

Picking Fruit from Trees without Roots

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A critical review from a Christian perspective of **Cornerstone Values: A Values Education Curriculum**, by John Heenan. Invercargill: New Zealand Foundation for Values Education, 1996.¹

In recent years there has been considerable debate, in New Zealand as much as elsewhere, about teaching “values” in schools, and re-affirming “values” in public and private life generally. The decline in standards of public and private morality in New Zealand, paralleled by a similar decline overseas, has produced calls for the re-introduction of the teaching of values in public schools. A speech on this subject by a former Prime Minister of New Zealand (Mrs Jenny Shipley) created some controversy.

Part of this debate has centred around such specific programmes for teaching “values.” There are a variety of such programmes being promoted in various countries. These programmes typically use the concept of a core set of “values” which are taken to be common amongst a number (or even all) religions or moral traditions, and as such, can be taught to all students uniformly. Each student simply places such core “values” within the context of their own tradition. For instance, in Albuquerque, USA, the schools have introduced the “Character Counts” programme, which teaches a set of basic values: trustworthiness, respect, caring, fairness, responsibility and citizenship.

¹ This article originally appeared in print in *Stimulus* 6 (November 1998) 4:32-39, and was subsequently published with only minor additions and alterations, principally in the introduction to place it within a wider context, in: **Pointing the Way: Directions for Christian Education in a New Millennium**. Edited by Jill Ireland, Richard Edlin and Ken Dickens. Blacktown, NSW (Australia): National Institute for Christian Education, 2004, pp. 227-246.

One such programme, which has received considerable attention in New Zealand, and in which many schools have reportedly shown interest, is the “Cornerstone Values Curriculum,”² produced by Invercargill school teacher John Heenan. This “Cornerstone Values Curriculum” is, however, not without its problems. This article explores some of those problems and demonstrates the fatal flaw in the approach taken to teaching “values.” These problems affect other programmes that take similar approaches, and so a detailed analysis of this one programme provides some keys to understanding the problems that to a greater or lesser extent affect all similar approaches.

In this curriculum, Heenan outlines an approach to teaching values which he claims will have wide acceptability because it teaches values which are common to all cultures, countries and religions.³ He draws on C S Lewis’ view of “the Tao, or doctrine of objective value, the belief that certain attitudes are really true and others are really false to the kind of thing the universe is and the kind of thing we are,” which Lewis expounded in his book **The Abolition of Man**.⁴ Heenan specifies these objective values as: “honesty and truthfulness, kindness, consideration and concern for others, compassion, obedience, responsibility, respect, duty.”⁵ He asserts that there is an external measure of right and wrong, which is built into the structure of the universe, and reflected in every culture and religion in the basic core values which are common to them all, or at least, are found throughout all religions, even if not all of them are found in each and every one. This then provides us with a core of universal moral precepts which can be taught acceptably to everyone.

Heenan places the problem in the context of two stark alternatives:

there are core moral precepts,

or

² For more information see the website for this programme at <http://cornerstonevalues.org/>. Other relevant internet sites can be found at the “Character Education” section of **Yahoo**.

³ See also the more recent book, **Building Character through Cornerstone Values**, also by John Heenan, where he explains his approach further. Details available on his website as noted above.

⁴ C S Lewis. **The Abolition of Man**. London: Geoffrey Bles, 1947. It is unfortunate that Heenan has chosen this particular book by Lewis as the basis of his programme, as it is one of the first that Lewis wrote after his conversion, and it is seriously flawed in its approach. While some of the problems present in this book persist into his later works, these latter books also demonstrate a vastly improved sensitivity to Christian teaching and the content of Scripture as a result of Lewis’ growing spiritual maturity.

⁵ Heenan, **Cornerstone Values Curriculum**, p. 15.

there are no core moral precepts.

He says: “All values arise from one or other of these two positions. They represent two opposite views about the nature of morality.” Heenan asserts that there are indeed core moral precepts, a position that he describes as the “traditional understanding.” He states that “The philosophical basis of the **Cornerstone Values Curriculum** is the understanding that there is a core of universal moral values precepts,”⁶ and it is these precepts which he has listed. Thus he rejects the “moral relativism” which he says has in recent decades “become the overriding concern of values education that programmes should not favour any particular religious or philosophical point of view. Programmes and approaches have been developed which present as being neutral and without religious or moralistic bias.” Heenan criticises this view as betraying not a neutral basis but a bias for moral and cultural relativism, a view arising out of “the doctrine of situation ethics.”⁷ This relativism rejects the idea of “an objective external measure of right and wrong,” and also rejects judgementalism, asserting that what is right for one may be wrong for another, all values merely personal and having no absolute status, being dependent on time, place and circumstance. Values thus are claimed to vary with the opinions of particular individuals and groups.

