Christian Ethics in a Postmodern World: A Historian's Response

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William Greenway resists integrating Hauerwas and Stout, and refuses to press them both into an ethical meta-narrative. In acknowledging his postmodern understanding to be one amongst others, he seeks to move the study of Christian ethics in a direction similar to postmodern historical narratives. Such narratives refuse to supply a master narrative, the kind of narratives which disguise coercive power, critiqued so memorably by Michel Foucault (Foucault 1977a, 1977b; Said 1986).

I respond to Mr. Greenway’s paper as an Anglican Christian historian who studies the social transmission of culture, particularly through liturgies, and tries to narrate how liturgical communities changed. I am not a historian of Christian ethics, so I speak from a position of weakness. In addition, I cannot integrate Hauerwas, Stout, or Greenway into a master-narrative of Christian doctrine, the kind of narrative which too often has become the doctrine of powerful élites who claim to be Christian. I can only offer these fragments; I chose them carefully, but nevertheless according to my insights tonight. I admit that my response could be quite different if I spoke at another time.

1 November 9, 1993, 7:00 p.m. (editor’s note). See editorial.
I must also remember that sometimes history should not be a narrative, as when the linguistic terms of any historical narrative become so corrupted by oppressive power that the story will, as it were, tell untruth. Every narrative of the Holocaust is finally untrue to that terrible event, as is every story of the Cambodian auto-genocide. Humanistic moralities of narratives have often been closely allied with Western bourgeois ideologies. Particular narratives can be useful nevertheless, because they can undermine false stories which legitimate oppressive power. Particular narratives bring to memory suppressed stories, as many historical narratives by or about women have done in the last twenty years.

The fragments offered here could be called historical reflection in the comic mode, as Caroline Walker Bynum has called the fragmentary, particular narratives woven by some historians history in the comic mode (Bynum 1991:24). In particular, she has remembered comedy in its classical meanings. While the heroic morality of tragedy undergirds its affirmation of human nobility, “comedy tells many stories, achieves a conclusion by coincidence and wild improbability, and undergirds our sense of human limitation.” Comedy is about compromise; it allows voices hitherto left unheard, and allows them to object and contradict (Bynum 1991:25). In a comedy the author plays a self-aware character; the story embraces partial truths, of which the author’s agenda is one element. History in the comic mode is distinguished from other modes not so much by its subject matter as by its multi-vocal approaches. It consciously chooses to avoid seeking an illusory total understanding and to prefer the moment of particular insight in situations which are necessarily ambiguous, multi-dimensional, and ironic. Tragedy’s Romeo and Juliet were cosmically fated, “star-crossed” lovers; comedy’s Puck can laugh that because of his own mistakes, “My mistress with a monster is in love.”

The tragic and the comic are both moral responses to human limitations. The comic is in particular a moral response to what Henri Bergson called “the recalcitrance of matter” (Bergson 1956:77). Comedy revels in narrative frustration, reversal, and ironic knowledge. It appeals through layered, interwoven interpretations of well-known stories. For example, we know all along who Joseph in Egypt really is, and when his brothers come begging for grain, we know why—in Tim Rice’s and Andrew Lloyd Webber’s interpretation, “I will now take them all for a ride.” After all, they have tried fratricide” (Rice 1973).

Attempted fratricide is part of the point of the fragmentary narratives of history in the comic modes. Comedy tells of dark things: fratricide, guerrilla war, violence, rape, betrayal, and survival against all odds (Frye 1957:178). Comedy always rests on the edge of the knife, and the story could easily go wrong. Joseph could have locked his brothers in prison forever, and become a tyrant rather than reveal himself as a kind of redeemer: “I am your brother Joseph.” Joseph risked destroying his family and vitiating God’s promise to Israel. History in the comic mode risks seeming to trivialize its subject matter in its refusal to claim too much, to make persuasive a master-narrative which masks oppressive power.

In the spirit of history in the comic mode, I make a choice different from Mr. Greenway: I choose Stout. I appreciate Mr. Greenway’s implied warning to praise Stout, not to bury him: I cannot proclaim the end of historians’ master-narratives and then supply another. I respond this way tonight because I see a great danger in Hauerwas’s dependence upon an idealized Christian historical master-narrative. Hauerwas’s Christian narrative acknowledges the plurality of narratives in the world, but not in the church. According to Mr. Greenway, in Hauerwas’s view, “The witness of the scriptures, the church, and the confessions will remain primary for Christians, but acknowledgement of the integrity of other traditions and of their centuries-old interaction with the Christian tradition implies that they may provide insights into how Christians should understand themselves” (Greenway 1994:25). Even though that statement is meant to correct and sup-
plement Hauerwas, it also once again implies recourse to “the Christian tradition,” an idealized narrative of interpretive doctrinal mastery accredited to certain individuals, councils, and groups which simply does not withstand close reading from historians. The metaphor of a “web” of inter-related beliefs and practices—a “distinct, enduring nexus of connections” (Greenway 1994:24)—may help here, but it suggests to me too many a-priori historical investments which would prove convenient to theologians and ethicists. Even what is distinctly Christian is extremely hard to specify beyond platitudes. Christianities are changelings, protean and supple, and each new mission situation reveals shifting nexuses of variable connections. I defy anyone to specify beyond mere platitude what is held in common by Nestorian monks in Mongolia, Catholic-Reformation Jesuits in Quebec, sixth-century Celtic anchorites, and Charles Hodge. The depositum fidei so beloved by Cardinal Ratzinger and Thomas Oden may need to exist in Denzinger’s reductive manual of Roman Catholic theology, but it simply cannot be authorized by historians.

