

The Many and the One:  
Religion, Pluralism, and American History  
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Organized by--  
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Final paper:  
Morality: How Does One Decide What Is  
Morally Right and Morally Wrong?

Submitted by  
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Institutional context: John F. Kennedy Catholic High School is one of nine Catholic high schools in the Archdiocese of Seattle, Washington. As an archdiocesan school, different from the high schools run by religious orders (e.g. Jesuit, Holy Names, Christian Brothers, etc.) in the Seattle Archdiocese, Kennedy is directly accountable to the Catholic Schools Superintendent of the Archdiocese, who is in turn directly accountable to the Archbishop of Seattle. Of the approximately one thousand students at Kennedy, about 70% are Catholic. The remaining 30% belong to a variety of Christian mainline Protestant denominations (Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Episcopalian, etc.) and to religions which are not Christian (Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, Judaism, Islam, Shinto, etc.). We also have a few students who are Eastern Orthodox, as well as students who are evangelicals or Mormons.

Regardless of students' religious affiliation, all students take eight semesters of religion at Kennedy. The first three years are required courses: freshmen take a Catholic Beliefs course (creed, Sacraments, and prayer); sophomores take a Moral Decisions course (a process for making moral decisions and then applying this process to specific moral issues); the Old Testament and New Testament are studied during students' junior year. Seniors choose from among several elective courses for their two semesters: Christian Lifestyles, Community Service, Social Justice, Survey of Christian Art and Music, World Religions, and Public Policy/Honors Social Justice (a college credit course through Seattle University). I have been at Kennedy since 1983, and have taught almost every course in the department at one time or another. I have been the Religion Department Chair for twenty-some years.

When I originally applied for this NEH Institute on "The Many and the One: Religion, Pluralism, and American History," I was planning to do my final paper on this question—does it matter what you believe? This question frequently comes up in my freshman Catholic Beliefs class. Since we study what Catholics believe, I will ask students, "Does it matter whether or not you believe this?" Last spring after the controversial national health care bill passed, I asked, "Would a person's religious beliefs affect how a person might feel about the passage of this health care bill?" Even though my freshmen are only fourteen or fifteen years of age, many of them had very strong opinions in response to my question. My original plan for this final paper was to show that it does, in fact, matter what one believes religiously by looking at the viewpoints of key events/people/movements studied in this Institute. My teaching schedule for the 2010-2011 school year changed in late May. Instead of teaching the freshman Catholic

Beliefs course, I will be teaching the sophomore Moral Decisions course. Therefore, the central question which I will address in this paper is: HOW DO YOU DECIDE WHETHER SOMETHING IS MORALLY RIGHT OR MORALLY WRONG? I will attempt to answer this question from the viewpoints of three important events/people/movements in American history which we have examined in this Institute:

1. The Pueblo Indian revolt of 1680 (Douglas Winiarski)
2. America's religious roots (Sheila Kennedy)
3. Biblical interpretation and the slavery question (Sylvester Johnson)

Final project: Do you believe that national health care is a moral issue? Should the children of illegal immigrants be provided free public education in their native language as well as free healthcare if their parents cannot afford to pay? Do you believe that torture is acceptable in situations of war and national security? This paper looks at the relationship between one's belief system and one's moral code. It assumes that for many (most?) people, the decision about moral rightness or wrongness can be strongly influenced by one's religious orientation or lack thereof. In his seven dimensions of religion, Ninian Smart, "one of the world's foremost scholars of religion...an elder statesman in the world of religious studies,"<sup>1</sup> counts "ethical and legal" (rules about human behavior—often regarded as revealed from the supernatural realm) as a key component to any religious system.<sup>2</sup> Or, as Rachel Wheeler explained in our introductory session on Monday, July 12, the ethical dimension is "applied doctrine." In other words, given what you believe, how should you act?

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<sup>1</sup> Accessed at <http://www.scottlondon.com/interviews/smart.html>

<sup>2</sup> Accessed at <http://www2.kenyon.edu/Depts/Religion/Fac/Suydam/Reln101/Sevendi.htm>

The religious orientation of 78% of Americans is Christian (51% Protestant—26% evangelical Protestants, 18% mainline Protestants, 7% black Protestants; 24% Catholic; and 3% other Christians). As will be shown, people who label themselves Christian can have very different responses from one another to the question—how do you decide if something is morally right or morally wrong? And what about the 17% of Americans who identify themselves as religiously unaffiliated? On what basis will they make moral decisions? Although this paper focuses mainly on the Christian denominations' responses to the moral question, it needs to be noted that the 5% of Americans who fit into the “other” category (Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, etc.) would undoubtedly be influenced by the ethical dictates of the religions to which they belong. The rest of this paper will attempt to show that one's system of beliefs (religious and secular) can greatly influence one's response to the question—how do you decide whether something is morally right or morally wrong?

