

Ethical Reflections: Ann Coulter - Pariah or Prophet of a Life-Affirming Ethic?

[The following was a paper Mark wrote this spring as one of the requirements for a Christian Ethics class he took at Earlham School of Religion where he is an “occasional student.” The assignment was to attend a lecture at Earlham and write an ethical reflection paper on an issue raised by the speaker. Mark chose Ann Coulter, a conservative Christian legal scholar who spoke against the activist agenda of the U.S. Supreme Court since Roosevelt. A student raised the question of the death penalty during the question and answer session].

Ann Coulter’s visit to Earlham November 14, 2001 provides an interesting backdrop for a number of ethical reflections, but we will isolate one: her argument that her support of the death penalty and her rejection of abortion are motivated by the same principle—affirming the value of life—and as such constitute a consistent position and not a contradictory one as assumed by her political opponents.

When responding to a questioner after her formal talk, she took offense at the suggestion that taking the life of an innocent fetus is comparable to taking the life of a hardened criminal who has killed others in cold blood. She argued that her support of the death penalty is actually an affirmation of the value of human life, the life that was taken by the criminal. The implication of her argument is that all lives are not of equal value, and to take the life of some people is necessary to maintain a society that truly values life. Though we may want to find an ethical refuge in the affirmation of the equal value of all biological life, Coulter invites us to look deeper at the tension between the affirmation of biological life and a life-affirming ethic that ascribes greater value to other perspectives of “life” and its value.

Without weighing in on her various and admittedly radical conservative opinions, we can appreciate her attempt to take a difficult and unpopular path in the pursuit of ethical absolutes. The fact that she offends the ethical sensibilities of a liberal campus should not be taken as evidence that she does not, in fact, have something important to say to those whose presumptions of ethical superiority constitute an ideological basis for an absolutistic ethic that may not bear out in the “real world.” Her voice, then, could be a kind of prophetic confrontation from “right field” that asks for a deeper inquiry into the value of a more authentic “life-based” ethic. Such an ethic critiques those who have presumed a claim to the moral high ground based on their advocacy of the abolition of the death penalty.

Using the affirmation of life as the lynchpin of an ethical system has an ancient root in the Torah: “This day I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now **choose life**, so that you and your children may live” (Deut. 30:19). Thus, this biblical injunction to affirm life effectively trumps the more abstract issues of right and wrong, and good and evil. This is also seen in the Decalogue, the fifth commandment of which contains both the command to honor mother and father and the promise of long life. McClendon [one of the authors reviewed in class] (p. 179) sees this as a granting of biological time to national Israel succeeding generations, but Paul’s citation of this verse in Ephesians 6:1 tips the scale in favor of viewing it as a *personal* promise of a protected and extended life to those individuals who choose to honor their mother and father. The good, then, is that which affirms the quality of family life, in this case by honoring the source of one’s biological life—their parents. Thus, the commandment and the grand promise attached to it point to the same sort of life-affirming ethic that we saw in the Deuteronomic passage.

To this point, we may have nearly universal agreement. Who with an eye toward the ethical does not want to affirm life? But what *authentically* affirms life, and the *value* of life? This is where our reflections can diverge, particularly as we contemplate the polarizing issues of abortion and the death penalty. Each issue hinges on what aspect of “life” we care to emphasize. If we value the biological aspect, we have a problem when the biological life of the mother is threatened by the biological life of the fetus, and both lives are threatened. We cannot toss an ethical coin, so to speak, but must look for a higher principle of life-affirmation. For instance, to choose to preserve a mother’s life instead of the fetus saves her life as well as preserves the possibility of her having more children. In such a case, we must make a difficult value judgment that all human lives are not equal, and biological life is not an absolute value. Is not this the same issue that must be faced when dealing with the reality of evil people who are set upon the destruction of others? The question is, are not some people by their behavior “worthy of death,” a notion that is found in both Old and New Testaments (Ex. 21:12; Rom. 1:32)?

The recent example of Todd Beamer and the other men who chose to resist the hijackers on United Flight 93 highlights the real-world dilemma that asks peace-loving people to try to kill hijackers so they cannot use a plane full of people as a bomb that will kill many more people. The question of what affirms life is readily answered in such a case, even though it involves the death of some. McClendon’s biographical sketch of Dietrich Bonhoeffer reveals the former’s judgment that the latter’s decision to participate in the conspiracy to assassinate Hitler was “inconsistent with Bonhoeffer’s Christian convictions” (p. 205). Perhaps Bonhoeffer’s earlier categorical aversion to violence was trumped by the reality of a death-dealing evil so profound that he found his old ethical convictions and categories inadequate to maintain his Christian love of life. Perhaps he found that to choose to kill someone who is set upon the death of others is not unethical after all, in any categorical sense that he could accept.

Thus, our ethical reflection brings us back to Ms. Coulter’s challenge to the categorical rejection of the death penalty. Perhaps the lesson to be learned is that there are limits to every attempt to systematize ethics, whether categorical, narrative, or decisionist. McClendon’s three strand approach, then, may hold the most promise for a biblical ethics that is sufficiently adaptable to real-world living, and resolving the many tensions between principle and practice.

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