

A CHRISTIAN ETHICS OF RESPONSIBILITY: DOES IT PROVIDE AN ADEQUATE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR DEALING WITH ISSUES OF PUBLIC MORALITY?

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Abstract

There is at present considerable confusion in church and theological circles in South Africa about the most appropriate approach to issues of public morality. In the article the inadequacy of prevalent approaches is pointed out. The claim that a Christian Ethics of Responsibility does provide an adequate theoretical framework for dealing with such issues is also discussed. A proposal is made on how the conceptual cogency of Christian discussions on an Ethics of Responsibility can be improved. The article concludes with the discussion of ways in which a Christian Ethics of Responsibility can deal with issues of public morality.

1. Introduction

Since the publication of Hans Jonas' influential book *Das Prinzip Verantwortung* in 1979 the term "ethics of responsibility" has increasingly been accepted in especially Europe as designation for an ethics that endeavours to deal adequately with moral issues encountered in contemporary science, technology, politics and economics. There have been quite a few recent attempts to develop a Christian version of the Ethics of Responsibility, inter alia in Germany by Wolfgang Huber, in Switzerland by Johannes Fischer and in the USA by William Schweiker.¹

This article is an attempt to answer the question: Can a Christian Ethics of Responsibility provide us with an adequate theoretical framework for dealing with issues concerning public morality in South Africa? There is undoubtedly at present considerable confusion in church and theological circles in South Africa about the most appropriate approach to such issues. As I point out in the first part of the article prevalent approaches during the previous political dispensation have become obsolete, while new approaches that are propagated have proved to be unsatisfactory. Unfortunately, existing versions of a Christian Ethics of Responsibility have their own problems. As I illustrate in the second part of the article by discussing the views of the three named exponents of a Christian Ethics of Responsibility, there is very little agreement on the definition of such an ethics. The conceptual disparity of

1. This does not exhaust the list of theologians who in the recent past contributed to the development of a Christian Ethics of Responsibility. Theologians like Ulrich Körtner (*Evangelische Sozialethik*, 1999 and *Freiheit und Verantwortung*, 2001), Harmut Kress and Wolfgang Erich Müller (*Verantwortungsethik heute*, 1997), Josef Röhmelt (*Theologie der Verantwortung*, 1991 and *Vom Sinn moralischer Verantwortung*, 1996) and even Sharon Welch (*A feminist ethic of risk*, revised edition 2000) – although she does not use the depiction Ethics of Responsibility - should be added to the list. Theologians of an older generation who are also associated with the development of a Christian version of the Ethics of Responsibility include Dietrich Bonhoeffer (*Ethik*, 1949, latest completely reorganised edition 1998 and *Widerstand und Ergebung: Briefe und Aufzeichnungen aus der Haft*, 1964), Bernard Häring (*The law of Christ*, 1961) and H Richard Niebuhr (*The responsible self*, 1963).

existing versions seemingly does not make a Christian Ethics of Responsibility a promising candidate for providing us with an adequate theoretical framework for dealing with issues of public morality in the South African society. Returning to Max Weber's original conceptualisation of an Ethics of Responsibility in 1919, I make some suggestions in the third part of the article on how the conceptual cogency of discussions on a Christian Ethics of Responsibility can be improved. In the last part ways in which a Christian Ethics of Responsibility can deal with the challenges of public morality are explored.

2. The inadequacy of approaches prevalent in South Africa

Three prevalent theological approaches to issues of public morality in the previous political dispensation can be identified: apartheid theology, liberation theology and what may – for lack of a better designation – be called church theology. Typical of the apartheid theology and the liberation theology approaches were that no sharp distinction was made between theological convictions on the one hand and political, economic and social convictions on the other hand. Both approaches were confident that theological convictions could be directly translated into political, economic and social programmes and policies. The church theology approach accused both the apartheid theology and the liberation theology approaches of ideologically legitimising political policies and strategies favouring particular groups in society. It wanted the church to find its own, specifically Christian voice on issues of public morality and to give public witness to its views.

Since the advent of the new political dispensation in South Africa, the apartheid theology approach has been completely discredited. Liberation theologians – at least those who still regard themselves as such – are confronted with the not so unproblematic alternatives of either legitimising the policies of their comrades in government or continuing the liberation struggle. More importantly, both the adherents of the liberation theology and the church theology approaches experience that their views on how things should change in our society have very little influence on the government and its policies. The main reason is that a liberal constitution, which insists on the separation of religion and state, has in the meantime been introduced. It makes it difficult – if not impossible – for the government to implement the distinctive views of a particular religious group, left alone the distinctive views of a particular sub-group, which forms part of such a religious group.

It is no coincidence that the influence of Stanley Hauerwas' Christian ethical views in church and theological circles in South Africa has increased significantly since 1994. His depiction of the quandaries churches in the USA experience in trying to promote Christian social ethics in society resonates with the experience of churches in the South African society. Hauerwas is of the opinion that it is virtually impossible for the church in liberal societies such as the USA to promote social justice without taking the liberal conception of justice as point of departure. As a result of the strong separation of state and religion conceptions of justice peculiar to particular religions are not allowed to have an influence on public life. Only the liberal conception of justice, which is regarded as universally valid, is accepted in the public sphere. When the church, however, promotes social justice in the liberal sense of the word, it does not serve the cause of Christ, but the cause of political liberalism (Hauerwas 1991:45-68).