Heenan correctly points out that a school’s approach to values will permeate all aspects of the curriculum, the school’s governance, management, administration and relationships. It will shape the teaching and learning methodology and the selection of resources. However, it is not so apparent that there are merely two choices. And this is where Heenan’s approach to values begins to break down, as he expresses the conflict between relativism and an “absolute” standard for values, in terms of the “contemporary” versus the “traditional.” The latter he calls “a centuries old consensus,” while the relativism he attacks as having arisen in “recent decades,” it being “the current prevailing ideology.” Thus before proceeding to expound his conception of values, Heenan has already placed the conflict not primarily in terms of competing philosophies, but of competing historical views: the older, traditional one, and the modern, contemporary one. But to

⁶ Heenan, **Cornerstone Values Curriculum**, p. 8.

⁷ Heenan. **Cornerstone Values Curriculum**, p. 9.

describe values in this way cannot escape from a certain nostalgia for the past, a consideration that things were better in earlier times, a traditionalism that has its own inherent problems.

This is not to deny that there were indeed lower rates of crime, of illegitimate births, of suicide and divorce in earlier decades. It is not to deny that there have indeed been declining standards of personal and public morality, correlated with the teaching of moral relativism and situational ethics. However, in order to understand the reasons for the popularity of moral relativism today, we need to reflect on the inadequacies of “traditional” ethics, and the reasons for their loss of credibility. And to do that, we need to examine what we mean by ethics in the first place.

The idea of “moral absolutes”

The idea that there are “moral absolutes” is by no means unproblematic. What do we mean by absolute? Simply that something is “absolved” or removed from a particular situation. It is unchanging, unalterable, permanently valid or true, independently of whether or not it is actually held or understood or believed to be thus valid and true. This conception of “absolutes” is derived largely from a rationalistic philosophy, which posits the existence of such “absolutes” in a realm of rationality that is independent of and removed from the world of phenomena around us. They are transcendent and detached; governing the world but not influenced by it. They are unchanging, unalterable, static and fixed. Their status is problematic, because of their basis in rationalism, that is, the appeal to Reason as the ultimate authority. This very concept of Reason has withered and collapsed in the attack on the modern project by post-modernism, and not only for that reason, but also because Christian thinkers have exposed the very humanistic basis of such appeals to Reason,⁸ appeals which amount to the establishment of a counterfeit, alternative religion to Christianity.⁹

⁸ See for example Roy A Clouser. **The myth of religious neutrality**. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991. J Richard Middleton & Brian J Walsh. **Truth is stranger than it used to be: Biblical faith in a postmodern age**. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1995. Lesslie Newbigin. **Foolishness to the Greeks**. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986.

⁹ Here I am arguing that secularism is itself a religion, a secular religion, and not an absence of or repudiation of religion. To refer to a secular religion is something of an oxymoron for many people, but that is simply because they are not willing to accept that secularism is not of a different order to religious

As Christians we cannot in any way appeal to “Reason” as the basis for our moral or ethical beliefs, because that is the ultimate source of the relativism in ethics that Heenan is so concerned about. What are the standards by which we can judge which ethical system is the most reasonable or rational? Only reason itself, that is, standards which have themselves been established by the use of Reason. However, we have proved ourselves to be capable of producing rational arguments for any ethical system we care to adopt. So we cannot appeal to reason as a guide in determining which ethical system is the right one. It has been claimed by Heenan (and others) that behind all ethical beliefs are common denominators which are found in each and every culture and religion. But the idea that all religions, all cultures, all ethical systems, do in fact share a set of core moral beliefs remains to be proven. All the evidence in fact points in the opposite direction: there are no core moral beliefs, no shared ethical convictions, that are all found in all religions. Nor can we compile a core set of beliefs by taking some from each religion, if we wish to maintain that they are indeed core ethical beliefs. Should they not in that case all be found in every religion? If not, in what sense are they truly core beliefs, and on what basis can we assert that this selection should be given the status of core beliefs over against any other similarly compiled, but different, selection? But how can we argue for the validity of the selection we have made without already having some prior basis on which we have made that selection? In other words, behind our selection of the “core moral beliefs” will lie a presupposition as to what constitutes a “core moral belief,” and thus it is this presupposition that we are actually arguing for, not the selection we have made.

