



BUSINESS ETHICS FOUNDED
ON CHRISTIAN MORAL THEOLOGY:
PERSPECTIVES FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

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Abstract

Religion influences the world of business through its influence on people's moral conscience and motivation, so it would be unrealistic not to take it into account. Theology does not see itself as being opposed to philosophy but, rather, as building on it. Through its rational and systematic justification of faith, theology opens up new horizons for business ethics. Furthermore, if public debate requires the contribution of acknowledged authorities on moral issues, then there is clearly a place for moral theology in a multicultural and plurireligious society. All of this suggests the need to further develop business ethics from a theological point of view. (Also available in Spanish - n° 426).

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Introduction

Religious traditions have contributed to business ethics (McMahon, 1985), but one wonders whether today, at the dawn of the 21st century and in a culturally and religiously secularized and pluralistic world, moral theology still has a role to play in the theoretical and practical development of business ethics.

In recent years, there has been a certain degree of uncertainty about what should be the relationship between religion and the business world (Williams, 1983). Moreover, theology, and, more particularly, Christian moral theology, has been the subject of some incomprehension and criticism, as we will have the occasion to point out in the course of the present paper.

However, there are also many who think that Christian moral theology and, in particular, Catholic moral teaching have a lot to say to the business world. Rossouw (1994), for example, highlights the opportunities offered by postmodern culture to theologians and churches. Naughton and Bausch (1996) urge the Catholic universities to remain true to their mission and identity by effectively incorporating Catholic social teaching in economic and business education. McCann (1997) suggests how and why this theological viewpoint can and must be an important resource for business ethics and Williams (1997) considers that Catholic social teaching is a moral compass for the next millenium.

In this article, we shall analyze the role of moral theology in the development of business ethics. We shall discuss some of the habitual objections, seeking to clarify them and trying to answer them. From there, we shall consider the prospects that, in our opinion, are offered to a business ethics based on Christian moral theology in the 21st Century.

Religion: Conscience and motivation

The conception of business and the firm as something that is purely economic, in which ethics has no place, and even less so theology or religion, has been widely maintained over a considerable period. However, as Richard T. De George (1982) pointed out quite a few years ago, the amorality of business is a myth that must be superseded. Business actions are

human actions that are the result of free, deliberate decisions, and, therefore, have an ethical dimension. Moreover, if ethics is relevant for the firm and business, it also seems that there should be a place for religion and theology, one of whose goals –like philosophical ethics– is to guide human action in the right direction.

Religion refers to man's relationship with God. This behavior encompasses all spheres of human life – at least in Christianity – and, therefore, also life in the company. Although religion is not equally important for all people, it is a fact that there are believing, religious people who draw values and standards of conduct in business from religious precepts (Delbecq, 1999). Those who believe in God understand that He knows better than anyone what is good and bad, and this gives substance to their moral conscience.

Religion has a broader sense than theology. Theology provides a rational elaboration of religion and, therefore, is more systematic. A Christian person wishes to follow Jesus Christ and make moral judgements that are consistent with the Gospels' teachings. And it is in this that moral theology may provide appropriate guidelines for believers.

In addition, it is well known that faith and religion have a known essential effect in human conduct, and the firm is no exception. De George (1989, 339), even though he advocates a business ethics based exclusively on philosophy, acknowledges that theologians and religious leaders may motivate people to do good even more effectively than philosophers. McCann (1997, 13) says that after teaching business ethics for 16 years in Chicago, he has discovered that most business executives with whom he has come into contact as a result of their concern with business ethics are people whose moral sensitivity is rooted in their religious convictions. My experience, although slightly less extensive (about 14 years in Madrid and Barcelona, Spain), has led me to the same conclusion. This personal experience is also backed by the odd empirical study (Kennedy & Lawton 1998), although, truth to say, research is still very thin on the ground in this area.

