Christian Ethical Distinctiveness, the Common Good and Moral Formation

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1. Introduction

The eloquent, albeit often pugnacious, prose of Stanley Hauerwas has provided the contemporary theological community with no shortage of quotable quotes, of which perhaps the most quotable – and arguably the most quoted – is his comment about the church’s social ethics:

I am…challenging the very idea that Christian social ethics is primarily an attempt to make the world more peaceable or just. Put starkly, the first social ethical task of the church is to be the church – the servant community. …As such the church does not have a social ethic; the church is a social ethic.¹

To the long, ecumenically-broad tradition of Christian social involvement, such remarks are often heard with something approaching incredulity, and quickly dismissed as sociologically sectarian. Where such social involvement has been intellectually grounded in some form of moral realism, Hauerwas’ comments are likely to be even more quickly dismissed as epistemologically fideist. Above all, if such involvement has been nurtured in the Reformed tradition with its ideas of common grace and civil responsibility, Hauerwas’ approach is likely to be knowingly explained away as something potentially even worse than sectarian and fideistic – Anabaptist!²

The essence of Hauerwas’ response to these charges is captured in the sentence which I omitted from the above quotation: “Such a claim may well sound self-serving until we remember what makes the church the church is its faithful manifestation of the peaceable kingdom in the world.”³ Whether, in the end, Hauerwas’ own developed position offers a

² I am here echoing the remarks of Richard J. Mouw in his He Shines in All That’s Fair: Culture and Common Grace (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001) when he writes: “When the going gets tough in an intra-Reformed controversy, there frequently comes a point when one of the parties reaches into the rhetorical arsenal and employs what seems for all the world to be one of the worst insults one Calvinist can toss at another: they call their opponent an Anabaptist” (p. 21).
³ Hauerwas, The Peaceable Kingdom, p. 99
theologically and philosophically coherent foundation for Christian involvement in the world will be a matter for ongoing debate – one that will not be taken up in this paper. Indeed, this paper is not about Hauerwas. He is nevertheless a useful point of departure precisely because his work, among that of others, has generated one of the crucial tensions in contemporary Christian ethics: Does the Christian appropriation of communitarian ethics subvert the Christian commitment to the common good?

Of course, the problem is not simply one internal to the Christian community. In fact, it is even argued that the very idea of a common good that is genuinely common is both intellectually- and socially-implausible. The latter is so because the liberalism that has sustained discussions about the common good has been shown to be ideologically suspect. The neutrality and openness that was the foundation of liberal ideas of the common good have increasingly been exposed as obscuring hidden prejudices and unacknowledged strategies of exclusiveness. The critique is well-documented in both theological and philosophical literature. Nevertheless, I know of few better, or more pithy, summary narratives of the decline of liberalism as a self-evident good than that provided by Andrew Sullivan.

Liberalism began … as a way for politics to avoid settling profound and divisive issues of religion; in the modern Western world, where religious convictions have become generally less intense, the notion of cultural identity seems to have replaced them as the construct that gives the deepest meaning to many people’s lives. And in its newest incarnation, liberalism is deeply implicated in the social warfare that this area inevitably leads to; indeed, it has begun to redefine politics and law as the means by which the problems of identity are finally resolved. It has come, in other words, to resemble the problem it was originally designed to fix. ⁴ (my emphasis)

This is a telling critique. And whilst it may not – and should not - render all liberal talk of the common good redundant, it is at the very least a reminder that discussions about Christian social involvement must assume a far less simple world than was possible when the idea of the liberal pluralist society was a more stable idea than it is today.

Within the debates that characterise the Christian community’s attempts to negotiate its way into and through this more complex situation, the tendency is for distinctiveness to be played off against commonality. The more the distinctiveness of the Christian community is

emphasised, the less likely – it is feared – will be the orientation to the common good, and vice versa. Indeed the distinction can be even sharper than this: sacrificing the distinctive may mean promoting the banal, whilst sacrificing the common may entail social alienation.

In appealing to what is held in common, Christians may be sacrificing what is distinctive to their own identity in favour of notions whose general acceptance is based more on their vacuity and banality than their universal transparency. Yet, by speaking directly from their own tradition, Christians may succeed only in alienating other members of society, who hear no more than a religious group recounting special claims to authority and privileged sources of ethical guidance, rather than a community which genuinely seeks to contribute to the common human task.\(^5\)

