

# accord extra

Association of Christian Counsellors and Pastoral Care UK

Autumn 2019

## Ethics

By Peter Barraclough

*Note: For a fuller explanation of the ideas below, see my articles in the spring and summer 2014 editions of accord.*

### Christian Counselling in a Secular World: a few Reflections

'... be wise as serpents and innocent as doves' (Matthew 10:16)

We live in a political culture which assumes that ethics can be freestanding, detached from any particular bias from one tradition or doctrine or another.

In contrast, the theologian Stanley Hauerwas (stated by *Time* magazine as America's greatest theologian) in his book *The Peaceable Kingdom* wrote: 'ethics always requires an adjective or qualifier – such as Jewish, Christian, ... humanist ... – in order to denote the social and historical character of ethics as a discipline. This is not to suggest that ethics does not address an identifiable set of relatively constant questions – the nature of the good or right, freedom and the nature of human behaviour ... – but any response to these questions **necessarily draws on the particular convictions of historic communities to whom such questions may have significantly different meanings**' (emphasis mine).

We Christians, therefore, always face this tension of being intrinsically distinctive out of conviction **and** through our practices, yet also having to justify our



existence by quite different criteria that make sense to those who might feel we believe nonsense, and whose ethics begins from a different starting point.

The tension really bites when we use the same words or phrases as our secular colleagues, whereas the assumed meanings may be radically different, depending on one's worldview.

For example the BACP ethical framework defines **justice** as a principle which is 'the fair and impartial treatment of all clients and the provision of adequate services'. In contrast, we Christians understand justice to be rooted in the character of God himself and expounded in the biblical traditions as a virtue to be acquired and lived out in relationship to God, the author of justice.

Another example is the notion of **individual autonomy**, a phrase which so easily rolls off

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our tongues as counsellors. This concept has its origins, not in the Christian traditions, but in the 18th century philosopher Immanuel Kant. It is 'the capacity to be one's own person ... not the product of manipulative or distorting external forces' (see <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/autonomy-moral/>), an ethic which is so familiar to us Christians who live in western culture. In contrast, however, a Christian understanding of personal free will only makes sense in our relationship as creatures to God as creator, the antithesis of autonomy or 'self-rule'.

Kant's idea that you do the right thing because it is the right thing to do leads to a rule-based ethics where rules are followed for the sake of the rules themselves. This has profoundly influenced western morality to this day, especially our legal system, our regulation dependent political culture and even the proliferation of 'codes of ethics'!

In stark contrast the chief means of moral education in biblical times, and in ancient Greek, medieval and Renaissance cultures, was **the telling of stories**. This is why we have different gospel accounts that enable moral arguments to be held in tension. The purpose of the scriptures is character formation, not the creation of rules, nor the abstraction of rules as some Christians are apt to do and potentially misuse the text.

Therefore, if we view the tension for Christians as secular rules versus God's rules we will have already been compromised in our assumptions. **The tension is between rules-based ethics and narrative-based ethics** because we are **story-formed** people; our identity stems from historical events which happened in time and space. Rules may indeed help to keep us in check, but rules as an end in themselves can lead to cheating and political skulduggery.

We counsellors want to help people to tell their unique story, and I have come up with four questions which I hope might be helpful in the task of revising ACC's Code of Ethics:

- Is the code of ethics sufficiently distinctive to articulate ethics on our own terms as Christians?
- Does the code of ethics sufficiently articulate a distinctive Christian understanding of counselling values that properly gives an account of ourselves both to the public at large and the wider Christian community?
- Does the code of ethics sufficiently establish common ground with the wider therapeutic community and pay sufficient regard for the insights of secular psychology?
- Does the code of ethics sufficiently demonstrate our willingness to have a level of accountability within the secular environment that we all inhabit?

### Summary

The very nature of ethics itself is effectively at stake. We cannot escape the reality that these tensions are inherent to our living in a secular world, but we can hold true to our own story as opposed to the alternative narrative thrown at us by contemporary politics. My plea is that we mindfully contemplate these seeming contradictions and hold the tension as an act of faithfulness, being determined to be a community of character.

### About the Author

**Peter Barraclough** is on the core counselling team at United Churches Healing Ministry, Huddersfield where he trained, and also practises counselling privately in Sheffield where he lives. He used to work as a civil engineer in the public health field for a local authority and consulting engineers.

He is concerned that Christians resist the temptation of reacting against contemporary politics but rather adjust to living on the margins of society, where Jesus lived among the powerless, and disavow Christendom which assumes the politics of power.

