Ethics in our time: A conversation on Christian social witness

Cover Story in the September 27, 2000 issue

This magazine took its name 100 years ago when the field of Christian social ethics was just being born. At the time, many Protestants were urgently seeking to address the dislocations of the industrial age and to learn from the emerging fields of social science. In this anniversary year, we spoke about this tradition of social ethics with three prominent writers in the field—Stanley Hauerwas, who teaches at Duke Divinity School; Robin Lovin, dean of Perkins School of Theology at Southern Methodist University; and Emilie Townes, professor of ethics at Union Theological Seminary in New York—and asked them to reflect on this tradition in light of the current challenges. The discussion was moderated by David Heim.

David Heim: In the first issue of the magazine named the *Christian Century*, in January 1900, the editors said that their special interest was in "the application of Christian principles to character and social problems." They also spoke of their hope to make the kingdom of God "a divine reality in human society." This, of course, was what we know today as the "social gospel"—the attempt to move beyond individual piety to address broad social problems. What relevance does that social gospel vision have today?

Stanley Hauerwas: That quotation is a reminder, for one thing, that in 1900 the editors thought Christian theological convictions were culturally assured. They thought that a Protestant culture was more or less in place, that they didn't have to fight over the creeds, and that they could direct attention to "character and social problems."

It is interesting that the editors mentioned "character" as well as "social problems." That reminds us that the social gospel did stress character. As the fight for Prohibition showed, the social gospel leaders cared about whether people drank or didn't drink.

A generation later, when Reinhold Niebuhr offered his critique of the social gospel for being naïve about the reality of sin in social structures, he didn't emphasize matters of individual character. That was partly because Niebuhr tended to assume that Christian character was in place—that people knew, for example, that divorce is a bad thing. It's these interconnections of theology, character and social action that we've lost in the 20th century.

Another important aspect of our time is that many of the original goals of the social gospel—like abolishing child labor—have been realized in the U.S. This raises another question for social ethics and for churches: What do you do when you get what you want and still have a lot of problems?

Robin Lovin: As Stanley says, there was a lot of theological confidence in the early 20th century. It was a confidence not only that theological claims were in some sense secure, but that you could reinterpret theology through the understandings of the world that were emerging from science and social science.

Since that time, we've lost confidence in the power and usefulness of science and social science. One of the important questions before us is whether the connections between those disciplines and theology are going to break down entirely. If they do, then I'm afraid the church will become the province of creationists and of people who want to reduce all social problems to individual piety.

Can we sustain the project started by those editors at the turn of the 20th century? Can we take Christian theology and read it into and read it off of what is going on in the world around us? That project remains very important, even though the way the social gospel theologians tried to do it may have been naïve in many ways.

Emilie Townes: I too hear the optimism in that quotation from 1900. It makes me think about the parts of the society that could not have much optimism about realizing the kingdom—at least not based on what they saw around them. As for naïveté, the social gospel's analysis of capitalism, for one thing, was quite naïve. Capitalism was not and is not as easy to control as those people seemed to think. The churches that have inherited the social gospel tradition still don't recognize how difficult it really is to be a Christian living in this system.

The quotation also reminds me that the turn of the 20th century was a time when a strong sense of America, the nation, was emerging. Before that time we drew our identity from Europe. It was not until the early years of the 20th century that a

distinctive U.S. identity began to emerge. What's more, many of the social gospelers came out of immigrant communities and had strong affiliations with those communities. The U.S. identity that was formed out of experiences of slavery, immigration and genocide was a complex thing—and it remains so. So when I hear that quotation, I wonder who was setting the standard for "character" and how "social problems" were identified. I suspect the editors of the *Century* had a narrower vision than they would have admitted to having. Some of us were not included in that vision—we were not on the radar screen.