Against this background, the thesis of this paper is quite simple: Rather than play distinctiveness off against the idea of the common good, I will argue that Christianity’s strongest warrants for contributing to the common good derive from its most distinctive beliefs. Of course this in itself does not say very much at all. More specifically, therefore, I want to take some of the language usually claimed by communitarians and import it into the discussion about social involvement. I will argue that social involvement is as much a matter of, and dependent upon, processes of moral formation unique to the Christian community as are the identity-giving practices of forgiveness, reconciliation, worship, breaking bread, self-denial etc. I want to propose that the Christian commitment to the common good is not an additional practice which the church might take up once it has been morally formed. Rather, it is intrinsic to the moral formation of the community. More specifically, appropriating Richard Hays argument about the focal images of the New Testament’s moral vision, I will argue that the church’s social involvement is fundamentally formed by its attention to cross, new creation and community.\(^6\)

The resulting proposal may or may not be immediately recognised as fitting the conventional contours of Reformed theology. Certainly, in broad terms, my approach to the issues is shaped by an ecclesial context – the Uniting in Australia – in which the Reformed tradition has already taken its place beside Methodist and Congregational traditions and is committed as a matter of course to engagement with the wider ecumenical traditions. At the same it is


shaped by the awareness of a social and cultural context which, as Clive Pearson’s paper elsewhere in this volume has amply demonstrated, has little knowledge of, and often shows explicit hostility towards, the concerns and categories of classical Christian belief and practice – be they Catholic, Reformed or anything else. In such a context the Christian community is forced to return to the narratives of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection in order imaginatively to re-think the manner of and rationale for its commitment to the common good.

Nevertheless, in order to locate my argument amongst the various concerns of the Reformed tradition, I will first undertake two preliminary tasks. One will be to counter the view that the Reformed tradition is by definition suspicious of the common good pole of the debate (and perhaps even responsible for the polarisation of the debate). The other will be to explore two recent contributions – one Catholic and one Reformed – in order to demonstrate how the conventional ecumenical divide is playing out in this debate. With these tasks complete, I will offer my own proposal.

2. Reformed Culpability?

Where the Reformed tradition tends to be wary of either a real or imagined Anabaptist sectarianism, the Catholic tradition looks with suspicion towards the Reformed on account of the latter’s criticism of the natural law tradition. Yet the history of the Reformed tradition bears strong and reliable witness to the fact that the absence of a developed natural law tradition has not prevented the development of an honourable history of social involvement. Typically, the doctrinal roots of this history are located in Calvin’s ‘third use of the law’ and his endorsement of the genuine wisdom to be found outside the church both in the political order and in the liberal and manual sciences.

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7 In fact, Hauerwas, in an article co-authored with J. Alexander Sider (“The Distinctiveness of Christian Ethics: A Review Article on John Colwell, Living the Christian Story: The Distinctiveness of Christian Ethics”, The International Journal of Systematic Theology 5 (2003): 225-233], has recently chided mainline protestants for a tendency toward misrepresentation of the anabaptist tradition: “Frankly we have to admit, we are sick and tired of mainline Protestants, who advocate ‘engaging the world’, accusing Anabaptists of ‘sectarian withdrawal’. As Daniel L. Smith-Christopher points out, these mainline protestants ‘typically undervalue, or are not even aware of, the worldwide involvement of these supposedly withdrawn Christian activists in direct service projects that are not mediated by any state authorities’” (p.232).

8 In his Rediscovering the Natural Law in Reformed Theological Ethics (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), Stephen J. Grabill argues that there is a developed, if circumscribed, tradition of natural law in the Reformed tradition with its roots in Calvin but which was obscured during the twentieth-century by Barth’s rejection of natural theology, and by the polemics of Barth and others against the rationalism of the Reformed scholastics as a deviation from authentic Reformed theology.
Calvin’s use of the law in the Christian life means that Christians encounter the law not only as a guide that brings them to Christ and is then redundant, but also as a continuing guide to the Christian life: “For no man (sic) has heretofore attained to such wisdom as to be unable, from the daily instruction of the law to make fresh progress toward a purer knowledge of the divine will.” Through their knowledge of the law, they have – among other things - a mandate to honour and obey such structures and institutions which can be seen to be divinely intended for the whole human race (even if the divine origin of those structures and institutions is obscured from others who participate in and derive benefit from them). Calvin’s exhortation to honour ‘civil government’ is driven by both a strategy of protecting the church as well as a more unprejudiced desire for the peace of society as an end in itself. This twofold strategy reflects a prior twofold understanding of the “appointed end” of “civil government”. On the one hand that ‘end’ includes “to cherish and protect the outward worship of God” and to defend sound piety and the position of the church. On the other hand it is also the purpose of civil government “to adjust our life to the society of men [sic], to form our social behaviour to civil righteousness to reconcile us with one another [and] to promote general peace and tranquillity”. Thus through their participation in Christ the fulfiller of the law, that which Christians have their eyes opened to is the Mosaic law which is “in a manner, dictated to us by that internal law, which … is in a manner written and stamped on every heart”. This includes a new awareness of the divine appointment of civil government.

