Christian Moral Education in a Global, Postmodern Age

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This article proposes an approach to Christian moral education as a constitutive dimension of Christian religious education. The author contends that we can learn to deal more effectively with the moral complexity and ambiguity of our present-day, global and postmodern world if we conceptualize moral experience as involving processes of moral awareness, moral reflection, moral commitment and sustained moral action, and that building upon an understanding of moral experience we can foster greater moral self-understanding, encourage fruitful dialogue among those who have differing moral outlooks, and teach people with diverse moral outlooks how they can work together to seek the common socio-moral good.

Introduction: Trudy and Moral Truth

Trudy emphatically proclaimed “truth is truth is truth.” I met Trudy, of all places, in a furniture store. When she learned that I taught graduate courses in religious education, Trudy launched into a discourse on the church, social decline, and the need to teach people the truth about life and the world. Several times Trudy asked, “So, are you a person who can recognize truth from falsehood, black from white; or are you one of those people who only sees shades of gray everywhere?” I was never given an opportunity to respond to Trudy’s monologue. If I had, I would have said, “I think the world is more than black, white, and gray. The world is a rich tapestry with many shades of colors.”

Trudy pointed out that moral living is a constitutive aspect of Christian faith, and that Christian moral education is, consequently, an essential dimension of Christian religious education. Furthermore, Trudy diagnosed well the moral uncertainty of our times. More and more often today people harbor doubts about the ability of social institutions, including our churches, to provide moral and spiritual leadership.

However, Trudy, like many other Christians I have met over the years, is ill-equipped to deal with the diversity and complexity of our contemporary globalized, postmodern age. (On globalization see Waters 2001. On postmodernity see Lakeland 1997, and Horell 2003.) Because of global transportation and communication, the mobility of people, and the many ways people envision their lives today, we live in a world in which we more and more frequently encounter people with diverse moral perspectives. Yet, Trudy’s and similar approaches to morality are non-dialogical. Given the way they see the world, one is either with or against Trudy and people of a similar mindset. One is categorized as a person who sees the truth as it is (that is, as Trudy sees it) or as one who is in error. This is hardly a strategy that can foster genuine moral dialogue about contested and often complex moral issues in an age in which there are

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1 The two stories told in this essay are from the author’s life experiences. However, the names of those involved have been changed.
increasingly diverse moral outlooks. (On the importance of dialogue in addressing religious and social issues see Ratliff 2010.) Additionally, I was struck by Trudy’s lack of critical self-reflection. The currents of contemporary postmodern culture have made us increasingly aware of the situatedness of all human knowing and doing. People throughout the world are developing a heightened sense of how our perspectives on life are always grounded within specific life contexts. Yet, Trudy seemed unaware of (or perhaps she chose to ignore) the ways her religious conviction, nationality, race and gender informed her moral outlook. She was firmly convinced of her grasp of moral truth, and she had a secure sense that she could and did evaluate the perspectives of others accurately and fairly.

So, how can and should contemporary Christians address moral issues? And how can religious educators provide effective moral education? In this essay I propose that if Christians can learn to be attentive to the dynamics of moral experience we can find ways to present a distinctively Christian moral stance while also being able to enter into dialogue with others as we strive to deal with the moral diversity and complexity of the times in which we live. In presenting my proposal I begin with another story.

Sr. Amelia and the Dynamics of Moral Experience

One morning Amelia, a religious sister in her thirties, arrived at my office for a meeting. Before I could utter a word, she said, “Garbage! Garbage! Garbage!” It was trash collection day, and Amelia had just spent the twenty-minute walk to my office from her new apartment in an affluent suburban neighborhood noticing the garbage that her neighbors had put out for collection. “You know I just spent two years as a missionary in Bolivia, among very poor people,” she said. “Those Bolivian people could eat for weeks, clothe themselves for years, and furnish their homes for a lifetime from the trash I passed today.”

I noted that I had talked with a few of our neighbors about trash day, and that I had come to learn that many of them see it as a chance to rid themselves of the clutter in their lives. At that point in our discussion I focused on moral awareness; specifically, on how Amelia’s experiences as a missionary in Bolivia shaped her moral awareness, and how Amelia and her neighbors had fundamentally differing perceptions of the moral significance of trash day.