Hauerwas: Robin points out that the social gospelers were concerned about defending the meaning and truth of religious claims in the face of the natural sciences, especially the work of Darwin, and in the face of the mechanistic presuppositions of social science. That's right. And that was central in Niebuhr's work: he never left behind questions of the meaning and truthfulness of religious claims. Interest in those concerns tended to get lost in recent years because social ethics has been shaped by advocacy groups for whom the question of whether Christianity is true or not takes a back seat to the question "Is it useful in the struggle for justice?"

Lovin: But the question "Is it useful?" reflects a pragmatic notion of truth with which Niebuhr would also be comfortable. And not only Niebuhr. The social gospel leaders whom Niebuhr was reacting against, as well as the liberation theologians of the 1970s and '80s who thought Niebuhr was too closely aligned with the establishment—all these people shared an interest in framing theological truths in light of their social effects. I see significant continuities between these movements. For example, at the conclusion of Niebuhr's 1932 book *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, he makes clear that he expects social change to come from people who are so oppressed by their situations that they grab hold of the eschatological hope in Christianity and take action. That sounds a lot like liberation theology.

An important difference, though, is that Niebuhr would say that movements of liberation can't be trusted any more than their oppressors can be.

Hauerwas: Right. It's not clear that liberation theologians have that kind of mistrust. They certainly do not want to acknowledge the reality of sin in Niebuhrian fashion.

The larger problem here—and this is a problem with the social gospel as well as with some kinds of liberation theology—is the notion that you can leave theological claims behind in the interest of getting on with the work of social justice. This strikes me as a conceptual and theological mistake.

Let me give an example: For some reason, people think that when you use the term justice you are talking about social ethics, but when you use the term creation you are talking about theology, not ethics. But creation is an extraordinary term that calls for rethinking not only the world but our actions in the world. Augustine said that any society that isn't based on the right worship of the true God cannot be just, because justice derives from our fundamental obligation to pay our due to God, which is worship. He was thereby offering a vision of justice based on an understanding of creation. And we need to remember that creation is an eschatological reality.

Lovin: As we lose confidence both in the social order and in our ability to understand it and control it, then we do have to pay more attention to the theological grounding of our convictions—to themes of creation, fall, resurrection and kingdom.

Hauerwas: And Jesus.

Lovin: And Jesus. I agree with you on that. But I want to avoid the step—taken by Karl Barth in response to the same set of issues—of trying to establish a kind of methodological barrier that prevents us from moving from what we know about society and the world to the theological reality. The fundamental insight of the tradition of social ethics that we've inherited since the social gospel era—and I think it's a good insight—is that the movement of reflection has to go both ways. It has to go both ways because the church is not, in fact, already in possession of all the truth that is to be known about God. The church has to be able to correct its own vision by paying attention to what's going on in the world, not only by paying attention to its tradition.

Hauerwas: Not of all us would agree with that reading of Barth.

Townes: It seems to me there's a tendency to lump liberation movements together and neglect their distinctive strains. Why is it that when someone states clearly that they know their ideas and actions are coming out of a particular set of experiences, and that attempts at objective action and theology are vain at best and bad social

theory and ethics at worst, they are labeled—pejoratively—as part of an “advocacy group”? It seems to me that we all function out of one advocacy group or another. We can call it what we like—we can even claim some sort of righteous bias or sound objectivity. But what we are doing is trying to be faithful witnesses. I’d like to see us stop dismissing ourselves by using labels to segregate our ideas.

I don’t see black or womanist theology leaving theological claims behind. James Cone is deeply concerned about liberation and reconciliation. Delores Williams explores the atonement. Both do, however, combine theology with other disciplines, such as social history and social theory. They do not appeal to philosophical categories or traditions in the way that what we call classical theology and ethics do. Rather than see this step as a conceptual and theological mistake, we should see it as a broadening of our theological visions.

People forget that liberation theologians and ethicists, at least in this country, have received very classical educations. They know the philosophical categories well, and those categories remain part of their basis for thought. But they recognize that those categories do not always help in addressing questions of truth or usefulness when it comes to social or structural evil or goodness.