Moral beliefs do not exist as independent, “absolute,” universal beliefs, but are inherent in, intrinsically part of, and inseparable from the religion in which they are found, the religious convictions on which they are based and which alone can give them meaning and validity. That is, moral beliefs are not derived from an independent, separate code of ethics which is adopted in whole or in part by each religion, but each religion generates its own unique, independent, set of ethical convictions that are necessarily rooted in that religion and only ever in that religion. As

faith, it is a particular expression of religious faith, a faith in something other than traditional deities, but a faith in a deity nevertheless (usually Reason).

Christians, we confess that we are given a revelation from God that stands over against our appeals to "Reason," or to anything else, a revelation that challenges our own attempts to decide for ourselves, on whatever basis at all, how we should live. Other religions similarly have their own ethical beliefs which likewise have their own specific authorisation from within that religion's belief system.

Thus, each particular religion (including secular religion) has its own authentic, unique and distinctive set of ethical beliefs. These are all based in their particular perspectives on the nature of the world we live in, the nature of human beings, the relationship these have with the gods that are worshipped, and how they should be worshipped. They are characterised by the different perceptions and beliefs of each religion concerning the purpose, meaning and destiny of human life, the penalties and rewards consequent on our response to those ethical demands, and how and when those penalties and rewards are allocated and by whom or what. They are not common, universal, independent ethical beliefs that each religion shares, but are specific to each religion and have the character and perspective of that religion.

The claim that there is a universal moral code that stands apart from and independently of each and every religion, that each of them share to a greater or lesser extent, does not arise from within those religions, but rather from Enlightenment rationalism. This rationalist project tried to discover what was universally true: in other words, the universal, single, rationally grounded truth that lay behind the irrational and diverse external manifestations of the various religions, and was partially and somewhat confusedly incorporated into each religion. True religion lay not in any one of these, but in the Rational beliefs of the philosophers who were convinced they were able to get to the heart of the matter. Thus the specific character of Christianity or Judaism or Islam or Buddhism could be discarded after having discerned the elements of rational truth they each contained that lay behind and independently of all of them. That is, in the view of rationalistic philosophy, these religions themselves were not the ultimate convictions that their adherents mistakenly thought they were.

This was not to establish the truth of each religion, it was to establish an alternative religion, one

that itself claimed to be the ultimate ground of all belief: a religion of Human Reason alone. It is this Reason that is the transcendent, universal truth, not what any religion teaches. The view that each religion, whatever it may be, simply accesses a common, independently grounded, set of ethical beliefs that are then incorporated into that religion, is not intrinsic to those religions, but is itself a particular view of the nature of religion and ethics grounded in its own beliefs. It is an alternative, competing religious perspective that seeks to co-opt and re-present other religions on its own basis, and also relativises them to its own perspective. That is, the so-called core ethical beliefs which Heenan has identified are not necessarily those which each religion posits as its own “core ethical beliefs,” but which Heenan has posited as the core ethical beliefs on the basis of his own perspective. This is to impose on these religions an alien and external criteria established by someone else. It is a form of ethical imperialism. In addition, it relativises the other ethical beliefs in each religion, by claiming that these “core” beliefs are the important ones, and any other ethical beliefs a religion holds are thereby less important, not only for those outside that religion but also for those inside it. And to make that claim is to do violence to the authenticity and integrity of the beliefs of others: it is, among other things, to claim to understand these religions better than their own adherents.

Heenan grounds his views in a belief in Natural Law, namely, that there is a universal, objective, external set of moral precepts which is inherent in the order of reality, and which can be accessed by all rational people and articulated in a rational way. This approach is drawn from C S Lewis, who argues that there is a Natural Law, which is expressed in all ethical codes somehow or other, in fuller or restricted form, but all alike drawing from the one original source. Therefore there can never be a totally new moral code, but only a reconfiguration of existing moral codes. Christianity was not the source of our moral code, but instead presupposed it. It is an expression, a re-affirmation of Natural Law, not a new set of moral injunctions.¹⁰ Lewis runs the real danger of positing Christian faith as the answer for our sense of guilt which comes from violating the natural law: offence against God himself is obscured, even though God is seen as the giver of the natural

¹⁰ C S Lewis. “On Ethics.” In: **Christian Reflections**. London: Geoffrey Bles, 1967, p. 55. According to the Editor, this paper antedated **The Abolition of Man** by a year or so. (See p. 47, n. 1). See also **The problem of pain**. London: Geoffrey Bles, 1940, p. 27.

law.¹¹ I do not share his views, not because I do not believe that the basis of human ethical beliefs is to be found within humankind, but because I do not believe that the external, universal, permanently-binding ethical code for human beings is of that character that Lewis describes.