When our discussion turned to moral reflection—to considering how Amelia and I ought to respond to trash day—we faced a conceptual block. Amelia had been schooled to think of reflection, including moral reflection, as a process of critical reflective distancing—a stepping back from life to get a more objective perspective. Yet, Amelia had a well-developed sense of emotional intelligence and it was her emotions—her affective response to the trash she saw piled up on the sidewalks of her neighborhood—that had sparked her moral awareness and initial moral reflections about this situation. Amelia was not able to reflect fully on the situation until she could envision how she

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2 In my analysis I draw insight from, yet further develop, the four component model of moral experience proposed by educational psychologist James R. Rest. Rest contended that we can conceptually divide moral experience into the components of moral sensitivity or awareness, moral reasoning, moral decision making, and moral action. See James Rest 1983, and Rest with Barnet et al. 1986.
could combine cognitive intelligence and emotional intelligence, critical reflective distancing and critical affective apprehension.

Once Amelia began to reflect in earnest, she developed a more expansive sense of the moral issues raised by trash day. Amelia is a member of an international religious community, and she has lived and ministered in three countries and traveled in a number of others. Her personal experiences and sense of living in a global world led Amelia to begin to wonder how wide-spread the “trash day problem” was and whether anybody was studying the garbage of first-world nations. She also began to ponder how her various communities—her new local community, her international religious community, our school, our church, our nation, and our world—should and could respond to the disparities in the distribution of the world’s resources that “condemned some people to live impoverished and shortened lives” while others felt a need to “trash valuable resources in order to clear their lives of clutter.”

Amelia’s reflections left both of us feeling a bit overwhelmed. To move us beyond this point I asked, “So what, if anything, do you, Amelia, want to commit to doing to address the trash day problem during the time you will be living and studying here?” I then explained how we could make a distinction between moral reflection and moral commitment. I noted that on a reflective level we could discuss all the ways the trash day problem should, ideally, be addressed. Then, at the level of commitment, we could ask, “What is God requiring and enabling us to do in the here and now to address the trash day problem?” Amelia, who has a now-centered, postmodern outlook on life, then began to consider how she could use her abilities as a missionary and teacher to address the trash day problem. In follow-up conversations with Amelia over the course of the next few months I learned that she was in conversation with the leadership of her religious community about this issue and that she had become involved with a program to promote sustainable development at a local school.

In my last conversation with Amelia she was feeling a bit discouraged. In some of her conversations with her neighbors about the trash day problem, she had been told that she should not try to force her “opinions” on others. That is, it had been suggested by some of her neighbors that she has one moral perspective about trash day while they have another, and that she (Amelia) should not try to impose her moral perspective/opinion on people who had a differing moral opinion. As I look back today, I recognize that I missed an opportunity to minister with Amelia during that conversation. Specifically, I could have noted that once we adopt a moral commitment we need to consider the factors that affect our ability to carry that commitment into sustained moral action.

Moral Awareness

In the first part of my conversation with Amelia we focused on moral awareness. Our moral awareness is sparked when our attention is drawn to salient ethical cues in a situation, that is, when we are drawn to notice how a situation expresses people’s moral values and/or moral faults or affects the well-being of people in relation to one another and the broader world. Once we notice the moral dimensions of a situation our moral awareness tends to unfold until we develop an initial sense of what moral issues are raised by that situation. In discussing issues of moral awareness, Amelia and I considered how our observations of trash day in our neighborhood made us aware of waste and misuse of resources, and of the negative influence of consumerism in our community.
So that we could deepen our awareness of the trash day problem in future conversations, I asked Amelia to think specifically about how her own background as a religious sister and missionary had set her apart from many if not most of her neighbors in the ways she saw moral concerns. Yet, I counseled Amelia not to adopt a Trudy-like stance: not to assume that she saw the truth about trash day and should now preach this truth to her neighbors. Rather, I suggested to Amelia that she be open to learning more about the moral issues raised by trash day through conversations with her new neighbors.

