: Canongate).

<sup>15</sup> Cf. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (1971), Oxford: Oxford University Press; Daniels, *Justice and Justification*.

process. However, we should not restrict the process to such distinctly religious elements; a reflective equilibrium process should be open to including all relevant information. Therefore, we should also include the results of modern scholarship, such as critical analysis of the origin and the interpretation history of the texts. We should also include an analysis of the context of application, of the society in which we live. All such elements should be brought into the process of mutual adjustment and refinement.

The elements that are central in the process will vary from person to person. Some persons develop their religious views primarily on the basis of religious experiences, such as the feeling of community in a church service or a mystical experience of contact with God. Others start from practical social activities and experience God in the face of the other. Again others follow a more intellectual path of reflection, guided by appealing stories from their religious tradition. Usually, each of these religious paths will play a role in someone's religious development, with different emphases on different moments in life.

Such a learning process is not purely individual; it is an interactive process in close contact with others, making it possible to test and enrich one's own views. A process of reflective equilibrium is never finished; new experiences, new contexts will continuously be brought into the process and lead to refinement – sometimes to radical revision – of religious and moral views. This is true both at the individual level and at the level of a religious tradition or a church as a whole.

Of course, these two approaches, like the two models, are ideal typical and my sketch is much too brief and, perhaps, in the eyes of theologians even naïve. However, I hope it shows that, apart from the deductivist approach, which is dominant in orthodox Protestantism, there is a legitimate alternative. In this pragmatist approach, a believer tries to reach a coherent formulation of her religious views – probably without ever succeeding – on the basis of both general ideas and concrete experiences, of both religious beliefs and moral intuitions.

This pragmatist approach has important advantages over the deductivist approach. It is contextualist, as concrete experiences and contexts are incorporated into the reflective equilibrium process. As a consequence, the religious doctrines that flow from it can be more practically helpful in guiding believers in concrete problems. It is dynamic, because the personal system of belief evolves with a person's

development during her life, and, at the collective level, with the evolution of a society. And it is pluralistic for two reasons: because it acknowledges that every attempt to formulate a religious and moral doctrine is always a provisional, imperfect attempt, and because it acknowledges that people may legitimately arrive at different doctrines, depending on their personal biographies, experiences, and contexts.

### 6. *A Pragmatist-Practical Approach*

By combining the two distinctions, we get two ideal-typical approaches. On the one hand, a deductivist-doctrinal approach, in which the doctrine is central to the identification of religion and in which morality is deduced from fundamental religious tenets and texts. On the other hand, a pragmatist-practical approach, in which practices take primacy and in which religious and moral views are always formulated provisionally in a continuous process of reflection.

The relationship between religion and ethics differs in the two approaches. In the former approach, ethics is – or is not – derived from religion. Most contemporary discussions about the relation between morality and religion presuppose this approach. The discussion focuses then, e.g., on whether a morality needs a religious foundation or not. Both believers and non-believers have, in my view, successfully argued that we do not need a religious foundation for the basic rules and principles of morality, for minimal social morality. Although usually a religious foundation can be provided for minimal morality, it is not necessary. Morality, as a collection of basic rules and principles for a peaceful cooperation within a society, can stand on its own.<sup>16</sup>

However, this is only part of the story. As soon as we switch to the latter approach, we understand that things are not that easy. When a person develops her own moral and religious views, there is no neat separation between the two. My moral and religious views are intertwined and interdependent. In a non-foundationalist, coherentist approach, moral rules and principles do not rest on one or more singular foundations, but on the whole network of views a person is committed to. That network includes someone's religious views. The same holds vice versa. My religious

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<sup>16</sup> For a persuasive argument along this line, see Holloway, *Godless Morality*.

views are also partly dependent on my moral views. I strongly believe in human rights and equality of the sexes. When I come across religious texts from my tradition (e.g., some texts by Paul) that contradict those moral norms, I will rather revise my religious views than my moral views.

Following the pragmatist-practical approach, we would find it absurd if a believer said her ethics and religion were completely independent. My ethical views and my religious views are both embedded in the larger network of my views. From an external, neutral perspective, of course, it is possible to say there can be an ethics without religion; we see proof of that all around us. Our atheist or agnostic friends are not immoral, or at least not more so than our Christian friends. And from a political perspective, we may also hold that social morality can stand on its own.<sup>17</sup> But if I, as a believer, see how my religious beliefs and moral beliefs are intertwined and mutually correct and support each other, it is impossible for me to stick to a strict separation of the two.

This does not imply that whenever I discuss moral issues I will always need to refer to my religious views. My moral views are based on an entire network of supporting considerations, and normally it will do to refer to secular arguments. Thus, in a conversation with a partly secular audience, I will usually only refer to secular arguments. In an ethical discussion within my church, however, I will also refer explicitly to arguments with a religious nature. It depends on the context, on the discussion partners, which type of argument is best brought forward.