The question I would raise here is: Why do we pick certain theological categories and not others? Why, for example, do we concentrate so much on the fall into sin? Why not, as Stanley says, begin with creation? Why do we start with pessimism instead of optimism, or despair instead of hope?

Heim: This reference to recovering theological categories brings to mind a frequent critique of both the social gospel and Niebuhrian “realism,” namely, that neither of these two traditions (or this large interconnected tradition, if that’s what it is) in social ethics gives much attention to the place of the church. Is that an important concern for you?

Hauerwas: Well, Reinhold Niebuhr was so much a creature of ecclesial practices that he didn’t have to give attention to the church. Oftentimes you don’t give an account of that which is closest to you. And I think his generation could continue to draw on vibrant Protestant practices in a way that ours can’t.

We now live in a time without vibrant ecclesial practices. I see this situation as a great opportunity for social and political witness. I tell my students who are preparing for ministry that they can have an extraordinary political witness if they do

just three things as pastors: never perform a wedding ceremony for anyone who just comes in off the street, never bury anyone in a funeral home, and never allow the American flag into the sanctuary. If they try to discipline a congregation to follow those simple Christian practices, if they insist on making a distinctive Christian witness in those areas of life, then they will find they have an extraordinary political task on their hands.

Lovin: I've known pastors who have done those kinds of things, and they have not exactly received an enthusiastic reception. However, I would phrase the challenge this way: We are in a situation in which pastors need to walk a fine line between, on the one hand, a culture that increasingly has no sense of its Christian roots and, on the other hand, a church that is tempted to isolate itself from the culture and become a museum-piece type of Christianity.

Townes: Regarding the role of the church in ethics, I have to say that I see more and more seminary students who have not been formed in a religious tradition. Often they have had a profound experience in a religious community and then end up in seminary, but they are still unformed by the church in a lot of ways. That makes walking the fine line Robin is talking about even more difficult, because in four years of seminary you can't get the resources you need to walk that line.

I say this against the backdrop of my own experience growing up in the black church, and of my experience having watched womanist theology unfold in the black church. This theology has not been done by way of pronouncements from on high. Most of our work is done fairly quietly in local churches with women's groups. When an author comes out with a book, it's often the result of talking to groups of women over numbers of years. I may not even use the term womanist when I talk to a church group. Our method is to try to figure out a problem together, and to ask people what the church isn't doing and what it should be doing.

My point is that formation in the black church has been important to the way I use my training in ethics. And one of the things that we've probably not done well enough as Christian ethicists is enter into dialogue with the church.

Lovin: The disconnection that I see is not so much between the seminary and the church as between the intellectual life of the seminary and the life of the church. It's relatively easy to hire faculty in the practical areas of the seminary curriculum who contribute in an important way to theological reflection in the churches. The harder

task is to engage the churches with the fundamental theological questions.

Hauerwas: We need to remember that most people in churches do not care about "social ethics" as it has been taught in the universities and seminaries. Most people do not care, for example, about whether retributive or distributive notions of justice are more adequate. What they want to know is whether sexual intercourse is all that significant.

In some ways, we are unprepared by our tradition of social ethics to answer those basic questions. They haven't been on the agenda. People have just assumed that something like bourgeois Christianity is OK and that everybody must know that, for example, divorce is a bad thing. If challenged as to why they think divorce is bad, people do not know how to give an account of why a certain kind of sexual behavior is fundamental for the character of their ecclesial communities. If you don't have ecclesial communities shaping people to think about marriage—or war, for that matter—then a course in social ethics is not going to help very much.

Our model of a Christian ethicist has so often been that of someone working for a denomination's social justice board. These boards are still a kind of model for what goes on in the Society of Christian Ethics. The focus is on making public-policy decisions. The real challenge, as I see it, is to do the kind of work Emilie is talking about—actually going into churches and talking with people. Most of the people trained in social ethics don't do that very well.