Rather, we Christians believe that ethical behaviour is established by God, proclaimed to human beings by God, and able to be recognised not by reason but only by faith. That is, we hold to our ethical beliefs as Christians not because they are reasonable or rational, but because they are given to us by God who loves us and cares for us, and who desires us to live in ways which are pleasing to him and best for ourselves. Because there is no code of ethical beliefs which is isolated from, independent from, not grounded in a particular religious conviction, the claim that everyone shares a code of ethics which is absolute, rational in character, universally valid, and permanently binding, is not a claim that is shared by Christians, but a claim for an alternative, competing, code of ethics which is other than and incompatible with that of Christianity.

I say this because there is nothing in the Scriptures which would lead me to expect that God has given such a code of ethical belief that can stand on its own, independently of his call to all humankind to repent of their sin and place their trust in him for forgiveness and new life. God does not have first-class and second-class believers. We either trust in him completely, following his way of life and his ethical demands, or we choose to go our own way. We cannot separate out a code of ethics from the remainder of his revelation in Scripture, adopt that for ourselves, and ignore or reject the rest. And to teach that we can indeed do so is to violate the very fabric of Christian faith. It is to assert that we can live a life pleasing to God without the forgiveness and renewal in Christ that God himself has established as the only way to please him. It is to continue to assert that we can please God in a way other than the way he has himself declared is the only way to please him. And that is the essence of sin; that is the essence of moral relativism; to assert our own moral standards in contrast to those which God has provided for us.

In order to teach ethics, we must begin first of all with a clear understanding of the basis and authority from which we are working. And for Christians, that can only be the teaching of

¹¹ C S Lewis. **The problem of pain**, p. 11.

Scripture. As a Christian, then, I would work with no other basis than what Scripture gives for ethical teaching. We are not teaching generic, universally-recognised moral truths, but the standards for life which is lived in obedience to Christ, shaped and directed by his teaching to us as to how we should live. We are explicitly teaching others to follow Christ and his way of life. We are calling them to turn from their own self-centred, self-directed lives and to acknowledge the Lordship of Christ. There is a long and noble tradition of Christian ethical teaching which we can draw on, not just so as to repeat the views of the past in a manner reminiscent of Heenan's traditionalism, but in recognition that God has been at work in times past, in other people, places and situations, and to draw on the legacy of their Christian thought in developing the ethical understanding we need for our time.

How then should we teach ethics?

Is it then possible for Christians to teach ethical standards to others? Yes, but not in a way which is divorced from Christian faith. We cannot and should not presume to teach non-believers that they can and should be honest, trustworthy, considerate, compassionate, and so on, as if these virtues can and do stand on their own without faith in Christ. We can teach people honesty, trust, consideration, and so on, only as the way of life in Christ, a way of obedience to God, a way arising out of repentance and faith. Short of that, we are not teaching ethics at all, but a set of ethical beliefs isolated from the perspective, the context, the convictions which provide their rationale, their purpose, their basis for acceptance as a valid and true set of ethics. Thus we end up precisely in the situation that Heenan is in fact trying to fight against. Why is it that traditional ethical beliefs have been abandoned and rejected? Not because they have not been found to be true, but because, having been divorced from authentic Christian faith, they no longer have any basis on which it can be asserted that they are true. In other words, when we ask of someone that they comply with a particular ethical belief, and they ask why they should, we have no answer to give and hence no compelling reason why anyone should follow that belief. Traditional ethical beliefs have been abandoned by society solely because having been cut off at the root, the plant has withered and died, and thus can no longer bear fruit.

God has given us a covenant, a commitment of God himself to us, and a call to commit ourselves to him. In that context, and on that basis, alone, can we follow the ethical beliefs that are inherent in and inseparable from that covenant relationship. For Heenan to attempt to teach any such “ethical belief” derived from, but independent of, Christian faith, is incoherent and inauthentic. Christianity does not contain an independent, decontextualised collection of ethical beliefs that can be followed apart from faith in Christ, and to extract moral principles or beliefs from Christian teaching, to follow them independently of a commitment to Christ, is not authentic Christianity at all. To abstract moral beliefs from any religion and present them in isolation is to denature them, to distort them, by removing them from the context in which alone they have their true meaning and significance. Not only that, we distort and falsify ethical beliefs by presenting them in isolation alongside other beliefs similarly extracted from other religions, taking them out of their context which alone enables us to discover their true meaning, and then placing them alongside excerpts from the sacred texts of other religions, philosophies, and cultures.