The first important event/people/movement in American history that I will use to show that one's religious beliefs can affect one's sense of morality are found in Henry Warner Bowden's article, “Spanish Missions, Cultural Conflict, and the Pueblo Revolt of 1680.” Bowden contrasts the belief systems of the Pueblo Indians of the mid-1600's with the belief system of their Spanish conquerors.<sup>3</sup> Bowden maintains that “religion was a factor at the core of each (Pueblo Indians and Spanish missionaries) way of life, and if we can understand what contrasted at the center, we will be in a better position to interpret

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<sup>3</sup> Bowden, Henry Warner. “Spanish Missions, Cultural Conflict, and the Pueblo Revolt of 1680.” *What Caused the Pueblo Revolt of 1680?* 1990, 21-37.

conflicts in the wider circles of cultural interaction, even to the point of seeing reasons for war.”<sup>4</sup> The Spanish missionaries believed that

“the natives were barbarians who lacked any civilized notion of law...Indian settlements were not viewed as properly organized communities; their forms of body covering were not considered true clothing; their sexual practices were judged to be disgracefully unregulated. So from the outset the friars (Spanish missionaries) set themselves the goal of stamping out every particle of native religion and substituting Catholic doctrines and practices, using force if necessary.”<sup>5</sup>

The Spanish missionaries’ response to the question, “how do you decide whether something is morally right or wrong” in their treatment of the Pueblo Indians was based on this—whatever it takes to convert these “heathens” is morally acceptable—  
“Traditional (Pueblo) leaders who persisted in continuing the old rituals were arrested...and whipped or executed as a menace to this life and an obstacle to the next.”<sup>6</sup>

Pueblo morality was based on the Pueblo worldview: the underworld rather than heaven as the source of life, the sacredness of the earth, the sense of sacred space, and the importance of the well-being of the group rather than that of the individual. “The Indians’ central (moral) obligation was to participate in and to perpetuate those rites which insured a well-ordered life for the pueblo and its circle of physical needs.”<sup>7</sup> By contrast, the Spanish ethical dictates came from biblical and theological traditions that came from the Catholic Church and that applied to all cultures, a view which justified for

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<sup>4</sup> Bowden, 26.

<sup>5</sup> Bowden, 27.

<sup>6</sup> Bowden, 27-28.

<sup>7</sup> Bowden, 30.

them their treatment of the Pueblos which most twentieth century Christians would condemn as immoral.

Some three hundred years after the Pueblo revolt, Roman Catholic Bishop Donald Pelotte of Gallup, New Mexico, told the Special Assembly for America of the Synod of Bishops,

“We thank God that so many indigenous people today are baptized into the life of the Trinity...but vast numbers were robbed of their cultural identity...as pastors, we must make it clear that we are sorry for past mistakes and actively seek reconciliation...As a church committed to a ‘preferential option for the poor and vulnerable,’ we recognize that Native Americans are often the most poor and vulnerable in our midst... We must support the efforts of indigenous peoples to have justice regarding treaties, land and water rights, education, housing, health care, social services, training and jobs, and the use of sacred lands.”<sup>8</sup>

The second important event/people/movement in American history which we have examined in this Institute that I will use to examine the question-- How does one decide what is morally right and morally wrong-- comes from Sheila Kennedy’s book, *God and Country: America in Red and Blue*.<sup>9</sup> Dr. Kennedy concludes chapter 3 of her book with this: “It is impossible to understand contemporary American policy debates without recognizing the conflicting Puritan and Enlightenment worldviews that shaped our earliest history, and to important and varying degrees, continue to shape our

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<sup>8</sup> Pelotte, Bishop Donald. “The Gospel and the Fate of Indigenous Peoples.” *Origins: CNS Documentary Ser vice*. December 18, 1997, 445-447.