Townes: I don't know of a more appropriate place than the church to be having those kinds of conversations. When I was growing up, the church was the only place that gave me a clue that it was OK to be black. And it allowed me to ask the question, "Why do people hate me just because I'm black, when God loves me?"

In any case, the social justice activities I'm most encouraged by are local and community-based. For example, in Kansas City there's a program called reStart. It's a homeless ministry started in the basement of a United Methodist church. It not only provides shelter but tries to give people the resources to live on their own again. It helps people negotiate the system, and it helps people change the system. The organization has always been very active in lobbying for different kinds of legislation that will make poor people's lives more manageable. That to me is an incredible kind of social witness.

Lovin: I think there was a time in the postwar era when the kind of reflection on social policy Stan is talking about was appropriate. But I agree that we need to change the model, and we need to make the local church the locus for social ethics. The churches in the inner city are still a logical place to think about what Christian witness means in this society. For that thinking to happen, we need to build connections between the tall-steeple churches in the suburbs and the communities in the inner city so that reflection at the grass-roots level can happen. Until then, all the policy statements coming out of denominational boards aren't going to make any difference.

One model of this approach is the United Methodist Church's program of creating Shalom Zones. The goal is for churches in a region to commit themselves to creating a zone of peace in the midst of communities disrupted by homelessness or addiction or poverty. The aim is precisely to operate at the local level, to work through existing church communities and with volunteers rather than through a social-service bureaucracy. The quality of these alliances varies, but there have been some remarkable successes in building networks.

Hauerwas: Part of our problem is that we don't have many examples of what this grass-roots reflection and activity looks like. I'm impressed by the community-organizing work of the Industrial Areas Foundation. The IAF people are building community in a quite extraordinary way.

The other part of the problem is in the university, where so much of social ethics is located. It is not at all clear that the university knows what it's doing. Once the university decides, as it apparently has, that its primary function is not to provide the memory of a civilization but to produce new knowledge, then it's not obvious that the university is a very efficient institution for the job. IBM and Microsoft are obviously doing a better job of producing new knowledge. This development presents a major challenge to the enterprise called "Christian ethics."

Finally, I'd say we have to face up to the fact that we live in an imperial power. We live in Rome. Our main challenge as Christians is not to underwrite the presumptions of imperial power in the name of God.

Heim: We may live in Rome rather than an incipiently "Christian America," but don't we still care about Rome's health care policy, or about Rome's welfare policy?

Lovin: Churchpeople and people trained in social ethics need to participate in conversations about those issues. But if the question is how does the church make its witness, how does the church make a distinctive contribution, then I think it will be through activities that involve people at the grass roots and that involve paying attention to the people the rest of society has decided to ignore.

Hauerwas: The problem with most policy-making is that it is determined by the economic model of rationality, which is more than happy to leave certain people out of the equation.

Lovin: Society will soon wake up to the fact that we've been listening to public-policy ideas for 50 years and they haven't made a significant difference. That's why there is a move to other ways of addressing problems, a move to seeing what congregations are doing.

Townes: Yes, we live in a powerful nation. But it seems to me that the imperial power no longer rests with any government. What my colleague Larry Rasmussen calls "turbocapitalism" is the true imperial power. Governments are increasingly at the beck and call of transnational corporations. The "trans" is important, because it points to the fact that these corporations operate outside national boundaries and outside the cares and concerns of the people in those nations.

I don't think we are in Rome. It's more like Sodom, whose sin was lack of hospitality to the stranger—the poor of all racial and ethnic groups, women, men, children, those who are differently abled, those from certain geographic regions, and many more. When you live in Sodom, you'd better care about what's happening in it. We know how the story can end if we don't change our ways.

Coming out of the progressive end of the black church tradition, I know that committed Christians working together can and do make a difference. The question to ask is: What are we doing to bring in the kingdom? Principalities and powers are going to be around for a long time, so its's important to cloak ourselves in a gospel that believes in the goodness of creation, while we recognize the enormity of the sins of society and kick at the doors of evil until they fall down.