Finally, I invited Amelia to think about the changing patterns of moral awareness in our contemporary societies. In the past, people could often presuppose that there was general agreement about issues of moral awareness. For instance, in the Catholic neighborhood in which I grew up, almost everyone attended the same church and was educated in one of two local schools. In such a social context, it could be taken for granted that there would be commonalities in the ways people looked at moral and social situations. Today, however, our contemporary, global patterns of life frequently bring people of diverse moral outlooks together. For example, in an adult religious education discussion a few years ago, a business executive spoke about how she maintained regular contact with customers and suppliers in Israel, India and Japan. She told us that in order to maintain “working relationships” with her network of colleagues she has to be aware of a number of distinct senses of morality, including Christian, Jewish, Hindu, Shinto and Buddhist moral sensibilities.

In follow-up conversations, Amelia reported on how her awareness of the moral issues raised by trash day continued to develop through conversations with her neighbors. On the one hand, she had become more and more convinced that she had a distinctive Christian moral viewpoint to share. Her travels and experience as a missionary had enabled her to develop a global moral outlook and a refined sense of social justice that enriched her discussions with the members of her new community. On the other hand, Amelia noted that while some of her neighbors did not see the moral issues raised by trash day and other communal concerns, many of them offered nuanced and insightful evaluations of moral issues. Amelia commented, specifically, on what her neighbors taught her about resisting consumer culture while being immersed within it.

**Moral Reflection**

When Amelia and I discussed how we ought to respond to the problem of trash day, we were engaged in a process of moral reflection. *Moral reflection involves considering the data of moral awareness in order to determine what should be done to resolve some present moral perplexity or, in cases of irreducible moral conflict or ambiguity, to come to some understanding of how and why a moral issue arose.*

During my conversations with Amelia we faced a problem I encounter frequently. That is, sometimes people are led into moral confusion today because they are unable to articulate a coherent model of moral reflection. Moral reflection has often been envisioned as a process of critical reflective distancing—that is, as an ability to step back from everyday moral concerns to develop a broader perspective or universal moral viewpoint. (See for example, Kurt Baier 1965.) In our contemporary era, more and more people are recognizing that this model of moral reflection is no longer adequate. On the one hand, in our contemporary, global age it is not possible in most instances to stand above all moral perspectives and view a situation or issue from an inclusive point of
view. As illustrated by the case of the business executive mentioned earlier, people are often likely to be overwhelmed today by the diversity of moral perspectives and the complexity of contemporary moral issues if they try to step back and then take into account the range of religious, socio-cultural, ethnic, and ideological viewpoints they encounter in their everyday lives.

On the other hand, trying to step back from our specific life contexts to gain a universal perspective can limit rather than enhance our moral perspectives. We learn about morality through the examples of others and the relationships that sustain our lives, by participating in communities that are guided by specific codes of conduct and in our striving to understand both our moral strengths and limitations as unique persons. Hence, striving for disinterested impartiality can diminish our sense of responsible moral agency insofar as it can cut us off from the sources of moral insights we draw upon in our everyday lives. (The ways in which critical distancing can impoverish people’s senses of responsible moral agency are explored in MacIntyre 1982 and 1989.)

As people have become aware of the limitations of established models of moral reflection, they have sought out other sources of moral insight; turning especially to affective and bodily-kinesthetic knowing as touchstones to guide moral awareness and reflection. (See for example the discussion of emotions as evaluative judgments that enable us to tune into the moral dimensions of life situations in Solomon 2007, 203-217.) Still, many of us have not fully incorporated a renewed and richer sense of moral insight into our operative models of moral analysis. We are, thus, prone to fall into moral confusion. For instance, as noted above, Amelia’s moral awareness and reflections were initially fueled by her affective reaction to the piles of trash she saw in her neighborhood. Her studies and life experiences have led her to go beyond established models of moral analysis and to draw insight from her emotions as she seeks to make sense of morally charged situations. Yet, when I invited Amelia to reflect intentionally about the trash day problem, she turned to the established models of moral reflection that she had learned during her youth and young adulthood. These models directed Amelia to discount her emotions and to adopt a posture of critical reflective distance. As Amelia tried to distance herself from the emotional insights that had originally fueled her moral analysis, she became morally confused.