Calvin’s endorsement of wisdom from outside the church establishes the possibility that Christians can learn from non-Christians, both in the political order and in the liberal and manual sciences: “…[I]f the Lord has willed that we be helped in physics, dialectic mathematics and other like disciplines, by the work and ministry of the ungodly, let us use this assistance”. Although Calvin places the emphasis upon the fact that Christians can be ‘helped’ by ‘this assistance’, he has also implicitly laid the theological foundation for Christians to act in common cause with non-Christians on such matters.

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10 Calvin, *Institutes* 4.20.1 In his *Sovereign Grace: The Place and Significance of Christian Freedom in John Calvin’s Political Thought* (Oxford: OUP, 1999) William R. Stevens Jr. has written: “Calvin finds the effort to distinguish sharply between the sacred law and secular law to be, in many ways, an artificial endeavour. Although Christian conscience does set Christian individuals apart from thoughtless obedience to institutional structures, it ends up freeing them for thoughtful awareness of their need for such structures. Through his law God provides for church, family, work, school and civil polity” (p. 50).
11 Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.8.1
12 See Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.2.13
13 See Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.2.14
Although these two strands of Calvin’s thought are concerned with two different sets of issues, I would argue that they are not unrelated nor merely random or ad hoc insights on his part. They belong to a coherent account of the inter-relationship between creation, law, sin, salvation and providence. Because in Calvin’s thought, the imago Dei has been corrupted rather than destroyed, the mind is therefore only “partly weakened and partly corrupted”. Nevertheless the level of corruption is sufficient to deprive it of access to ‘heavenly things’. Thus, human beings “being immured in the darkness of error [are] scarcely able by means of that natural law, to form any tolerable idea of the worship which is acceptable to God”. On the other hand, it is not so great that ‘earthly things’ have become inaccessible. So we read in the oft-quoted passage: “Whenever we come upon these matters in secular writers, let that admirable light of truth shining in them teach us that the mind of man [sic], though fallen and perverted from its wholeness, is nevertheless clothed and ornamented with God’s excellent gifts.” The unity of these various strands of thought has been the basis of suggestions that it is possible after all to affirm that “for Calvin, as for the Catholic tradition, there is one moral law, and that it is ‘written on the consciences’ of all persons” and that therefore “a biblically based ethics can be an ethics for all, since its ultimate moral referent is ‘written upon the hearts of all’”. Thus it is suggested that “constructive ecumenical ethics done from the perspective of Protestantism might best begin with Calvin”. So perhaps the Reformed tradition can breathe a sigh of relief that it can counter the objections of its Catholic counterpart.

One of the means of developing these insights has been the idea of ‘common grace’. Richard Muow has tracked the background to this idea and given an account of recent debates about it. Although more explicitly engaged with a specific strand of North American Calvinism,

14 Calvin, Institutes, 2.2.16
15 For a detailed study of the inter-relationships between the duplex cognitio Dei, the sensus divinitatis, the semen religionis, the lex divina, the lex naturalis in Calvin, see Grabill, Rediscovering the Natural Law, pp. 70-97.
16 Calvin, Institutes, 2.2.12
17 Calvin, Institutes, 2.8.1. That Calvin does indeed have an idea of ‘natural law’ and ‘natural revelation’ is often obscured in protestant polemics. That such natural law and natural revelation does not attain its intended purpose does not alter the fact that it exists. Indeed, the coherence of Calvin’s ideas quoted above collapses if such an idea of natural law or natural revelation were to be ultimately denied by Calvin. In a recent study Edward Adams also appeals to the coherence of these strands in Calvin’s thought. Although focusing on the arguments in Institutes 1.2-5, he argues that Protestants often miss the nuances of Calvin’s ideas around this theme by reading Book 1 of the Institutes filtered through Book 2. Adams concludes: “Calvin attempts to develop an approach to natural theological knowledge which is philosophically informed as well as biblically based” [“Calvin’s View of Natural Knowledge of God”, International Journal of Systematic Theology 3 (2001): 281-292, (p.292)].
18 Calvin, Institutes, 2.2.15
20 Gustafson, Protestant and Roman Catholic Ethics, p. 19. Again, see Grebill, Rediscovering the Natural Law, for an interpretation of Calvin which would justify this claim.
Muow does, I think, summarise something of a more general Reformed sensibility around these issues, and which can be argued to have stemmed from Calvin: “I think the main concern for Calvinists about general revelation, natural law, natural theology, and similar notions is that they can lead to a categorical endorsement of the moral and rational capacities of human beings in general.”21 He describes his own position as one of “a hermeneutic of caution, though not a hermeneutic of outright suspicion”; neither is it a “hermeneutic of solidarity in which we presume truth and goodness”.22 This is a reminder, I suggest, that Christian social engagement does not in fact require or depend upon a particular moral or ethical theory. Even if Calvin’s various reflections on this matter can be shown to be internally coherent and inviting of some level of theoretical consistency (which I’ve suggested they can be), in the end the Christian trust for such encounters lies not in the wisdom of those who are wise but in God who, in faithfulness to all creation, has ‘clothed and ornamented it with such excellent gifts’. For this reason the tradition of thought formed by these seminal texts tends to exercise not systematic withdrawal from wider society, but an ad hoc engagement with it. Thus, and to anticipate the final section of my paper, I suggest that Calvin reminds us that to be committed to social engagement Christians must be morally formed by the narrative of God’s faithfulness before they understand a theory of natural law or some variation thereof, be it even an idea of common grace.