It will be clear that a pragmatist-practical approach is a more adequate response to the challenges of the twenty-first century than a deductivist-doctrinal one. In the Introduction, I suggested that a contemporary ethics should be contextualist, pluralist, and dynamic, and that it should avoid a direct appeal to religious dogma as much as possible. On each of these criteria, the pragmatist-practical approach fares better than a dogmatic-doctrinal one.

Such an approach also fits well into the liberal-Protestant tradition. A synonym often used for liberal Protestant is ‘undogmatic’; the emphasis is on praxis

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<sup>17</sup> Cf. Kole, *Moral Autonomy*, p. 14. The thesis of a weak autonomy of morality should be accepted: morality can do without religion. But a strong autonomy thesis should be rejected: for many believers, morality is connected with religion and partly dependent on it (as, vice versa, religion is partly dependent on morality).

rather than on dogma and doctrine.<sup>18</sup> And liberal Protestantism accepts that, although we cannot do without formulations of our beliefs, these are always provisional and open to criticism. There is a legitimate plurality of religious paths and of doctrinal formulations, and a religious way of life is a life-long process in which someone's moral and religious views evolve.

### *7. Some Problems for Liberal Protestantism*

Here I could stop - but that would be too easy. Liberal Protestantism has some characteristic weaknesses and vulnerabilities, and these can also be discerned in the pragmatist-practical approach. Orthodox Protestantism may, in the eyes of the outsider, often present unwarranted claims to certainty, based on the authority of the Bible or interpretations thereof and the creeds and confessions, but at least they offer the prospect of certainty. And orthodox Protestantism may perhaps be out of tune with modern times, but at least they present a critical perspective. Liberal Protestantism has to provide an alternative on both accounts. How should we deal with uncertainty and how should we provide a critical input that prevents us from becoming completely conformist?

Liberal Protestantism cannot claim certainty, and it should not aspire to it either. On the contrary, its openness to plurality and further evolution implies a principled stance that all our statements are never more than provisional. However, that should not lead us into passivity and apathy. If we have done our best to formulate and critically evaluate, it is the best we can do. We have reached the highest level of trustworthiness we can reach. This may be an adequate justification for action. For many of our beliefs (e.g., on human rights, on precepts such as 'do not kill' and 'do not steal'), the level of trustworthiness will be high and we will act upon them with great confidence. As regards other beliefs, we may be less certain of ourselves, perhaps because we know that others have opposite views. In those cases, we cannot refrain from acting,

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<sup>18</sup> Although it adequately characterizes liberal Protestantism in not dogmatically sticking to (let alone enforcing) certain dogmatic confessional formulas, I am nevertheless not quite happy with the term. Some liberals seem to think that it means we can do without attempts to formulate, however provisionally, our religious doctrines and 'dogmas.' This is, in my view, intellectual laziness rather than liberalism.

but the fact that we are less confident about our beliefs and that there is a plurality may influence the way we act upon them; for example, by regarding our moral views on sexuality as a private matter and accepting that others may have legitimate different views.

Living in a postmodern society is living with uncertainty.<sup>19</sup> That should, however, not prevent us from living conscientiously and acting on the beliefs we may reasonably trust. Rather this than flee in sham certainty, pretending that we know the truth, indubitable truth. Fundamentalism may seem an attractive alternative, but it probably does only so to those who are prepared to ignore reality.

The second challenge is, in my view, a more serious one. One of the criticisms sometimes brought forward against liberal Protestantism is that it merely uncritically follows societal developments and presents no radical Christian perspective. I think this criticism is unjustified if one considers reality. Liberal Protestants have always been at the forefront of reform movements and committed to social action. They are, indeed, sometimes less critical of social developments of which other churches are highly critical. Examples are equal rights for women or same-sex marriage. However, that is not because they are uncritical, but rather because they are critical toward some traditional values, including some that have traditionally been associated with Christianity. Precisely because of their emphasis on praxis, they have been fully part of the world and taken their responsibility. The fact that they are often not active in organizations or political parties on the basis of confession may make them less visible as liberal Protestants. Nevertheless, there is no ground at all to assume that, in general, they are less active and less critical toward society.<sup>20</sup>

However, their basic attitude may make liberal Protestants vulnerable to a tendency to be conformist and conservative (I use this term in a purely descriptive sense). As they are open to the world and willing to incorporate insights and experiences from science and culture, they may more easily conform to prevalent

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<sup>19</sup> Cf. Elford, *Ethics of Uncertainty*, passim; and Kole, *Moral Autonomy*, p. 247:

“Instead of trying to safeguard moral certainty by an impractical *theory* (either a religious-moral absolutism or an ideal theory like Frankena’s), we should accept that moral *practice* is intrinsically uncertain.”