As a result of this situation that the church in liberal societies finds itself in, Hauerwas is of the opinion that it should not strive to change society by undertaking all sorts of social ethical initiatives in public life. The church should instead serve as a model of how a true community should look like: "The task of the church [is] to pioneer those institutions and practices that the wider society has not learned as forms of justice... The church, therefore,

must act as a paradigmatic community in the hope of providing some indication of what the world can be, but is not... The church does not have, but rather is a social ethic. That is, she is social ethic inasmuch as she functions as a criteriological institution – that is, an institution that has learned to embody the form of truth that is charity as revealed in the person and work of Christ” (Hauerwas 1977:142-143).

It is understandable that an increasing number of South African theologians have – since 1994 – found Hauerwas’ proposal that the church in liberal societies should, almost exclusively, strive to be a paradigmatic community, very attractive. A number of influential South African theologians have since then stressed that the prime ethical task of the church is to be a “community of character”, which contributes to the formation of strong Christian virtues among its members. I personally find this new emphasis on the task of moral formation of the church a much needed and valuable one. My concern is, however, that South African churches would be under the wrong impression that they fulfil their social ethical task in our society if they devote themselves to the instilling of strong moral virtues in their members. There is a real danger that views such as Hauerwas’ will be misused to justify avoidance of the broader social ethical responsibility of churches in our society. It cannot be denied that there is at present a considerable lack of enthusiasm in many South African churches to become constructively involved in issues and initiatives concerning public morality.

There are a number of reasons why it would be unacceptable to reduce the social ethical task of the South African churches to that of striving to be paradigmatic communities:

- We should take into account that church members are for the greatest part of their waking hours involved in activities not related to the institutional church: doing their work, raising children, participating in sport and recreation, etc. In spite of the fact that by far the majority of South Africans profess to be Christians we are faced with a moral crisis in the workplace, family life and sport and recreation. The moral crisis can certainly be partly blamed on a lack of moral formation. Other factors like the pressures and competing values people – Christians included – are exposed to in other spheres of life, however, also play an important role. Many Christians who are trustworthy members of their churches, succumb under these pressures and competing values in other spheres of life. To enable church members to resist the temptations they experience in, for example, the workplace, churches should – in addition to the instilling of traditional Christian values – also intentionally help them to develop skills to deal with the temptations and moral issues they experience in the workplace.
- Severe problems like the high percentage of absolutely poor people, the high incidence of violent crime, fraud and corruption, the comprehensive disruption of family life, the high rate of HIV infection and AIDS and the serious deterioration of the natural environment threaten to destroy the South African society. All these problems have a moral dimension that needs to be addressed. If the South African churches refuse to participate in the public debate on the moral issues involved and to contribute to their solution, they could rightly be accused of moral irresponsibility.
- Although our new constitution can be characterised as liberal, the constitutional situation in South Africa is not identical to the one in the USA. The separation between state and religion in the USA is “hard”, in that almost no religious influence is allowed in the public sphere. In South Africa this separation is “soft”, in that some allowance is made in the constitution for religious influence in the public sphere. Section 15(2) of the Bill of Rights in the constitution, for example, allows religious observances in state and state supported institutions on condition that they take place on a fair, free and voluntary

basis. In my opinion the allowance of at least some religious influence in the public sphere, aptly reflects the fact that our society is not a secularised society in the way many of the Western societies are. The majority of South Africans still find it almost impossible to maintain a sharp division between their private and public lives and to screen out their religious beliefs when they reflect on public issues. For the churches not to creatively explore and optimally utilise the room the constitution provides for religious involvement in the public sphere, would be short-sighted.

3. The claim that a Christian Ethics of Responsibility provides an adequate theoretical framework

In his book *Das Prinzip Verantwortung* (1979) – an English version with the title *The imperative of responsibility* was published in 1984 – Hans Jonas makes the strong assertion that we are in our time in need of a completely new approach in ethics. To quote Jonas: “Modern technology has introduced actions of such novel scale, objects and consequences that the framework of former ethics can no longer contain them ... No previous ethics had to consider the global condition of human life and the far-off future, even existence, of the race. These now being an issue demands ... a new conception of duties and rights, for which previous ethics and metaphysics provide not even the principles, let alone a ready doctrine” (Jonas 1984:6 and 8).² Jonas sets himself the task in his book to develop such a completely new ethical approach based on the principle of responsibility, understood by him as the prospective and unilateral responsibility to ensure the continuing existence of humankind.

It is safe to say that the three named exponents of a Christian Ethics of Responsibility: William Schweiker, Wolfgang Huber and Johannes Fischer, are in agreement with Jonas that the rapid development of modern science and technology and especially the vast expansion of human power to which it contributed, necessitates a new approach in ethics. They are also in agreement with him that such a new ethics should be developed as an Ethics of Responsibility. They differ from him in that they all believe that a *Christian Ethics of Responsibility* is needed. It is, however, clear that there are also crucial differences in their respective conceptions of an Ethics of Responsibility. What is especially significant is that they do not agree on how such an ethics should be defined.