Nevertheless, Protestant and Catholic contributions to the discussion remain shaped by the contours laid down by the divergent attitudes towards natural law that emerged in the Reformation. For examples of this I now turn to the recent proposals of Robert Gascoigne and David Fergusson.

3. Two Contemporary Responses

These two relatively recent works are both highly erudite and sustained by sophisticated, subtle and wide-ranging arguments. I will not even begin to attempt to summarise the full extent of their respective arguments within the space of this paper. Rather I will seek to seek to bring a few of their key concerns to focus, in order to draw some comparisons between them.

3.a Gascoigne’s The Public Forum and Christian Ethics (2001)

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21 Muow, *He Shines in all that’s Fair*, p. 92
22 Muow, *He Shines in all that’s Fair*, p. 93
Gascoigne, an Australian Catholic theologian, does not set out to offer some generic Christian account of the church’s commitment to the common good. He is explicitly oriented to the pursuit of that issue in liberal societies. He is, he writes, “concerned with the way the church understands and expresses its identity through ethical communication in liberal societies.”

Moreover, as that very statement shows, his orientation is also towards the communication of Christian identity to and within liberal societies. This involves him in developing a particular account of revelation. Such an emphasis on communication is, of course, grounded in the mission of the church: “[T]he church’s mode of communication to the world is, at heart, a question of the nature of evangelization” (p.1). Clearly, Gascoigne is of the view that the Christian faith has something very particular to say to liberal societies. Where such societies have, by definition, defined a “person’s worth or dignity in terms purely of freedom from unwarranted interference” (p.5), the Christian revelation, as the revelation of the triune God “who invites human beings to live in with the divine life and with each other”(p.3), holds that the “freedom of persons is based in their relationship to the infinite God, a relationship which of its nature bonds them to other persons in community” (p.5).

Yet, Gascoigne’s emphasis on communication is also driven by another factor: the post-Kantian emphasis within liberal societies on discourse ethics where, in the absence of any appeal to the authority of any particular tradition, moral argument and decision depends upon the persuasiveness of the arguments themselves. What Gascoigne does, however, is quite explicitly re-describe this commitment to discourse ethics in terms of ‘natural law’:

The communication of Christian ethics should be based on an understanding of consensus as the resultant of the influence of historical traditions, which converge on a number of principles which can receive strong community assent. Such mediating principles provide a new means of understanding the ancient concept of natural law (p.8).

This leads to a further claim that such discourse ethics is ontologically grounded in the life of God. “[T]he project of universal ethical dialogue and ethical community, as expressed in the

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23 Gascoigne, *The Public Forum and Christian Ethics*, p. 2. References to all subsequent quotations from this work will be shown in parentheses in the main text.

24 Of such discourse ethics, as shaped by Habermas, David Horrell has written: “[T]he emphasis on argumentation as the process by which norms are discerned is founded on the conviction that norms are only valid if they are arrived at without coercion. Ideological, power-, or interest-based distortions would invalidate...
Kantian notion of the kingdom of ends, receives its ontological grounding in the theology of revelation, in which the mutual respect of human persons is grounded in their community with the three-personed God and with each other” (p.161). Having already made the move of investing the mediating principles of liberal ethical discourse with the status of ‘natural law’, and adding to that a conventional Catholic move of linking revelation to natural law, Gascoigne contends that such discourse also informs and is partly constituent of Christian identity. Thus, the event of revelation includes not only the church’s contribution to that discourse, but also what it receives from that discourse: “Christian identity is formed and reformed in the process of understanding the relationship between the Gospel and all those moments of thought and action which call for reaction and response” (p.161). It is this element of his proposal which leads him to resisting the communitarian approach of Hauerwas which, Gascoigne argues, implies an understanding of revelation whose sources are solely internal to the community of faith (see pp.175-177).