<sup>20</sup> I need only refer to probably the most widely translated and published book of a Remonstrant theologian: G.J. Heering, *The Fall of Christianity: A Study of Christianity, The State and War* (orig. 1928), in which he offers a radical critique of the association between Christianity and military violence.

trends and developments.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, the pragmatist-practical approach, with its appeal to reflective equilibrium, has an inbuilt leaning toward conservatism.<sup>22</sup> The risk of reflective equilibrium is always that we merely systematize our prejudices and preferences. In terms of religion, we run the risk of merely turning our personal experiences of bliss, harmony, or unity with the whole (if these are our religious experiences) into a coherent doctrine, leaving aside every critical perspective that this world is not as it should be. Moreover, the individualist tendencies of both Protestantism and modern society reinforce this risk by emphasizing individual choice in religious and moral issues, thus reducing the possible critical input from tradition, religious authorities, or the religious community.

This should not be regarded as a problem specific to liberal Protestantism, however. In my view, both within the New Age movement and within the Evangelical movement similar individualist tendencies can be discerned (although they should not be identified with these movements) in which the critical dimension, the perspective of reform of this world, is lost. As for the New Age movement, the reason is that the emphasis is on individual growth and there is a strong focus on experiences of harmony rather than on tragedy and conflict; as for the Evangelical movement the reason is that it lays emphasis on personal Salvation. In both movements, the critical, collective perspective that moves us to radical social action may be too easily ignored.

How can liberal Protestantism counteract these tendencies? In my view, it should start acknowledging rather than ignoring them. I see various directions in which liberal Protestantism can and should counteract its inbuilt tendencies toward conservatism and conformism.

First, this can be done by emphasizing the need for a religious community. Believing is a social practice – even if, in the end, an individual’s conscience is the ultimate authority. Protestants should be aware of the risk of hyper-individualism and aberrations in developing one’s own system of belief – the number of secessions in Protestant history should make Protestants keenly aware of this risk. If believing is a lifelong learning process, we cannot do so on our own; we need the stimulus and criticism of others. We need a religious community.

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<sup>21</sup> According to Elford, *Ethics of Uncertainty*, p. 47, it was such a conformist association with prevalent trends – the endorsement of the First World War by leading liberal theologians – that led Karl Barth to developing his own, much more critical approach.

<sup>22</sup> See my ‘Ideals and Ideal Theory: The Problem of Methodological Conservatism,’ in: Wibren van der Burg and Theo van Willigenburg (eds.) (1998), *Reflective Equilibrium: Essays in Honour of Robert Heeger* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers), pp. 89-99.

I believe there is a serious weakness in liberal Protestantism here. It is often said by liberal Protestants that they can very well do without a church. They do not need to go to church services on a regular basis; they experience God in nature or in daily life. There is much wisdom in this approach – a church is certainly not an essential mediator for salvation. However, the risk of such a purely individual path of belief is that one only chooses those experiences that are convenient, that confirm what one already believes. Learning is, however, also being confronted with things that do not fit, with stories that make one feel uncomfortable, with criticisms on familiar ideas. These things are sometimes provided by the religious community – not necessarily by traditional church services, perhaps also by religious salons, discussion meetings, or pastoral care. If we take the idea of religion as a lifelong development seriously – and liberal Protestants should – then we also have to accept that we cannot live up to that idea entirely on our own. We need others; we need a community to help us in this process, perhaps not necessarily in the form of traditional church institutions or church services – these may not be what many searchers for spiritual wisdom nowadays seek. We may need to be creative in developing new institutions, new forms of community, new ways to foster religious development. Even so, we should beware of being too individualistic in this respect.

Second, religion – or, broader, spirituality – implies a different perception of the world. It is not that we have different theories of the world. The story of Creation in Genesis is not an alternative scientific theory, but an invitation to look at the world as a gift, as something precious that we are asked to guard as stewards. A religious ethics implies not so much a different substance as a different attitude and, to some extent, a different input in the reflective equilibrium process.

How can we foster such a different attitude, such a different perspective? One way is to go to a very general level, the level which is farthest from reality, that of ideals. We should purposively open ourselves to ideals or, in religious terms, to visions.<sup>23</sup> It is the Kingdom of Heaven that inspires us. Even if it cannot be realized here on earth, it is not completely outer-worldly. The prophets of the Old Testament, the Sermon on the Mount – they make us realize that this world is not what it was meant to be, and that we ourselves are not what we were meant to be. Religious visions thus both offer a critical perspective on this world and an attractive

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<sup>23</sup> Cf. Elford, *Ethics of Uncertainty*, p. 114; Van der Burg ‘Ideals and Ideal Theory,’ p. 97.

perspective on how it should be. I think this is one of the most important aspects of a religious practice: to make us fully aware of how much the world is in need of reformation. By considering the perspective of the Kingdom of Heaven, we perceive the world differently.