<sup>9</sup> Kennedy, Sheila. *God and Country: America in Red and Blue* (Baylor University Press, 2007), chapter 3.

contemporary policy debates.”<sup>10</sup> A central struggle by the time of the American revolution was the meaning of “human liberty”—the Puritan based view claimed that human liberty is the “freedom to do the right thing,” and the Enlightenment shaped view maintained that human liberty is the “right to act upon the basis of one’s individual conscience, free of the interference of government”...as long as one does not harm one’s neighbor.<sup>11</sup> One representative of this Enlightenment view of human liberty is Founding Father, deist Thomas Paine. “He was staunchly anti-slavery, and he was one of the first to advocate a world peace organization and social security for the poor and elderly.”<sup>12</sup> His views were considered radical at the time, and illustrate the right to act upon the basis of one’s individual conscience. Certainly, many people see slavery, world peace/war, and social security for the poor and elderly to be moral issues.

In response to the debate over whether the United States is a “Christian nation,” Sheila Kennedy quotes Richard Holloway: “Christianity is not and never has been a single thing.”<sup>13</sup> Within Protestantism alone, she distinguishes between two dominant general categories: mainline and evangelical. Each of these general categories approaches public policy and moral issues from a specific worldview. Kennedy explains with this quote:

“Mainline denominations have typically emphasized an accommodating stance toward modernity, a proactive view on issues of social and economic justice, and pluralism in their tolerance of varied individual beliefs. Evangelical denominations have typically sought more separation from the broader culture,

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<sup>10</sup> Kennedy, chapter 3, p.22 of handout.

<sup>11</sup> Kennedy, chapter 3, p. 10 of handout.

<sup>12</sup> Accessed at <http://www.ushistory.org/paine>

<sup>13</sup> Kennedy, chapter 2, p. 1 of handout.

emphasized missionary activity and individual conversion, and taught strict adherence to particular religious doctrines.”<sup>14</sup>

According to Kennedy, when evangelical clergy were asked to describe their “social gospel” in a 2003 study, they “believed capitalism to be the only economic system compatible with Christianity..., that religious values were under attack, and that the government has an obligation to protect the nation’s religious heritage.” By contrast, mainline clergy described their “social gospel” in this way: “support for issues of social justice—amelioration of economic inequities and poverty, and support for human rights.”<sup>15</sup> An effect of the Enlightenment, asserts Kennedy, was a new way of conceiving reality based on science and reason and which required the ability to live with a certain level of uncertainty and ambiguity. In moral matters, uncertainty and ambiguity are not acceptable states for people whose belief systems require clarity about moral rightness and wrongness. As an added point, since I am Roman Catholic, the Enlightenment saw Protestantism placing greater emphasis on the individual and the present, differing from the Catholic belief of the time (and, I believe, continuing into the present) that “morality is nurtured collectively, with the family and within the church.”<sup>16</sup>

The third important event/people/movement in American history which we have examined in this Institute that I will use to examine the question-- How does one decide what is morally right and morally wrong—is the use of the Christian Bible to determine morality. Specifically, I will look at Reverend Philip Schaff’s article on “Slavery and the

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<sup>14</sup> Steensland, Park, Regnerus, Robinson, Wilcox and Woodbury, 2000: 293-294 as quoted by Sheila Kennedy, chapter 2, pp. 1-2 of handout.

<sup>15</sup> Kennedy, chapter 2, p. 2 of handout.

<sup>16</sup> Kennedy, chapter 3, p. 8 of handout.

Bible,”<sup>17</sup> as well as differing approaches to biblical interpretation and the implications for moral reasoning. The Bible is the holy book, the Scriptures, for all Christianity, and considered to be the revealed word of God, “the infallible source and supreme rule in matters of religion and morals.”<sup>18</sup> Yet, as Colin Kidd points out in the Prologue to his book, *Forging of Races: Race and Scripture in the Protestant Atlantic World, 1600-2000*, “interpretations of the Bible and certain branches of the discipline of theology have played an influential role in shaping racial attitudes over the past four centuries.”<sup>19</sup>

Or, as Edwin Gaustad says in *The Religious History of America*:

“Like a rag doll, the Bible was tossed back and forth, now quoted to support slavery, now to attack it. The Christian religion was now the slaves’ dearest friend, now their betrayer and deceiver. The church could be a station in the underground railroad, helping to spirit away runaway slaves to freedom, or the church could be the gathering place from which to send out patrols to recapture slaves or to break up their religious meetings. Both sides, as Abraham Lincoln later and sorrowfully observed, ‘read the same Bible, and pray to the same God.’”<sup>20</sup>

How can the Christian holy book condone slavery? Or does it? Herb Vander Lugt of

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<sup>17</sup> Schaff, Rev. Philip. “Slavery and the Bible—A Tract for the Times.” 1861.