As a concrete example of this approach, let me quote an extensive passage from towards the end of the book where Gascoigne refers to the issues surrounding the ethical discussion of abortion.

Ethical controversy in the public forum, since it is often not conducted on shared premises in such broader visions, must focus on the specifically ethical goods involved. References to the purposes of the creator are references to premises which are not shared, and whose relationship to the ethical question at stake is unclear for many participants in the debate. Communication of normative principles demands particularly stringent relevance and intelligibility. At the same time, Christians can communicate the meaning of those ethical goods in ways which are formed by their own religious vision – a vision which enables them to see the goods of human life in a particular light and in particular mutual relationships. Christian critique of abortion can develop and affirm understandings of human existence, which imaginatively links the desire for autonomy and self-expression with respect for the beginnings of human life. Motivated by their own narrative, but oriented towards the public forum, Christians can unfold the inherent ethical logic of a stance oriented towards the protection of innocent human life. This must be accompanied by words and action which seek to overcome the bitter history of conflict … through an affirmation of the any consensus or norms.” David Horrell, Solidarity and Difference: A Contemporary Reading of Paul’s Ethics (London: T&T Clark International, 2005), p. 59.
rights of women, especially through a commitment to forms of service which welcome and support the bearing of children (p.205).

For the purposes of the dialogue being developed here, a critical question to be put to this approach concerns the driving force behind Gascoigne’s insistence on ‘particularly stringent relevance and intelligibility’? Is it the motivation to evangelise through participation in ethical discourse? Or is it a desire to acknowledge the canons of post-Kantian discourse ethics, an acknowledgement which is reinforced by investing the ‘mediating principles’ of that discourse with the authority, status and function of ‘natural law’? If it is the former, should there be any hesitation about mentioning the Creator on the grounds of this being a reference ‘whose premises are not shared’? (Indeed, if reference to the Creator is deemed illegitimate, can the contribution actually be considered an instance of evangelisation?) If the latter, is it the case that Christians are ‘unfolding the logic of their stance’ because they are ‘oriented towards the public forum’ or because they are ‘motivated by their own narrative’? Indeed, the reference here to ‘public forum’ could obscure the fact that Gascoigne has already made a decision to privilege a particular understanding of the public forum, i.e., that of a modern liberal society whose discourse is normed by post-Kantian ideas of discourse ethics. For all the obvious strengths of Gascoigne’s argument, my query is whether investing the discourse of liberal societies with the authority of ‘natural law’ has dented the normativity of the Christian community’s own narrative.


Fergusson’s book is in large measure directed against the risk of ecclesial isolationism implicit in the communitarian approach of Hauerwas and others, and uses the resources of the Reformed tradition, especially Karl Barth’s account of Christ’s presence *extra muros ecclesiae*, to critique that approach.25 Fergusson seeks to correct any tendency towards Christian isolation from the common good with an echo of Calvin’s argument which I noted above: “For the church to function as a community which bears witness to the kingdom of God within a wider civil polity, some doctrine of the state is necessary. In this respect it seeks civil community space within which to practice” (p.159). Yet, in another echo of Calvin’s arguments, Fergusson also recognises that Christians are active contributors to “communities other than the Christian one” (presumably because of the intrinsic value of those
communities) and “may need greater encouragement” for such involvement “than that found in wholesale denunciations of liberalism” which communitarians are often quick to provide (p.160). They therefore are likely to seek some explanation of the fact that they often find themselves in moral agreement with non-Christians.

Fergusson explicitly rejects the appeal to natural law and orders of creation as a means of offering such explanation. In this rejection, he shows a sensitivity to communitarian concerns:

[T]he arguments that have been rehearsed against liberal projects to establish the validity of moral principles independently of any particular tradition will also tend to destroy the more substantive and free-standing formulations of natural law theory or the doctrine of the orders of creation (p.165).

Therefore, in a move that eliminates any binding theological appropriation of the principles of discourse ethics, he acknowledges that there is “no free standing natural theology governed by the presuppositions to which all rational inquirers can in principle give their assent” (p.166). At the same time, Fergusson has already set this discussion against the background of an extensive and sympathetic discussion of moral realism. He insists that his qualified defence of the ecclesial community in theological ethics does not involve any jettisoning of realism (see p163).

Also in the background is a broadly defined Christian doctrine of providence which is expressed in the “typical claim of the Christian tradition that God does not abandon the creation to the consequences of its worst excesses but is present, active and faithful to creatures beyond the domain of the church” (p.162). Indeed, Fergusson makes the obvious point that “[w]ithout some such claim it becomes difficult to understand why or how common cause might be made with other forces, agencies and communities” (p.162f).