In an effort to develop what he calls “an integrated theory of responsibility” Schweiker draws insights from various theories of responsibility (Schweiker 1995:32).³ He groups all previous theories of moral responsibility into three types: agential, social and dialogical. Agential theories ground responsibility in the agent, social theories centres on social practices of praise and blame, while dialogical theories focuses on the event of encounter

2. The full title of Jonas’ book is: *Das Prinzip Verantwortung: Versuch einer Ethik für die technologischen Zivilization* (1979), and the full title of the English version: *The imperative of responsibility: In search of an ethics for the technological age* (1984). In *Technik, Medizin und Ethik: Zur Praxis des Prinzips Verantwortung* (1985) he applied the Ethics of Responsibility to particular ethical issues in technology and medicine. See D. Böhler (ed.), *Ethik für die Zukunft: Im Diskurs mit Hans Jonas* (1994), 460-466 for a bibliography of Jonas’ own publications and 467-476 for a bibliography of publications on Jonas.

3. Schweiker developed his view on a Theological Ethics of Responsibility in his books: *Responsibility and Christian Ethics* (1995) and: *Power, value and conviction: Theological ethics in the postmodern age* (1998). See also: Radical interpretation and moral responsibility: A proposal for theological ethics, *The Journal of Religion* 73(40), 613-637; Verantwortungsethik in einer pluralistischen Welt: Schöpfung und die Integrität des Lebens, *Evangelische Theologie* 59(5), 320-335 and: Responsibility in the world of Mammon: Theology, justice and transnational corporations, in: M L Stackhouse & P J Paris (eds), *God and globalization. Volume 1: Religion and the powers of the common life* (2000), 105-139.

with others and thus on that to which or to whom one is responding. While views on responsibility that express these different theories of responsibility will be found in all moral reflection, that does not mean that the idea of responsibility must function as the first principle of an ethics. An ethics might specify the idea of utility, happiness or some other central value or principle and then treat the questions of responsibility within that framework. However, an ethics of responsibility can also mean that responsibility is the basic conception, which serves as a starting point for the development of a coherent and comprehensive ethical doctrine. Responsibility in this case is the first principle for an ethics. Schweiker calls this a “strong” as opposed to a “weak” ethical paradigm in which the idea of responsibility is not the first principle of ethics. “Ethics of responsibility can be classified, then, in terms of moral focus (agential, social, dialogical) and with respect to the first principle of an ethics (strong, weak)” (Schweiker 1995: 42-43).

The Imperative of Responsibility that forms the centrepiece of Schweiker’s theological Ethics of Responsibility is formulated by him as such: “*in all actions and relations we are to respect and enhance the integrity of life before God*” (Schweiker 1995:2). He denies, however, that by depicting this imperative as an “imperative of responsibility” he is elevating responsibility to the first principle of ethics, as it was done in the Theological Ethics of Responsibility of H Richard Niebuhr en Bernhard Häring, based on strong dialogical theories of responsibility. Responsibility does not specify the moral good for the Ethics he proposes. “Moral integrity is the substantive moral good and hence focus in theological ethics; the idea of responsibility provides the means for thinking about the meaning of that good for how we ought to live. Neither a “strong”, nor “weak” theory of responsibility, the position of this book is what I have called an *integral* theory of responsibility” (Schweiker 1995:44).

In an article “Toward an Ethics of Responsibility” published in *The Journal of Religion* (1993) Wolfgang Huber defines an Ethics of Responsibility as one that deals with typical contemporary challenges relating to responsibility and is characterised by four specific structural dimensions of responsibility.⁴ He mentions three challenges: ascribing responsibility in the case of collective crimes of obedience, taking up responsibility to avoid catastrophic future side-effects of the globalisation of technology and responsibly dealing with the cultural and religious plurality in our societies, which is threatened by monoculturalism as the result of modernisation (Huber 1993:574-578).

The four structural elements are:

- (i) *Foundation in a relational anthropology* (Huber 1993:580-584). All Theological Ethics of Responsibility rely, in Huber’s opinion, on a relational rather than a substantialist anthropology. A substantialist anthropology has its exemplary formulation in the

4. Huber developed his own views on a Christian or Theological Ethics of Responsibility in especially a paper: Sozialethik als Verantwortungsethik, read in 1982 (published in 1990 in a collection of papers and articles by Huber: *Konflikt und Konsens: Studien zur Ethik der Verantwortung*, 135-157) and a paper: Toward an Ethics of Responsibility, read in 1992 (published in 1993 in: *The Journal of Religion* 73(4),573-591). However, see also the paper read in honour of H E Tödt after his death in 1992: Strukturen verantwortlichen Lebens: Die Bedeutung Heinz Eduard Tödt für die theologische Ethik, and the articles: Selbstbegrenzung aus Freiheit: Über das ethische Grundproblem des technischen Zeitalters, *Evangelische Theologie* 52 (1992), 128-146 and Gewalt gegen Mensch und Natur – Die Notwendigkeit eines planetarischen Ethos, in: J Rehm (ed.), *Verantwortlich leben in der Weltgemeinschaft: Zur Auseinandersetzung um das “Projekt Welthethos”* (1994), 30-46. Contributions of Huber on particular issues related to responsibility and a Christian Ethics of Responsibility can be found in: *Konflikt und Konsens*, 158-250. See also: Rights of nature or dignity of nature?, *Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* 1991, 43-60, *Die tägliche Gewalt: Gegen den Ausverkauf der Menschenwürde* (1993); *Gerechtigkeit und Recht: Grundlinien christlicher Rechtsethik* (1996) and the book he wrote with Hans-Richard Reuter: *Friedensethik* (1990).

understanding of humans as rational beings; a relational anthropology has its exemplary formulation in the understanding of humans as responsive and therefore responsible beings. Luther has already in his *Disputatio de homine* (1536) proclaimed that humans are constituted not by their rational substance, but by their relationship to God in faith. The two most prominent representatives of a Christian Ethics of Responsibility in the twentieth century, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and H Richard Niebuhr, have in common that they understand the human person as a responder.