Moral theology: Faith and reason

Moral theology pursues the same goal as philosophical ethics, although its focus is different. Thus, theology is concerned with the mystery of God and God's will about creation. This is related to human conduct, giving rise to moral theology. Moral theology is the "science that addresses and investigates the divine Revelation, responding at the same time to the demands of human reason" (John Paul II 1993, n. 29). Moral theology accepts rational ethical principles and uses them to gain a better understanding of the Revelation. Their normative conclusions seek to guide human conduct in its various spheres, including business and the firm. However, being rooted in the Revelation, it appears that Christian morality can only propose a business ethics that is valid solely for believers. Is this true? Yes and no. Yes, because Christian morality, which is certainly very elevated, leads one to follow, imitate and identify oneself with Christ, and this demands faith and a special help from God (John Paul II 1993, chap. I). However, at the same time, Christian morality is open to everyone, because it responds to the demands of human reason, at least in its most basic aspects (Melé, 1996).

In this context, there arises the problem of delimiting the methodological scope of philosophy and theology in business ethics and the possibilities for interdisciplinary collaboration. This issue has already been discussed on several occasions (De George, 1986a, 1986b; Camenish, 1986; McCann, 1986; McMahan, 1986; Williams, 1986; Byron, 1988; De George, 1989; Rossouw, 1994; McCann, 1997; Fort, 1997; Stebbins, 1997; among others), but the discussion is far from concluded.

De George (1986a) says that when theologians remain only as theologians, their contribution to the field of business ethics, if it exists, is very small; however, when occasionally they make contributions to this field, apparently they cease to be theologians. He also says that business ethics is not applied ethics or moral theology but that it is a field in its own right (1986a, 1986b).

Nowadays, few would argue that business ethics is a specific field that needs philosophy to clarify concepts, analyze and reason. However, does this mean that when theologians enter business ethics, they cease to be theologians and become philosophers? If the essence of ethics –whether or not it is business ethics– is the investigation of good, and moral theology is concerned with the same thing, it does not seem reasonable to exclude theology simply because it is grounded on faith in God. Indeed, if God really has revealed Himself, no-one knows good and bad better than God, as He is Good (John Paul II 1993, nn. 9, 12). Furthermore, philosophy is not sufficient in itself to develop a correct business ethics but must also take into account the contributions of sciences such as economics, psychology and sociology, together with organizational and management theories and, above all, a thorough knowledge of corporate reality. Otherwise, it would contribute general arguments but would not enter the specific field of business ethics.

Moral theology, at least as is it understood by the Catholic Church, needs philosophy. Its starting point is the knowledge of faith, but it develops its content and attains the intelligence of faith with the help of philosophy. However, using philosophy does not mean abandoning theology. Economists or engineers use mathematics in their field, but this does not mean that they cease to work in the subject of their discipline.

It is true that there are moral norms in the Bible and in Christian tradition that are applicable to the business world, some of them very immediate, such as paying debts, not cheating, not lying, or not taking advantage of the needy. However, it is clear that the modern firm is affected by a series of moral problems whose solution requires rational inquiries that can sometimes become exceedingly complex. In actual fact, the problem is not new. Back in the 16th Century, the theologians of the Salamanca School realized that they could not find in the Scriptures any specific rules concerning contracts, exchanges or other commercial transactions of the time and they developed a rational knowledge, although without forgetting the ultimate reference to God (Melé 1999).

In addition, Christian faith has its specific contribution to make: it opens new and, sometimes, surprising horizons for philosophical reflection. At the same time, faith proposes questions and concepts to philosophy, without interfering in its methodology. To a certain extent, one can say that philosophy and theology are mutually supportive. The theology of Creation, for example, has given us concepts such as the dignity of all human beings because they have been made in the image of God and the basic equality between all men, man's "stewardship" with respect to material resources –"environmental stewardship" to use Enderle's words (1997)–, the unity of the human family with the global responsibility this brings, the universal destiny of the goods given by God to all humanity, or human work as cooperation in the work of creation.

In fact, Western philosophy, and moral philosophy in particular, owes a lot to Christian theology. For the last five hundred years, people have wanted to create an independent ethics which dispenses with God and man's creatural condition. In their place, man and his reason have been put forward as sole guarantors of ethical correctness. However, in spite of this, the influence of Christianity and theology has not disappeared. As Romano Guardini points out, "most of the ideas and values used by independent ethics and the

independent sense of existence are not in any way original phenomena, but rather epiphenomena, uses, adaptations, reinterpretations of Christian moments” (1999 p. 797).