<sup>18</sup> Schaff, p. 3 of handout.

<sup>19</sup> Kidd, Colin. “Prologue: Race in the Eye of the Beholder,” *Forging of Races: Race and Scripture in the Protestant Atlantic World, 1600-2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 1 of handout.

<sup>20</sup> Gaustad, Edwin and Leigh Schmidt. *The Religious History of America* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2002), 191.

RBC Ministries <sup>21</sup> explains it in this way: Some people believe the Bible justifies slavery. They cite passages like, "Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear" (Eph. 6:5). They also point out that church leaders during the middle 1800s used the Bible to defend slavery. How can we trust a book that was used to justify the terrible evil of buying, breeding, and selling humans like animals? <sup>22</sup> Reverend Schaff clarifies the misinterpreted Biblical support for slavery in this way:

“It (the Bible) nowhere establishes or abolishes the institution of slavery...it neither sanctions nor condemns it; it never meddles with its political and financial aspects and leaves the system as to its policy and profitableness to the secular rulers. But it recognizes, tolerates and ameliorates it as an existing and then universally established fact; it treats it under its moral bearings and enjoins the duties and responsibilities of masters and servants; it corrects its abuses, cures the root of evil and provides the only rational and practical remedy for its ultimate extinction...”<sup>23</sup>

Sylvester Johnson lends support to this idea when he says that all Scripture writers lived in patriarchal slave-based societies. Herb Vander Lugt suggests that the reason Jesus did not speak against slavery was because his focus was to reveal the Father and to provide eternal salvation, not to be a social reformer.

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<sup>21</sup> RBC Ministries was founded in Michigan in 1938 with the mission “to make the life-changing wisdom of the Bible understandable and accessible to all.” The ministry has international offices in 20 countries. Their signature publication is the daily devotional called “Our Daily Bread” which is translated into 30 languages.

<sup>22</sup> Accessed at <http://www.livingvinechurch.org/ds/q1109/q1109.html>

<sup>23</sup> Schaff, 20.

I have seen many Christians selectively pick out Scripture passages to support their moral views. One of the most common examples is 1 Cor. 6:9-10, "Or do you not know that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor the covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, shall inherit the kingdom of God." Some people use this passage to support the immorality of homosexuality; I have not often heard it used to support the immorality of drunkenness or envy. My point here is that how one interprets the Bible affects one's answer to moral questions. Because they are contextualists, Catholics ask this question when reading the Bible—"What is the religious or moral truth contained in this passage?" Since it can be difficult for the non-biblical scholar to discern that intended meaning without research, it is helpful to have a Bible commentary to see what Biblical scholars have to say.

In this paper I have tried to show that how one answers the question—how does one decide what is morally right and morally wrong—can be greatly affected by a person's belief system (religious or secular). I have used three examples from the events/people/movements we have looked at over the past three weeks: the Pueblo Indian revolt of 1680, America's religious roots (the conflicting Puritan and Enlightenment worldviews), and the differing ways that Christians read/interpret the Bible to seek moral guidance. How will I use what I have learned in my classroom this year? In my Moral Decisions classes, students will understand that people who think about important moral decisions do so from their own worldview and set of values. As an educator, particularly as an educator in a Catholic high school, I believe it is important to help students become clearer about their developing worldviews and values. Because I

teach in a Catholic school, students will be knowledgeable about the Catholic perspective on the various specific moral issues we will be studying. The Catholic Church cautions against moral relativism—

“In a nutshell, relativism (or moral relativism-they're often used interchangeably), is the idea that moral principles are based on your culture (such as where and when you live, your education, your age, and your level of wealth) and therefore subject to individual choice. Taken to an extreme, a moral relativist believes there are no rules governing right and wrong. So, for example, when certain sectors of African society permit polygamy, some thinkers say that practice is acceptable because it arises from that particular culture-making it moral in "relative" circumstances.<sup>24</sup>

Moral relativism is not my goal; my goal is that students understand that thoughtful people make important moral decisions based on their religious beliefs, their worldviews and their values which modify and develop with maturity and experiences. I want them to be able to identify and articulate where they are as sophomores in their life journeys.

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<sup>24</sup>Accessed at <http://www.beliefnet.com/Faiths/Christianity/Catholic/2005/04/What-Is-Relativism.aspx>