- (ii) *Correspondence to reality* (Huber 1993:584-586). The Ethics of Responsibility is associated with the control of human power. If power is understood as the ability to shape and transform reality, then all Ethics of Responsibility imply, in Huber's opinion, a certain kind of realism. It is conspicuous that not only in Weber's original conceptualisation of an Ethics of Responsibility, but also in Bonhoeffer's and Niebuhr's theological versions of such an Ethics, the notion of correspondence to the real world is central.
- (iii) *Teleological character* (Huber 1993:586-588). In Huber's opinion, an Ethics of Responsibility has to be understood basically as a teleological ethics – although deontological elements may be included. He agrees with Franklin Gamwell's understanding as teleological all those kinds of ethical reflection in which "moral, in distinction from immoral, action is identified by the intent to realize or maximize some characteristic of existence" (Gamwell 1990:62). In a Christian Ethics of Responsibility the distinction between eschatology and teleology, between the *eschaton* that can only be realized by God and our finite and relative *tele* has, in Huber's opinion, also to be taken into account.
- (iv) *The reflexive use of principles* (Huber 1993:588-589). Huber believes that the distinctive character of an Ethics of Responsibility can be clarified by referring to Max Weber's view on the evolution of basic ethical approaches in the Western world. For Weber, the transition from the Catholicism of the Middle Ages to modern Protestantism included the step from an *Ethics of Norms* to an *Ethics of Conviction*. An Ethics of Norms formulates imperatives for actions that have to be followed in each and every case. An Ethics of Conviction is restricted to general principles that orient the conduct of life as a whole, but do not necessarily imply direct guidance for action in specific cases. The next step in the evolution of ethical approaches was the one from an Ethics of Conviction to an *Ethics of Responsibility*, or – to put it another way – from a simple use of principles to a reflexive use of principles. Increasingly, especially since the Enlightenment, people have found themselves in a social world characterised by a plurality of religious and ethical orientations. To respond to such a situation in an appropriate way one has to relate one's principles in a reflexive manner to the principles of others. One has to take the freedom of conscience of others as seriously as one's own.

In his book *Leben aus dem Geist: Zur Grundlegung christlicher Ethik* (1994) Johannes Fischer distinguishes three basic types of ethics, which corresponds with three levels or manifestations of the good that humans strive at.⁵ As humans we have to get answers to the

5. Fischer first wrote an article: *Christliche Ethik als Verantwortsethik?*, *Evangelische Theologie* 52(2),114-128. He developed his view on an Ethics of Responsibility as part of a more comprehensive framework of Christian Ethics in his book: *Leben aus dem Geist: Zur Grundlegung christlicher Ethik* (1994). In his book *Handlungsfelder angewandter Ethik: Eine theologische Orientierung* (1998) he applied his theoretical view on Christian Ethics to particular ethical issues relating to human sexuality, bio-ethics, ecology and politics, but also elaborated certain aspects of his theoretical view on Christian Ethics.

following questions concerning the good: What is the good that we have to strive for in this life? What is the good we owe others, for which we are responsible? What is the trans-subjective good that determines our lives, the “spirit” from which we live and in which we communicate with each other? (Fischer 1994:9-10). The first question is the leading question of the type of ethics that was given its classical form by Aristotle and has – up till now – played a major role in the history of Western thought. Fischer depicts this type of ethics as Ethics of Doing (German: “Tun-Ethik”) (Fischer 1994:70-74)).

The second question is the leading question of the second basic type of ethics, which has its roots in the Judeo-Christian tradition, with its central tenet that humans are in everything they do responsible to God. Fischer calls this type of ethics an Ethics of Action (German: “Handlungs-Ethik”) or Ethics of Responsibility. By depicting this type of ethics in this way he distances himself from the tendency to regard the turn to the Ethics of Responsibility as typical of the ethical situation we find ourselves in today. He regards the Ethics of Norms and the Ethics of Conviction not as completely different precursors of the Ethics of Responsibility, but rather, respectively, as the heteronymous and autonomous phases of the Ethics of Responsibility. In recent times the Ethics of Responsibility has, in Fischer’s opinion, moved into a third phase, namely the phase of what he calls *koinonomy*. We have come to the realisation that we cannot appeal to objective commands, duties or norms that are given to us by one or the other instance. The central ethical issue is not anymore: “What *are* we responsible for?” but rather: “What do *we want to, or should we, make* each other responsible for?” It is, in other words, not our task anymore to *discover* moral responsibility, but to *create* or *constitute* it mutually. That is, in Fischer’s opinion, what is new with regard to the present ethical situation (Fischer 1994:110-121).