Abstract stories may appeal to us, may motivate us, but they can never do the trick alone. It is also concrete experience that moves us, especially in the form of contrasting experiences – it is the direct contact with others, with suffering and injustice.<sup>24</sup> Concrete experiences may help to enrich us, and also to challenge our established perceptions. I believe that one of the important aspects of a religious tradition is that it offers us these experiences; it confronts us with the suffering of others, with the needs of the world; it makes us sensitive to these needs. It may also provide us with experiences that make us feel in harmony with the world, supported by something which is bigger than us, which transcends our limitations. In both ways, it transforms us.

Denis Müller argues that “the enlightening capacity of theology depends greatly on the fragile balance between experiences of resonance and experiences of dissonance.”<sup>25</sup> Although I would rather apply this idea to religion than to theology, I think it is an important warning for liberal Protestants. As strongly influenced by the traditions of Humanism and the Enlightenment, we probably more likely run the risk of being too optimistic and neglecting the darker sides of life. (Whereas, conversely, we sometimes are critical of the inclination of more orthodox Protestants to overemphasize those darker sides.)

This fits in well with what some theorists of reflective equilibrium have argued. Michael DePaul has argued for the need to search for new experiences, which he calls ‘formative experiences’, which may enrich and transform our moral faculties.<sup>26</sup> This may lead to a marginal modification of our views, but also to more radical transformations. Marian Verkerk added that searching for new formative experiences is not only necessary in order to enrich our faculties, but also to transform

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<sup>24</sup> Cf. Bert van den Brink (2000), *The Tragedy of Liberalism: An Alternative Defense of a Political Tradition* (New York: SUNY Press), pp. 152-153, referring to the work of Axel Honneth.

<sup>25</sup> Denis Müller, ‘Why and How Can Religions and Traditions Be Plausible and Credible in Public Ethics Today?’, *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 4 (2001) 4, 329-348, at 344.

<sup>26</sup> Michael R. DePaul (1993), *Balance and Refinement: Beyond Coherence Methods of Moral Inquiry* (London/New York: Routledge).

ourselves.<sup>27</sup> Inspired by feminist philosophy, she argues that we sometimes need to transform our self-concepts as well, in order to make our moral views on how to act correspond with our personal view of who we are. We have to become different persons, and in order to do that we also need to address the general social and political interpretative framework.

Both authors refer not only to actual experiences in order to reach this enrichment and transformation, but also to fiction, like in literature. Both authors thus, though in secular terms, argue for what we might call ‘radical conversions’. I believe this argument for the role of – actual and fictitious – enriching and transforming experiences has parallels in the way a religious tradition can enrich and transform ourselves. It can enrich our experiences and our faculty of judgment, intuition, and perception; it can also more radically transform our moral personalities in the sense that we become different persons, that we perceive the relation between ourselves and our social and political context differently. The ways in which religion can do this vary – there is more than one spiritual path. For some, a church service can have such an effect. It may be a song or a prayer that has a special appeal, a sermon that sheds new light on an ancient text, or the blessing at the end that gives new strength. For others, there may be other experiences.

## 8. *Conclusion*

Let me conclude. The role of religion for ethics is not in providing foundations for moral norms; it is not in providing completely different moral norms than a secular ethics would do. I believe that it is primarily in the way it enriches and transforms our experiences, and the way in which it stimulates our spiritual and moral development and provides a critical input into the process. It may thus lead to a process of transformation or, in more traditional terms, conversion, enabling us not only to develop moral views, but also to find motivation to act upon them.

There has been a tendency among liberal theologians and philosophers to adopt a strategy in which religion and ethics are separated. I believe such an artificial

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<sup>27</sup> Marian Verkerk, ‘The Thinker and the Thinking Process: A Feminist Perspective on the Moral Faculty,’ in: Wibren van der Burg and Theo van Willigenburg (eds.) (1998), *Reflective Equilibrium: Essays in Honour of Robert Heeger* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers), pp. 115-126.

separation in the long run has a negative influence both on the vitality of liberal ethics and on the vitality of liberal Protestantism. Therefore, I have tried to sketch a pragmatist-practical approach to the relation between religion and ethics that, in my view, does more justice to the pluralist, secular, individualizing, and dynamic character of western European societies. It does not offer easy distinctions or simple answers; it does not offer certainty. However, should we deplore that, or is it merely an adequate reflection of the complexity of life in the twenty-first century?<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> I want to thank Jos Kole, Hildegard Penn and Heine Siebrand for their helpful comments on a draft of this paper.