With such concerns in place he argues that even without a ‘free-standing’ natural theology to resource such an approach, “it remains possible to offer a theology of nature which explains why moral perception and agreement can be found across traditions, cultures, and communities” (p.166). Such a theology is, for Fergusson, grounded in the “universal significance of God’s action in Christ” (p.167) and can be viewed as a “theological expression
of the commitment to ontological realism and epistemological contextualism” (p.167). This position enables Fergusson to offer a theological rationale for Christians not only contributing to the common good, but to do so in common cause with non-Christians. On this basis it can be theologically possible for them to be “common moral ground in the absence of common theory” (p.162).

Clearly, Fergusson offers an account of the Christian understanding of the common good which has some very recognisable Reformed contours: the rejection of natural theology and/or natural law, the honouring of the state, and the appeal to a doctrine of providence (which is more fully and christologically developed through an explicit appeal to the ‘universal significance of God’s action in Christ’). Yet I have a question to put to Fergusson’s approach similar to the one I put to Gascoigne’s. What is driving the explanation of common moral perception and agreement? Is it the ‘universal significance of God’s action in Christ’, or is it a prior commitment to moral realism. Even Fergusson’s language invites comment: the appeal to God’s action in Christ is a ‘theological expression’ of a seemingly prior commitment to ontological realism. My concern is that by presenting the appeal to Christ’s universal significance as an ‘expression’ of ontological realism, Fergusson has also dented the primacy of the Christian community’s own narrative as the foundation for engaging the common good.

3.c Some points of comparison between Gascoigne and Fergusson.

Obviously, some of the points of comparison have already been made obvious. Both writers are particularly concerned to avoid ecclesial isolation. The arguments of both are sufficiently subtle to avoid any simplistic trading of commonality off against distinctiveness. There is no doubt that both writers seek to hold the two together. It is possible to see paradigmatic Catholic and Reformed attitudes to natural law working their way into the discussion about modern liberal ethics. In many ways, the lines that are drawn between these two approaches are rather fine ones, and basically yield to conventional Reformed – Catholic disagreements. Nevertheless, this very distinction in relation to their respective assessments of the natural law tradition does make Fergusson more suspicious of modern liberal ethics than Gascoigne is.

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26 Gascoigne’s work was published subsequently to that of Fergusson, and includes an exposition of and response to Fergusson, largely in terms of the distinction between a Reformed theology of the Word and a Catholic theology of human transcendence. On this basis Gascoigne focuses on the respective accounts he and Fergusson can give of human rights. See Gascoigne, The Public Forum and Christian Ethics, pp. 182-188.
For similar reasons, Fergusson is more (albeit very cautiously) sensitive to the communitarian approach than Gascoigne.

Indeed, I would argue that Fergusson’s proposal does offer some grounds for suggesting that a Reformed suspicion (as articulated by Muow) of the natural law tradition might in its own way offer possibilities as a starting point for fruitful ethical reflection in contexts of radical pluralism. A strong adherence to natural law may in fact force (as I fear it does in Gascoigne’s account) levels of agreement and ‘stringent’ demands for clear communication that risk skewing Christian ethical reflection. Fergusson demonstrates that common ground can be occupied, and common causes undertaken, in the absence of common theory.

What, then, of the question that I put to Fergusson’s account? It certainly does not undermine his proposal. But it does raise the question of whether the appeal to the fact of Christ’s work is sufficient to explain moral perception outside the church. My point is not at all that arguments for ontological realism should not supplement and help to interpret Christ’s universal rule. Rather, in contrast to Fergusson’s own formulation, I see the former as an ‘expression’ of the latter. And this brings me to the point of identifying how the church begins its ethical reflection, not least its reflection about the common good. The church’s commitment to the common good will not in the end be sustained by separate theories of the common good; it will be stimulated and sustained by Christian people being formed by and in the conviction that God remains faithful to the whole creation. This brings me to the final section of my paper.