The third question is the leading question of the third basic type of ethics, which also has its roots in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Fischer calls this type of ethics the Ethics of the Life determined by the (S)pirit and regards it as the most fundamental in that it incorporates and integrates the other two types (Fischer 1994:10-13). There is in his mind little doubt that Christian Ethics is predominantly Ethics of Life determined by the Spirit. Christian Ethics has its orientation primarily in the ethos inherent in the life relationships in which human beings are placed by their Creator on account of Christ’s redemption through the work of the Holy Spirit. “Creation”, “new creation”, “Kingdom of God”, “reconciled world”, “body of Christ”, “brother” or “neighbour” are all descriptions of life relationships. They describe the relationship to God in the life dimension that is constitutive for the Christian faith, the Christian perception of reality, but also the Christian ethos. That is why the “indicative-imperative” structure of the Pauline “paranesis” is the typical expression of the Christian Ethics of the Life determined by the Spirit. Its “We are..., so let us” sentences do not appeal to a basic situation of being responsible to God, but remind those to whom they are addressed of the life that is given to them in the Spirit, with as aim the realisation of this life in all they do and say (Fischer 1994:113-114).

It is clear that Schweiker, Huber and Fischer have completely different views of what an Ethics of Responsibility comprises. For Schweiker “strong” versions of such an ethics would include theories of normative ethics, which take responsibility as fundamental normative principle – although he makes an exception for his own Christian Ethics of Responsibility. For Fischer it is rather one basic type or category of normative ethics amongst others, which strives to spell out what the good is we owe to others. Fischer would classify as Ethics of Responsibility all normative ethical theories, which set themselves the task to achieve this. For Huber it includes all normative ethical theories that engage the new challenges with regard to responsibility in our time and are characterised by certain features.

This disparity in defining an Ethics of Responsibility is confusing and certainly does not help to establish a Christian version of such an ethics as adequate theoretical framework for dealing with issues of public morality. One can of course, in an effort to overcome the confusion, opt for only one of the three proposals. The problem, in my opinion, is that not one of the three proposals is completely satisfactory. To make out a case for depicting an adequate ethics for our time as Ethics of Responsibility, the least one should do is to convincingly demonstrate (i) why the term “responsibility” is needed in qualifying such an ethics, and (ii) in what sense the Ethics of Responsibility is the new ethics that we need in our time. None of the three proposals succeeds in doing that convincingly.

Schweiker’s depiction of all ethics that explicitly deal with the question of responsibility, without elevating responsibility to fundamental ethical principle, as “weak” Ethics of Responsibility is not very convincing. The implication is that one can name a particular ethics with reference to any of the number of ethical issues it deals with. His reason for depicting “strong” Ethics of Responsibility as such is that it takes responsibility as its fundamental normative principle. It is, however, conspicuous that he denies that he elevates responsibility to fundamental ethical principle by making what he calls the “imperative of responsibility” (“in all actions and relations we are to respect and enhance the integrity of life before God”) the centrepiece of his own Christian Ethics of Responsibility. He rightly asserts that moral integrity is rather the substantive moral good from which his ethics takes its point of departure. If that is the case it is not clear why he calls the fundamental imperative of his ethics an “imperative of *responsibility*” in the first place. Used in this way the phrase “imperative of responsibility” is in fact nothing more than a synonym for the phrase “fundamental ethical imperative”. Nor is it clear in terms of his own definition of a “strong” Ethics of Responsibility why he calls his own Christian Ethics an Ethics of Responsibility.

The incongruence of Schweiker’s proposal may be seen as an indication that any attempt to alleviate responsibility to the status of fundamental normative ethical principle, is unviable. As, inter alia, Kurt Bayertz has pointed out in criticism of Jonas’ attempt to do that, responsibility is a second level normative concept, which cannot function as a normative ethical principle on the first level (Bayertz 1995:65-66). According to the classical model of moral responsibility someone is morally guilty if it can be established that a negative outcome is causally linked to the actions and intentions of that person and his/her actions and intentions contradict the moral values of the particular society (Bayertz 1995:14-15). The ascription of moral responsibility is, in other words, always logically dependent on existing moral values, which are accepted as valid. This is true, not only in the case of the classical, predominantly retrospective concept of responsibility, but also in the case of the contemporary, prospective concept of responsibility.

By relating the term “responsibility” in the depiction Ethics of Responsibility to the roots of this type of ethics in the tenet of human responsibility to God in the Judeo-Christian tradition, Fischer at least provides a rationale for his use of the term. By regarding in this way the term “ethics of responsibility” as more or less a synonym for the term “duty ethics”, which is the traditional name used for the same type of ethics, he in fact denies the claim that the Ethics of Responsibility is a distinctively contemporary ethics. It is not clear how he can do that in the light of the fact that the depiction Ethics of Responsibility is relatively new. It was coined by Max Weber in 1919. As the historian Richard McKeon demonstrated, even the term “responsibility” has only come into regular usage in philosophical literature since the middle of the nineteenth century (McKeon 1957:6-7). The large-scale substitution of the concept of duty in our time by the notion of responsibility may not

be co-incident. It may be an indication of a fundamental shift in our contemporary understanding of moral obligation.

By relating Ethics of Responsibility to contemporary challenges with regard to responsibility Huber does give account of the distinctively contemporary nature of such an ethics. The simple fact that a particular ethics discusses, amongst others, contemporary challenges with regard to responsibility does, of course, not qualify it as an Ethics of Responsibility. The discussion of such challenges can therefore, at most, be regarded as a necessary, but not as an adequate condition for an ethics to be called an Ethics of Responsibility. The same remark can be made with regard to the four structural elements Huber discusses. Even if Huber is right in saying that at least a Christian Ethics of Responsibility has to exhibit all four the mentioned structural elements – something that can be debated with regard to at least the elements of a relational anthropology and a teleological character – it still remains a question whether the presence of these elements – taken separately or together – provides an adequate condition for calling it an ethics an Ethics of Responsibility. Or, to put it differently: is it only an Ethics of Responsibility that can incorporate all four the elements: a relational anthropology, recognition of the need for correspondence to the real world, a teleological nature and recognition of the freedom of conscience of others?