Lastly –but not least–, theology has the reference to God, which provides a transcendental foundation to business ethics. With respect to such a fundamental concept as human dignity, only God, who is Absolute, gives a definitive foundation to the respect that all human beings deserve. In this sense, it has been written: “If there is no transcending truth, through whose obedience man conquers his full identity, then there is no sure principle either that guarantees fair relations between men” (John Paul II, 1991, n. 44). It does not seem totally unreasonable, therefore, to search for the ultimate reason of many injustices in the business world in the denial of human beings’ transcendent dignity. Although this dignity finds a certain degree of support in philosophy, it is declared with full force and depth by theology and, ultimately, by faith.

The problem of authority

Since the Enlightenment, there have been people who have argued against ordering social life on the basis of any authority, including that of God. However, moral theology accepts as its starting point the authority of God. This leads some to maintain that business ethics should be developed solely using rational arguments (De George, 1997, p. 339).

It is true that there are ethical rules that are necessary for organizing society and no doubt, rational arguments may contribute very positively to their consolidation by clarifying concepts, analyzing situations and giving reasons. However, many of us will agree that no human authority can impose ethical rules on anyone, and much less so if this authority acts in a despotic and arbitrary manner.

However, one often notes a certain degree of confusion with the concept "authority". Authority may mean legal power or decree, but also acknowledgement, credibility, trust. The last meaning is perhaps the most genuine, because authority comes from *auctoritas*, which, in turn, expresses the quality of being *auctor*, or "author", that is, "father" or "progenitor" with respect to others. And a good father is not a tyrant, but someone who seeks to further the good of those he has engendered and has under his care.

Thus, one way of understanding authority is that it is what indicates the advisability of following another person because people trust him and it is assumed that he will lead to what is good. In ethics, "moral authority" is an important quality, which is recognized by the wisdom of words or the trust that a person or institution deserves. History, including very recent history, is full of leaders –religious or otherwise– who have had a great moral influence on many people, precisely because of the credibility or wisdom of their words.

In other words, there are moral voices that it is worth listening to and it is very debatable that the most sensible stance is to systematically reject all authority. Indeed, many moral recommendations made by religious leaders have more influence on society than some sophisticated philosophical reasonings.

It may be objected –and rightly– that not everyone will accept the same authority. But this same objection may be made about philosophical propositions, as they are not single but highly varied and, often, contradictory. The best solution will no doubt be to listen to all of them and initiate a debate in order to try to find out what is really good for society and human development.

However, limiting business ethics to the outcome of a public debate is to void of its richness the very concept of business ethics. Public debate on ethical issues until an ethical consensus is reached is a difficult exercise, and when it is reached, it usually refers to certain minimums. This contrasts with the attitude of responsible companies and people who not only try to avoid illegalities or ethical misdemeanors but to do things as well as they can. If the best companies seek total quality and excellence, why should they settle for ethical minimums?

Finally, I would point out that although public debates may contribute new arguments for personal reflection, they do not eliminate or replace the judgement of one's conscience. In addition, ethics, as it was understood by the Ancient Greeks, is oriented towards virtue, that is, the human development of people. And, if this is so, one wonders what human development will be achieved with only minimum values agreed by consensus in public debates.

The contribution of Christian moral theology in a multicultural, plurireligious society

Closely linked to the problem of authority is the fact that, in many countries, one can find coexisting different religious beliefs, cultures and outlooks. Faced with this situation, the question arises as to whether one should concentrate one's effort on devising a business ethics that is acceptable to everyone, rather than working with a theological approach which, as has already been said, is based on faith in the Revelation of God.

A multicultural, plurireligious society also raises problems for business ethics, with various practical manifestations. One of them is the approach that should be taken in the business ethics courses that are offered at management schools, which are attended by people with different religions and beliefs, or no religion at all. Another is the ethical content of the values statements or codes of business conduct which companies draw up to guide their managers and employees.