There is no single theological or historical web of connections. There are many Christian narratives, each with only partial family resemblances to other Christian narratives. Particular churches, denominations, religious orders, communities and ecclesiastical traditions incarnate particular historical webs of connections, always multiformal, always hard to untangle, always rooted in daily liturgical and catechetical practices of concrete communities. Particular histories of particular individuals and groups in particular times and places can (and do) generate particular insights which may be isomorphically valid for those who study such things. However, the big-scale Tradition of Catholic or Protestant scholasticism (upon which Hauerwas seems to depend for his particular, nearly sectarian view of Christians’ stories) is simply very hard to find in the evidence (and in mid-range hypotheses based upon the evidence) without suppression or falsification of discordant thoughts and events. The history of the Church Catholic will only be written from beyond the eschaton; until then we have to rest content with particular, partial, incomplete narratives. Such particular historical narratives—history in a comic mode—can offer analogies, historical narratives with significant ethical implications. I will supply two brief examples.

Greek, Syriac and Latin Christianities each faced various challenges of Islam as it swept much of the Mediterranean area. Here is an arena for “centuries-old interaction” between varying Muslim and varying Christian communities. Many narratives tell of violence and wars between Christians and Muslims, especially the Crusades. Other narratives tell of peaceful times in Spain and Italy. They tell how Europeans learned Arabic mathematics, Greek philosophy, and medicine (especially Aristotle)—ideas which in time revolutionized Western Europe. Much later, nineteenth-century Christian missionaries again interacted with Muslims. They learned Near Eastern languages and cultures, and re-learned the deep roots of Christianity in that cultural region. The varying narratives of these violent and peaceful contacts need to be written from varying Christian and Muslim perspectives. Bernard Lewis and Peter Sahlins have taken much of this work in hand (Lewis 1982, 1985; Sahlins 1989). Which fragments are more important for us in North America today: narratives which emphasize threat, war, and revenge, or narratives of learning and respect? Can anyone doubt that this important aspect of medieval history has present-day implications? History in a comic mode will not construct a master-narrative of Christian-Muslim contact, but will offer particular perspectives on particular times and themes. Christian historians who seek to narrate Muslim-Christian interaction need to practice bricolage with abandon, which necessarily leads to the partial perspectives and ironic self-knowledge which history in a comic mode may offer.

My second example is more controversial, and has to do with sharply differing self-assessments of varying Christian communities and their recognized and hidden histories. John Boswell’s book Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay
People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century made exceedingly well-documented, exhaustively researched claims that Christians held varying ethical judgments about homosexual persons from patristic to later medieval times. Such judgments ranged from censorious persecution to tolerance, to acceptance. Boswell's work has been questioned regarding several methodological issues, such as medieval understandings of the concepts implicit in our present-day phrase "sexual orientation" (Gay Academic Union 1981; Linehan 1981). To my knowledge, to this date no one has really challenged Boswell on the basis of his evidence and conclusions (<MEDGAY-L> 1993). Is Boswell's narrative supportable on the basis of commonly accepted historical canons? Does his narrative undercut claims that Christianity has always unambiguously condemned gay and lesbian persons? Does not his decision to tell this particular story serve one agenda, just as other people's decision not to hear this story—no matter how well researched—equally serves another agenda?

In Greenway's phrase, Hauerwas hears a *chorus* of Scripture, the saints, and Christian tradition in regards to Christian ethical questions such as this one. I am suggesting that historical reflection may reveal various Christian traditions and perspectives which are not nearly so unanimous, and may even be termed a *cacophony*.

Can there be corporate ethical norms in Christian communities? I suggest tonight that fragmentary historical narratives in a comic mode cannot answer that question directly, and can only suggest that Christian corporate ethics in the past have been provisional and ad hoc even when specific ethical positions have been passionately held. Christian ethical norms which would be valid for everyone, at all times, and everywhere, would almost certainly become allied with a master-narrative which would legitimate oppressive power. I believe that it is in the very terms of our cacophonous traditions that suppressed stories will eventually return to our memories, full of ironic power and hermeneutical suspicion. "I am your brother Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt."

Fragmentary historical narratives in the comic mode are *bricolage*—and we must be frank about this—despite the longing of some theologians and ethicists for comforting but ultimately misleading master-narratives. Such fragmentary *bricolage* in the comic mode requires a happy ending, one which historians can't supply for more than a transitory moment of insight.

Fragmentary historical narratives and fragmentary ethical narratives tell about flesh, the stories of our bodies. The Incarnation is the story of our social body, Christ's body, and my own body as well. That is our beginning. The wildly implausible doctrine of the Resurrection supplies our ultimate, happy, comic ending. In the resurrection of the body, and the life of the world to come, we can only point in fragments to God who will gather up the fragments of our bodies and our narratives in the end of history.

Historical writing in the comic mode cannot substitute its small moments of insight for God's transcendent work. Let all the people laugh, and sing, Alleluia!

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Ferribby: A Historian's Response  
Rice, Tim  
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Said, Edward  