Through conversations with Amelia and others over the years, I have found that moral reflection can be fruitful when it is envisioned as a two step process: stepping back and stepping in, critical distancing and narrative/relational projection. When we begin an intentional process of moral reflection it is often helpful to take a step back from the situation and to try to develop a more inclusive perspective. We can often get a better view of a moral concern by stepping, conceptually, out of the river of life and imaginatively looking at moral issues from the riverbank. Of course, we must also recognize that our moral outlook always remains grounded within a specific life context. The aim of critical distancing should be to provide enough perspective to raise critically reflective questions, not to seek a totally unbiased and impartial perspective.

Then, as we reflectively process the data of moral awareness we must step back into the situation as we strive to recognize the extent to which who we are and how we stand in relation to others inform the way we see the situation. Amelia, for instance, had the reaction she did to trash day in her new neighborhood because of her experiences as a missionary and the strong affective relationships she has maintained with her friends in
Bolivia. Overall, if we are to understand present-day moral issues in relation to both our past and our future possibilities, we must be able to develop a sense of how those issues connect with our life story, our personal and communal life narrative, and our efforts to project our life narrative into the future. (On the importance of narrative thinking in moral reflection see McClendon 1986, Hauerwas 1981, and McIntyre 2007, 204-225.) Additionally, we must be able to formulate a sense of how a situation affects our ongoing relationships with others. (For discussions of how relationships are essential to our moral lives see Gilligan 1982, Noddings 2002, and Brabeck, ed. 1989. For a discussion of the importance of balancing cognitive with emotional insight, and a sense of self with an understanding of the importance of relationships with others see Brabeck 1996.)

**Moral Commitment**

As already noted, Amelia and I became somewhat overwhelmed by our reflections on the moral issues raised by trash day in our neighborhood. We then determined that we were reaching the limits of that part of our conversation, and I steered our discussion beyond moral reflection to consider issues of moral commitment. *To make a moral commitment is for a specific person or group to pledge to work for the realization of some concrete moral good.* Even after we have reflected extensively on a morally charged life situation, it may often take a great deal of additional effort to develop a plan of moral action, choose between competing plans of action, or determine how to deal with negative consequences that could arise from a specific moral commitment. Thus, the process of making a moral commitment can carry us far beyond the realm of moral reflection.

While based on moral awareness (or awareness coupled with reflection), the process of making a moral commitment moves beyond understanding to involvement. Because they are embodied rather than abstract expressions of moral agency, moral commitments are formed according to a logic of personal and social meaning-making rather than a logic of reflective analysis. When we make a moral commitment, what we decide and how we then act may have significant consequences for our own and others’ lives.

We can often address the complex moral issues of our contemporary postmodern age more effectively if we distinguish between moral reflection and moral commitment and recognize the distinctive dynamics of each. If we are to develop an adequate understanding of moral experience today, many of us must also further develop our understanding of the dynamics of moral decision making as central to the process of forming viable moral commitments, and deepen our sense of how moral decisions are embedded within the concrete contexts of our lives. More fully, in our increasingly complex, global world many of us need to learn to be more intentional about how we (1) frame or conceptualize moral decision-making situations so that we focus on the moral issues that are most important and how we can approach these issues informed by a sense of our unique talents and gifts, (2) list, survey and weigh decision-making alternatives in terms of their effects on the many dimensions of contemporary moral issues, and (3) deliberate about what alternative is best within our specific life contexts. (On decision-making and ethical decision making see Janis and Mann 1977; Hill, et al. 1978; Brody 1981; Callahan 1991, 65-75; Sternberg and Stebler 2004.)
Sustained Moral Action

In my final conversation with Amelia she was feeling a bit discouraged. As part of her efforts to engage her new neighbors in conversations about trash day, Amelia was grappling with the idea that moral perspectives can be reduced to matters of subjective opinion. Hence, Amelia was dealing with the negative tendency to trivialize our sense of morality and to doubt the existence of objective moral standards. At that point, I might have been able to help Amelia understand her situation more fully if I had explored with her how we can sustain committed moral action in our contemporary, global age and how, moreover, our faith communities can help us to resist the influence of contemporary tendencies to trivialize the significance of moral experience.