On account of our analysis of the three theologians' concepts of a Christian Ethics of Responsibility we are faced with the question: Is it possible to clearly distinguish such an ethics from other types of Christian Ethics and, at the same time, convincingly demonstrate why it is the distinctively contemporary ethics that we need in our time? Having responsibility as the fundamental or first ethical principle would surely distinguish a Christian Ethics of Responsibility from other normative theories of ethics, but does not seem viable. To list a number of contemporary responsibility challenges with which such an ethics deals and name a number of characteristics some Christian conceptions of such an ethics share, does not help either in distinguishing it from other conceptions of Christian Ethics if they also deal with these challenges and share these characteristics. To regard "ethics of responsibility" as a synonym for "duty ethics" enables one to distinguish such an ethics from other categories of Christian Ethics – if one accepts that there are such other categories – but at the cost of relinquishing its distinctively contemporary nature.

4. A proposal on how the conceptual cogency of Christian discussions on an Ethics of Responsibility can be improved

As we have seen, the development of a Christian Ethics of Responsibility is hampered by the lack of consensus on what such an ethics comprises. In my opinion the conceptual cogency of Christian discussions on an Ethics of Responsibility can be improved if we take as point of departure Max Weber's original conceptualisation of such an ethics. It would – at the same time – provide the opportunity to demonstrate the distinctive nature of such an ethics as a typically contemporary ethics.

Weber introduced the term "ethics of responsibility" (German: "Verantwortungsethik") in his famous paper *Politik als Beruf* (English: *Politics as vocation*) published in 1919. In this paper he took to task Christian pacifist politicians who campaigned for the abolishment of the German army. He depicted them as proponents of an *Ethics of Conviction* (German: "Gesinnungsethik"). Typical of proponents of such an ethics, according to Weber, is that they apply their religiously inspired moral convictions in an abstract and absolute way without taking into account: the specific nature of politics, the particular role responsibility that they as politicians have and the disastrous consequences a decision to abolish the

German army and never to use military force could have. They are only interested in obeying what they believe the will of God is, and they are quite happy to leave the responsibility for the consequences of their decisions to the almighty God who in his providence determines the outcome of events in accordance with his will.

In opposition to the Ethics of Conviction Weber proposed an *Ethics of Responsibility* (German: “Verantwortungsethik”). In contrast to politicians who adhere to an Ethics of Conviction politicians who adhere to an Ethics of Responsibility would be willing to:

1. take full personal responsibility for deciding on the right political decisions;
2. take the specific nature of politics as a separate life sphere with its own principles and demands seriously (including what Weber calls “die Sache” of politics: the maintenance of order);
3. take their particular role responsibility as politicians – to do what is needed to maintain order – seriously; and
4. seriously consider the consequences their political decisions could have on the political power play, before taking and implementing such decisions.

I restrict myself to two remarks on Weber’s original conceptualisation of an Ethics of Responsibility:

- a) It presupposes the whole process of modernisation since the Enlightenment. Rational scrutiny of all aspects of life led, amongst others, to insight into the human origin and historicity of social and political structures and the exponential development of science and technology. As a result not only the awareness of increased freedom and power, but also of increased human responsibility grew stronger. People became more and more aware of the fact that they themselves have the comprehensive responsibility to see to it that social, political, economic and technological systems are developed and utilised to the benefit of humankind. To execute such responsibility, the growing consensus was knowledge of the distinctive laws and principles that govern the different spheres of life was needed.
- b) It poses a challenge to Christian Ethics. To try to develop a Christian version of the Ethics of Responsibility is not something innocuous. It is to take up the challenge that Weber, in conceptualising such an ethics in opposition to the Christian (!) Ethics of Conviction, originally put to Christians of that time. This challenge has more than one dimension. One is to counter the implicit accusation that Christian Ethics is inherently an irresponsible ethics. A second is to demonstrate that from a theological perspective not only the room, but also the positive motivation is given to develop a Christian Ethics of Responsibility. A third is to grapple with the agenda that, I believe, Weber provided for the development of an Ethics of Responsibility and in doing so to develop a distinctive Christian version of such an ethics. A Christian Ethics of Responsibility will have to make out what it means from a Christian perspective to:
 - take on own responsibility;
 - take the concrete situation seriously;
 - take role responsibilities – besides moral responsibilities – seriously;
 - take into account (present and future) consequences of decisions before making such decisions.

This is not the occasion to take on the first two of these challenges. I do, however, want to make some suggestions on how a Christian Ethics of Responsibility, in engaging Weber’s agenda, can deal with issues concerning public morality, especially in the South African context.