4. The Moral Formation of Socially-Involved Christian Communities

The issue that emerges from the foregoing is that of how the contribution to the common good is related to the moral formation of the Christian community. It is my contention that commitment to the common good is not a special case or discrete area of ethical responsibility. It ought to be woven into the fabric of the Christian community’s moral formation from which all its ethical activity and reflection flow. In proposing this view, I am suggesting that our continuity with the New Testament in moral matters lies not in the replication of all of its specific beliefs and practices, but rather in sharing with them in the process of formation initiated by hearing and responding to the proclamation of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection.
I am here appropriating some of the specific insights of Richard Hays’, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*. Employing a narrative approach to moral formation, Hays argues that the vision of the New Testament in moral matters is not limited to the explicit ethical teachings of its various documents. Rather, “the church’s moral world is manifest not only in didache but also in the stories, symbols, social structures, and practices that shape the community’s ethos”. 27 Obviously, however, the diversity of the New Testament means that alongside and emerging from its theological diversity is a diversity of moral vision. On the other hand, some measure of unity seems demanded if these texts are to be regarded as constitutive and not merely illustrative of Christian ethics. 28

Nevertheless, even within such constitutive unity certain tensions, says Hays, must be allowed to stand. For instance, in relation to the tension between Romans 13 and Revelation 13, Hays suggests that these two texts “are not two complementary expressions of a single principle or a single New Testament understanding of the state; rather, they represent radically different assessments of the relation of the Christian community to the Roman Empire” (p.190). These texts cannot, he continues, be ‘averaged out’ in order for us to occupy some ‘middle position’ which would “allow us to live comfortably as citizens of a modern democratic state” (p.190). Rather: “If these texts are allowed to have their say, they will force us either to choose between them or to reject the normative claims of both” (p.190). It is the latter option that Hays proposes: “Whatever synthetic account we give of the unity of the New Testament witnesses, it must be sufficiently capacious to recognize and encompass tensions of this kind” (p.190). In fact, however, by merely observing and honouring the ‘tensions’ within the New Testament Hays actually risks obscuring the fact that the New Testament communities are involved in a process of moral formation. Hays suggestion leaves open the possibility that Romans 13 and Revelation 13 represent the poles of a static spectrum about ‘the state’ in which contemporary reflection must work.

I would suggest that the issue is somewhat more complicated than this, as is suggested by reflection on the ‘differences’ between Gal 3:26 and the hierarchical passages of, for instance, Colossians 3:18-4:1. If the latter is seen to be an exact mirror reflection of Roman domestic and social arrangements, then clearly the text hardly manifests a community of any penetrating gospel-driven moral formation. On the other hand, if, as is argued by some

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27 Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, p. 5. All subsequent references to quotations from this work will be included in parentheses in the main text.
scholars, closer inspection reveals such passages to reveal a subtle re-ordering of the Roman
and domestic and social arrangements, “then what we are witnessing in these texts is the
criticism and gradual transformation from within of Jewish and pagan household ties in the
light of Christ.”29 They do not, in other words, merely represent the poles of a tension that
must be replicated in the contemporary Church. Analogously, I would suggest that the
‘differences’ between Romans 13 and Revelation 13 do not reflect a perennial and defining
tension about Christian attitudes to the state. Indeed, they could only be that if the ‘state’
presented itself to Christian communities as a fixed and homogeneous object of enquiry.
Rather they suggest to us that the church’s relationships to the structures and institutions of
civil society were an object of diverse moral reflection in the light of Christ.30 The
contemporary church find its continuity with the New Testament, therefore, through
participating in analogous process of moral reflection and formation as they take their
bearings in relationship to the various structures and institutions of civil society. Moreover, if
Hays’ proposal about the ‘constitutive’ rather than ‘illustrative’ status of the New Testament
texts is to be given full weight (weight I believe it warrants being given), then the continuity
with the New Testament communities will also lie in being formed by the moral vision of the
those communities.

Hays argues that that moral vision emerges from and is grounded in a sequence of three focal
images: community, cross and new creation. Community “points to the concrete social
manifestation of the people of God”, a people “called to embody an alternative order that
stands as a sign of God’s redemptive purposes for the world” (p.196). Cross refers to Jesus’
death on the cross as being the “paradigm for faithfulness to God in the world” (p.197). Hays
is not unaware that the cross has been used ideologically to “ensure the acquiescent suffering
of the powerless” but he argues that the New Testament writers themselves “consistently
employ the pattern of the cross precisely to call those who possess power and privilege to
surrender it for the sake of the weak” (p.197). New Creation refers to the eschatological
framework in which the Christian community lives. It recognises that for all that its own
existence is to be understood as the appearance of the new creation, “all attempts to assert the

Christian Ethics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 64. Of course, care must be exercised with
such an interpretation of the processes of transformation of received practices. Even allowing for ‘criticism and
gradual transformation’ of such practices in the light of Christ, it is clear that such transformation left certain
ideological blinkers in place.

30 As Rowan Williams has written: “[T]he church does not either affirm or deny ‘the state’ in the abstract: it asks
what kind of humanity this or that state fosters – what degree of power in its citizens, what level of mutual care,
what vision that is more than local, what scepticism about claims to absolute authority and the right to absolute
comments about the church’s attitude to ‘the nation’ and the ‘the family’.
qualified presence of the kingdom of God stand under the judgement of the eschatological reservation” (p.198).