Just as we can distinguish between moral reflection and moral commitment, we can distinguish between moral commitment and sustained moral action. Moral commitment involves deciding how to address concrete moral issues within the relational context of our lives. Then, sustaining moral action is the process of striving to be faithful to our moral commitments and the underlying values upon which they are based. To carry our moral commitments into action we must be able to keep our moral goals in mind, deal with impediments and difficulties, cope with frustration and fatigue, and resist distractions.

Our ability to sustain moral action depends on having effective personal and social supports. Personal supports include such things as our ability to remain focused on our moral goals, positive inner self-talk, self-management skills, positive and pro-social feelings, and a sense of the unity of our personal identity and moral goals. Social supports include the support of a community, including a faith community, and the reinforcement of a sense of social responsibility through our interactions with others. In my conversations with Amelia I could have prepared her to sustain her moral commitment to address the issues raised by trash day if I had discussed with her the dynamics of sustained moral action and how she could turn to personal and social supports that would affirm her efforts to work for the common good. (On sustaining moral action see Grim, Kohlberg, and White 1972; Mischel and Mischel 1976; Masters and Santrock 1976; Blasi 1983; London 1970; Hornstein 1976; Colby and William Damon 1992; and Staub 2003.)

In her encounters with her neighbors Amelia grappled specifically with the problem of moral relativism. Moral relativists hold that each moral perspective is constructed within a particular life context and pertains only to the person or group that holds that perspective. Hence, they adopt that view that moral outlooks are the moral opinions of specific people, and that others may or may not agree with these opinions.

Moral relativism is problematic insofar as relativists base their moral outlook on questionable assumptions about the relationship between moral knowing (moral epistemology) and moral value (moral ontology). Our postmodern age has heightened our awareness of the situatedness of all human knowing and doing. More and more people today recognize that in our efforts to come to know what is morally right and good we can never distance ourselves completely from our specific life contexts to grasp objective and universal moral truth fully. Thus, we can never begin moral inquiry with universal moral truths that are self-evident or intuitively obvious to persons in all life contexts.

However, to accept that there is a certain degree of relativity to all moral knowing does not mean that we must also conclude that moral values are relative or limited to
specific life contexts. Rather, there is another way of envisioning the relationship between moral knowing and moral values. That is, we can compare moral perspectives in an effort to develop a more and more universal sense of moral values that can guide us in discerning the objective moral good. Historically, for instance, debates in the United States about slavery, women’s suffrage, and civil rights involved extended discussions among people with diverse perspectives seeking, successfully or at least somewhat successfully, to move beyond divisions to the fuller realization of the common and objective moral good. Overall, an awareness of diverse life perspectives need not lead us to assume that all moral perspectives are equally viable. We have often in the past and can today compare moral perspectives as we try to determine the extent to which each perspective is likely to contribute to human flourishing and fullness of human life within the concrete circumstances of our lives and world.

Conclusion

In striving to develop and teach viable senses of Christian morality today, religious educators can begin by recognizing that in our global, postmodern age there are a number of ways in which our moral outlooks can be distorted. Specifically, in trying to reduce the moral diversity and complexity of our contemporary age to a manageable scope, we may be tempted to adopt a simplistic “truth is truth is truth” (a “see-the-truth-and-act-according-to-the-truth”) model of morality. Or, we may be overwhelmed by the diversity of moral outlooks found today and be tempted to reduce morality to subjective opinion. However, we can learn to avoid simplistic and reductionistic approaches to morality if we begin by attending carefully to the dynamics of moral experience as involving processes of awareness, reflection, commitment, and sustained action. Building upon a foundational sense of moral experience we can learn to understand our own moral experiences more fully. We can also learn to be more fully open to the truth found in the moral experiences of others, and better able to work with others to seek the fuller realization of the common good.

References