5. How can a Christian Ethics of Responsibility deal with issues of public morality?

5.1 Taking on own responsibility

- Church denominations and individual Christians have the responsibility not to ignore the pressing and often completely new moral issues that are thrown up in life spheres such as politics, economics, education, health care, sport and recreation – often as a result of new scientific and technological developments. Their first responsibility is to confront these moral issues and to develop a Christian ethical view based on the “thick” religious and moral beliefs that form part and parcel of the Christian tradition.⁶ The formulation of such Christian ethical views outstrips the competency of most individual Christians and is therefore less their responsibility than the responsibility of church denominations (in their local, regional and especially national institutional manifestations), ecumenical organizations and Christian ethicists. It does not, however, take away the responsibility of the individual Christian to try to form an informed personal opinion.
- Developments in science and technology are often so rapid that traditional Christian morality is completely left behind and just does not have the norms at its disposal to provide adequate guidance to Christians. This means that especially a Christian Ethics of Responsibility should be willing to take on the meta-responsibility of the formulation of more applicable and sometimes even completely new norms on the basis of the traditional Christian morality. Although specific traditional norms may not be of help in this regard, and can even become obsolete, what Johannes Fischer calls “the Ethics of Life determined by the Spirit” can provide fundamental moral orientation on the basis of which applicable and new moral norms for Christians can be formulated (cf. Fischer 1998:49-62; 228-236).
- Church denominations and individual Christians do not only have the responsibility to form their own Christian views on issues of public morality. They also have the responsibility to take part in the public debate on these issues, in order to contribute to the well being of society. They can of course do this on the basis of their own “thick” Christian morality and prophetically give witness of their Christian views in the public sphere. In some situations this may be the right thing to do. As we have noticed, however, it has become almost impossible for governments in liberal societies to accept and act on the distinctive moral views of a particular religious group. A result of the process of modernization not only the sphere of politics, but also other spheres like the economy, art, sport and recreation, are regarded as autonomous systems with their own laws and principles. For church denominations and individual Christians to always insist on prophetic public witness of their Christian views can in many instances be ineffectual and even irresponsible, because they could know from the outset that there is no chance that their “thick” Christian ethical views could as such be accepted by the government, or by business people, artists, sport people and entertainers. In such situations it would be better to “translate” their views and the arguments on which they are based, into views and arguments that can be understood and accepted by non-Christians. This means that they will have to latch onto the “thinner” moral values and

6. See for the distinction “thick” and “thin” used with regard to morality and ethics: M Walzer, *Thick and thin: Moral argument at home and abroad* (1994), xi, footnote 1. Walzer utilises the term “thick” to point to a kind of moral argument that is “richly referential, culturally resonant, locked into a locally established symbolic system or network of meanings”. “Thin” is simply the contrasting term.

norms that form part of the moral consensus in society (cf. De Kruijf 1994:178-209). This does not, however, necessarily mean they will in effect promote liberal values and views. The moral consensus in society may not be – and in the case of the South African society certainly is not – that liberal. They should always – on the basis of rational arguments that can be accepted by others – strive to shift the moral consensus in society to be more in accordance with the Christian moral views they profess. In order to do that in an effective way, Christians have to strive for the optimal moral consensus among them. In this respect ecumenical initiatives to formulate a common Christian view on issues of public morality will increasingly become indispensable.

- Although church denominations and Christian ethicists have the prime responsibility with regard to the formulation of moral norms, individual Christians have the prime responsibility to apply moral norms in concrete situations. They are involved in all spheres of life and are in a position, not only to form their own personal ethical opinion on what ought to happen in concrete situations, but also to contribute to collective decision making on what ought to be done in such situations. In order to be able to do that they should be assisted by church denominations and a Christian Ethics of Responsibility to develop the necessary skills in moral deliberation.

5.2 Taking the concrete situation seriously

I restrict myself to four ways in which the concrete situation should be taken into account in the South African society:

- In some situations insistence on strict compliance to the *ideal* morality and the refusal to make compromises and make allowance for adherence to an *optimal* morality can have unintended negative effects. In such situations the insistence on compliance to the ideal morality can even be regarded as irresponsible. The Christian pacifist politicians who refused to accept the use of military force in the Weimar Republic, to whom Weber refers, is an example. Ronald Nicolson points out another example in his book *God in AIDS? A theological inquiry* (1996). He concedes that sexual abstinence outside marriage is the most effective way of preventing the spread of HIV infection. By insisting, however, that even in the context of the combat against HIV/AIDS, only the Christian ideal of sexual abstinence can be accepted as morally responsible sexual behaviour, and by refusing to accept stable sexual relationships outside marriage and the use of condoms during extra-marital sexual intercourse as optimal forms of morally responsible sexual behaviour in certain situations, some churches' contribution to this combat is, in his opinion, counter-productive (Ronaldson 1996:100-152). In other situations – as Sharon Welch points out in her book *A feminine ethic of risk* (revised edition, 2000:13-37) – it is the willingness to compromise and to settle too quickly for a “realistic” option, that can be detrimental and irresponsible. In other words: only the concrete situation will determine whether insistence on the ideal Christian morality or acceptance of an optimal morality is morally the most responsible option.
- Taking the concrete situation seriously means, inter alia, to take the religious and cultural plurality of the South African society into account when propagating one's views on issues of public morality. Huber rightly points out that moral responsibility in such societies entails taking into account whether the implementation of such views in public policy would restrict the freedom of people with different moral beliefs to act according to their conscience (Huber 1990:150-151). Once we accept Huber's view we also have to accept that Christians' personal moral views regarding their own conduct, need not be identical with their moral views on public policy. The reason is that the first can be