This is not all. Hays goes a stage further: these three focal images belong, and make sense, in this sequence.

By placing community first, we are constantly reminded that God’s design of forming a covenant people long precedes the New Testament writings themselves, that the church stands in fundamental continuity with Israel. By placing cross in the middle, we are reminded that the death of Jesus is the climax and pivot-point of the eschatological drama. By placing new creation last, we are reminded that the church lives in expectation of God’s future redemption of creation. In other words, the images are to be understood within a plot: they figure for the story of God’s saving action in the world” (p.199).

With these foci set in this sequence, the Christian community will find itself oriented to the world beyond its walls in quite particular ways. ‘Community’, ‘Cross’ and ‘New Creation’ abstracted from this sequence could all form the Christian community in particular and strongly demarcated ways. Set in this sequence however, the moral imagination formed by ‘community’, ‘cross’ and ‘new creation’ is in one stroke oriented to the wider world. The church is indeed concrete and particular, but no longer discontinuous with that history of election in which the called community is to be a blessing to the whole world. The church is indeed cruciform in its life, but only as a witness to the pivotal event of God’s self-giving for the whole world. The church indeed lives in hope, but given what it hopes for it cannot limit the realisation of redemption to itself.

A church formed by these foci held together in this sequence will not treat the issue of the common good as an ‘add on’ to other (internal) dimensions of moral formation. Nor will it set such a commitment in antithetical tension with other tasks of the church (as, for instance, ‘evangelism’ and ‘social justice’ often are). With a moral imagination formed by these foci in this sequence such a church would encounter the structures and institutions of society with responses ranging from critique, suspicion and solidarity. Such responses would be held together not by a range, even a tension-filled range, of New Testament teachings on ‘the state’, or on theological appropriations or rejections of ‘natural law’, but on the plot of the New Testament teachings about the status and form of the church in the wider purposes of
God. None of this would deny the importance of the kind of theoretical work carried out by Gascoigne and Fergusson. Indeed, such theoretical work could itself been seen as a particular instance of moral formation as Christian theoreticians encounter and then ‘transform and criticise from within’ the world of ideas ‘in the light of Christ’.

No doubt, a critical response to this proposal could well be that I have simply repeated the Reformed tradition’s rejection of, or suspicion towards, natural law as a framework for thinking about Christian social involvement. Nevertheless, I would argue that the approach taken here challenges both the respective proposals of Gascoigne and Fergusson. The sequence of the New Testament focal images suggests that the work done by ‘natural law’ and ‘ontological realism’ in Fergusson might be better framed in terms of God’s faithfulness. The world may not understand this language (as per Gascoigne’s fear), but it is this language that will be heard by Christians as integrally related to the narratives of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection, and therefore more directly formative of their moral imagination. At the same time, the particular focal images define God’s faithfulness not in terms of some generic appeal to providence (as it risks being done in both Calvin and Fergusson) but in terms of the specific narratives of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection. It is true that Fergusson certainly seeks to render something more than a generic appeal to providence as the basis for making common cause with non-Christians. He appeals to Trinitarian doctrine to propose an understanding of the rule and presence of Christ beyond the church. Yet, on closer inspection this apparently more doctrinally complex approach still yields an affirmation of the fact of Christ’s presence outside the church, not its form nor its status in relation to the church. The focal images of the New Testament narration of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection offer a thicker description of both the form and function of the church.

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In summary, therefore, Christian ethical distinctiveness need not be traded off against a Christian commitment to the common good. This possibility is grounded in the narratives of the New Testament, and their formation of the moral imagination of contemporary Christian

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31 In a more recent work, Fergusson makes a similar argument, even if less dependent on specific biblical narratives. He argues that to imagine the churches as communities of moral formation in a pluralist, post-Christendom context requires a Christological maximalism, a term he borrows from George Lindbeck: “In this setting what finally separates the Christian faith from every other is neither its particular set of virtues nor its doctrines but only the irrereplaceable centrality of Jesus for life and faith.” Nor is this an abstract Christological focus. He continues: “The processes of moral formation…repose upon strong claims about the identity and action of Jesus in the church”. See David Fergusson, *Church, State and Civil Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 113.
communities. This approach may well be more ‘Reformed’ in its insistence on starting with scripture and ‘the world’ of the church’s own text, but it also suggests a way into the debate not constrained by conventional debates about ‘natural law’. Discussions about moral theory are not resisted; but they are relativised to, and seen to belong within a wider ecclesial process of moral formation.\textsuperscript{32}

\textsuperscript{32} My thanks to both Robert Gascoigne and David Fergusson for their responses to earlier drafts of this paper.