One possible response could be to accept the validity of ethical relativism. An even more radical reaction could be to abandon business ethics. However, as well as being contrary to reason which seeks to know ethical truth and the well-known criticisms of relativism, this would be tantamount to throwing overboard all the work that has been done in business ethics and in disproving the amorality of business. It would also be contrary to the conviction expressed in the practices of many companies, which identify incorrect practices, superseding certain ethically unsatisfactory approaches used in some places where they operate, while at the same time setting themselves high ethical standards. It does not seem, therefore, that the answer is to reject all ethics, but rather to make more effort in investigating what is good.

Furthermore, the present emphasis on multiculturalism and religious plurality may lead us to lose sight of the fact that, beyond the differences, there is something held in common: we are all human beings and ethics refers precisely to human beings and that which makes people and societies more human. From there, it is possible to consider the search for that which contributes to personal or social growth or plenitude.

Moral theology, as has already been pointed out, considers the possibility held by human reason for discovering good and discerning what must be done and what must be avoided, at least in very basic aspects of behavior. This is what is traditionally called moral

natural law, or simply natural law. This human ability to know and discern good and bad is shared by many people. If it were not, one could not talk of crimes against humanity or applaud the solidarity shown by a multitude of humanitarian organizations.

All cultures and beliefs deserve consideration and respect. However, it would be naïve to think that all cultures and beliefs have an identical ethical quality. A culture that accepts slavery, systematic bribery or lack of respect for human rights cannot have the same moral quality as another culture that respects the dignity and equality of all human beings, that is against corruption and respects human rights. This judgement rests on something that is shared by everyone: natural moral law.

Christian moral theology, at the same time as it listens to the word of God, performs “a reflection that concerns ‘morality’, that is, the goodness and badness of human acts and the person performing them, and, in this sense, it is open to all men.” (John Paul II 1993, n. 29). It therefore offers a message that is rational and reasonable. It is rational because it is theological, and theology uses rational arguments together with the facts of faith. And it is reasonable because of its internal consistency, and because of the wisdom and moral loftiness of its teachings. This is why the Catholic Church, twice millenarian and “expert in humanity”, can render a great service to the multicultural, plurireligious societies emerging in many countries in the third millenium, with their vision of man and humanity.

Conclusion

Religion influences moral conscience in decision-making and moral theology comes to its support by contributing rationality. With theology, decisions obey both ethical rationality and divine will at the same time.

On the other hand, if the importance of ethics is not so much knowing it as practicing it, then theology contributes motives for doing good, by contributing a motivation that is additional to that provided by philosophical reasons. However, for religion to act as a motivating force for business ethics, it is necessary to provide an adequate preparation for believers’ consciences so that they can truly live their faith in the company. Here again, there is a role for moral theology and education in faith.

Both theologians and philosophers have a scope of inquiry of their own in business ethics, but they can also support each other. Theology needs philosophy to develop its proposals and philosophy finds in theology new horizons for advancement. As regards business ethics, both disciplines need to be strongly anchored in reality and work with organizational and management theorists to achieve effective integration of ethics in business management.

Moral theology offers to believers a solid grounding in business ethics whose transcendence comes from its ultimate reference to God. Theological authority, understood not so much as a power as an expression of acknowledgement and trust, may also provide non-believers with an important ethical referent or, at least, a “moral voice” that is worth taking into consideration, even in a multicultural, plurireligious society.

In this respect, it should be remembered that there are a large number of Christians in the world, and also in companies, who it may be assumed are potentially receptive to the demands of Christian morality with respect to the firm. This raises a challenge in conceptual development and communication that must be addressed.

It therefore seems reasonable to conclude by asserting the desirability of developing a business ethics from a Christian outlook. Some work has already been done, but more is needed if it is to effectively influence organizations and their management. Christian moral theology –in its applications to business, too– has a long history and conceptual bases that we consider to be solid and consistent. This without doubt provides an optimistic reference for addressing the challenges of the 21st century.

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