based solely on “thick” Christian ethical considerations, while the moral views of people from other religious and cultural groups and the possible restricting effects different policy alternatives can have with regard to their freedom of conscience, have also to be taken into account in the case of the second. As a result it would sometimes be morally irresponsible to directly transfer moral beliefs regarding the personal conduct of Christians to the sphere of public policy. A white South African Christian may, for example, be convinced that it would be morally wrong for Christians to seek abortion where only social indication is at stake. To campaign for legislation on abortion that would legally prohibit abortion even in the direst social circumstances would, however, be to ignore the plight of thousands of absolutely poor black women who are convinced that abortion is the lesser of the evils they have to deal with. This does not exclude the possibility that on certain moral issues and/or in certain circumstances the moral views of Christians regarding their personal conduct and public policy can and should be similar. In the South African society Christians should, for example, not only refrain from racist attitudes and conduct, but should also support legislation that prohibit racist conduct in society. The reason is that racist conduct is not only morally wrong from a “thick” Christian ethical perspective, but also because the harm done to racists in legally restricting their right to act in accordance with their own conscience, does not weigh up to the personal and social harm racist conduct inflicts.

- Nonetheless, to take the concrete situation in the South African seriously, would also mean to take into account that we are living in a society that is not as secularised as some Western countries and in which the constitution does leave some room for religious denominations to exert a public influence. This room for public influence should be explored by a Christian Ethics of Responsibility and should be optimally utilised by church denominations and ecumenical organisations, not only for the sake of Christian witness, but also for the sake of the well being of society.
- In the light of our history of injustice and oppression one only takes the concrete situation in South Africa seriously if one is willing to also take into account the causes of the situation we find ourselves in today. One, of course, only acts morally responsibly if one refrains from screening out certain causes for ideological reasons, and is willing to take all relevant causes into account.

5.3 Taking role responsibilities – besides moral responsibilities – seriously

- A Christian Ethics of Responsibility has to avoid two extremes in this regard. On the one hand it has to avoid the view that moral responsibilities have an absolute priority over against role responsibilities. This view has been the prevalent one for the greatest part of church history. Up till the late Middle Ages, for example, all usury was morally forbidden on account of a Biblical text like Deut. 23,19. The role responsibility of the business person (to make a profit, to pay taxes, etc.) and of the politician (to maintain law and order, to provide a political framework conducive to economic prosperity, etc.) should be recognised as important in its own right. On the other hand, the tendency in our time to completely separate moral and role responsibilities and to reduce role responsibility to functionality should also be avoided and criticised. A Christian Ethics of Responsibility has to emphasise that politicians and business people also have moral responsibilities and to demonstrate that the widespread assumption that acting in a morally right way is not conducive to efficient politics and business is wrong.
- It is the task of a Christian Ethics of Responsibility to determine what the optimal relationship between moral and role responsibilities, between moral and functional values

is. Schweiker is of the opinion that the role of moral and religious values is primarily a limiting one: to prevent the values that are prevalent in a particular life sphere, especially economic values, from playing an imperialistic role in other life spheres (Schweiker 2000:128-139). I am of the opinion that the relationship is more intricate and, may be, more intimate. Moral values can also guide and enrich the implementation of functional values. And moral responsibilities can form part of someone's role responsibilities.

5.4 Taking the consequences of decisions and actions into account

- The realisation that the risks involved with modern technology, especially nuclear and ecological destruction, will not only seriously affect the quality of life of future generations, but could lead to the elimination of human life on earth, has led to the outcry that measures should be taken to control, if not, eliminate these risks. It has also – since the publication of Hans Jonas' book – led to the development of a new concept of prospective responsibility. Responsibility, in the classical sense of the word, looks back into the past and ascribes the responsibility for one or the other negative outcome of the past to a particular person or persons. Prospective responsibility looks forward into the future and ascribes to a particular person or persons, or – more likely – an institution or institutions the responsibility to actively prevent future harm to humans and nature, or realise desirable future conditions by taking the necessary measures in the present. It is an important part of the task of an Ethics of Responsibility, also of a Christian version of it, to work out the implications of such a prospective responsibility for persons, but especially for different types of institutions, including the church.
- There is the tendency to restrict the prospective responsibility of institutions to purely functional risk management. An assessment is, for example, made of possible risks that can escalate the production costs of a company and measures are then taken to prevent the risks and an escalation of production costs. The risks and the cost to humans and nature are often only taken into account if it involves direct financial risks and costs to the company. A Christian Ethics of Responsibility has an extra obligation to insist that present and future consequences of actions taken today should also be assessed from a moral perspective.

6. Conclusion

In this article I have tried to respond to the question: "Does a Christian Ethics of Responsibility provide an adequate theoretical framework for dealing with issues of public morality in South Africa?" In order to answer this question adequately one, first of all, has to make out a case for such an ethics and, secondly, has to demonstrate that such an ethics does deal adequately with issues of public morality in South Africa. I have argued that only by addressing three challenges Weber put to Christians in his initial conceptualisation of an Ethics of Responsibility one can make out a case for a Christian Ethics of Responsibility. In the article I could only address the challenge to deal with the agenda for an Ethics of Responsibility Weber drew up. The two other challenges: to refute the criticism that Christian Ethics is inherently an irresponsible ethics and to demonstrate that, from a theological perspective, the room and positive motivation for developing a Christian Ethics of Responsibility is given, still have to be addressed. An attempt has also been made to illustrate how a Christian Ethics of Responsibility could deal with issues of public morality in South Africa. A full demonstration of the adequacy of a Christian Ethics of Responsibility to deal with the wide spectrum of such issues in the South African society still has to be provided.

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