Not only does such a process imply that these systems of ethical beliefs are all ultimately the same (which they are not), and that those who adhere to other religions and philosophies wish to live in the same way as Christians (which they do not), but that it does not matter where we find our moral guidance, for ultimately we will end up with the same ethical beliefs (which we do not)! Thus Heenan, an opponent of cultural and ethical relativism, resorts in the end to a form of ethical relativism himself, which is different from that of the true moral relativists only in that he considers there to be an absolute, universal, moral code which all religions and philosophies have drawn on and incorporated into their systems. This simply indicates that these religious systems are superfluous and irrelevant to moral teaching, since that can be attained merely by examining the “Natural Law” which he considers to be the true, transcendent, universal basis for ethics. He has relativised all religions with respect to his preferred, unavoidably religious alternative, that of the belief in a rational, universal moral code that is the true essence of all religions. What then of the remaining beliefs of those religions? How can they be important or relevant if what we have focused on is the universal moral code they all supposedly contain, and ignore the “superficial” trappings that distinguishes one religion from another? What Heenan is suggesting is in fact the very religious neutrality he condemns at the opening of his book, because it is an implicit claim to

stand apart from and independently of any religious commitment, transcending them all, so as to see what they really have in common. In order to do this he does not treat these religions with respect, but undermines them by relativising them to his own, transcendent perspective. Such relativism can only lead to further breakdown in society, because it undermines and destroys the only possible path away from destruction: to recognise that we are, in fact, all inescapably committed to various religious perspectives that guide and shape us in everyday life.

Why then have any religious teachings at all, why not simply teach the “Natural Law” as such? I suspect because if his ethical programme was put into those stark terms, it would not gain any adherents, because then the question which Heenan carefully avoids would become inescapable: who is to determine what the “Natural Law” says? And on what basis? On what or whose authority? It would be apparent then that his views are not compatible with Christianity, or with any other religion, save perhaps that of secular humanist religion, because the only ground to which Heenan is able to appeal, based on what he has said in his curriculum, is Reason. Thus in his very effort to defeat humanistic relativism, Heenan simply shows himself to be more deeply influenced by that humanism than he may care to admit. Such humanism is service of the god of Reason, the idol constructed by sinful human imaginations which seek the source of meaning, purpose and direction for life within the powers and products of human thought alone. Each of these religions, including secular religion, has its own beliefs about the gods we are to worship, its own perspective on the nature of the world we live in, its own convictions as to what it is to be human, and what purpose and meaning we have for life, its own understandings of what we need to enable us to escape from the problems that afflict us, and its own views as to where we will find that solution. Thus to place ethical teachings from various religions alongside each other is to view their understandings and beliefs concerning gods, the world, sin and evil, salvation and the future, as if they are ultimately all providing us with the same answers to human questions. This is not the case at all, and we not only falsify Christianity, we also falsify and distort all the other religions if we claim they are ultimately the same at root, seeking the same thing, taking equal approaches to saving us from what has gone wrong in the world.

Each religion has its own perspective which its adherents certainly do not see as basically the

same as those of others. It is only a particular school of modern, liberal religion which has developed out of and away from Christianity, that would have us believe that to be the case. To attempt to promote the view that all religions are ultimately the same, that at root they all share in the “Natural Law,” and that we can use their teachings equally and indiscriminately, is not to have us accept the validity and truth of all religions, but to attempt to convert us to a new, secularised religion, that has abandoned its commitment to Christ and seeks instead to draw us into a generic, directionless religion with an unknown and unknowable god of its own devising. It is not an acceptance of all perspectives, but an alternative perspective that claims for itself the only truly transcendent understanding: the view that at root all religions are the same. That is not a view held by the authentic followers of any of the religions they claim are the same: it is the view of the adherents of this new religion that seeks to convert us all. For in the end Heenan cannot avoid the fact that his set of “core ethical beliefs” is not given to us in a revelation from God, but is rationally deduced by human beings from what they see in the world around them. He has compiled his set of ethical beliefs himself; he must now convert others to his point of view.

The problem of ethics in a pluralistic society is that there is no common basis from which we can argue for any particular set of ethical beliefs. There is, contrary to Heenan’s assertion, no set of core values which we all share, that stand on their own, that can be defended independently of a religious conviction about the nature of human beings, their responsibilities to one another and to God, and the nature of ethics. And to teach a common ethical perspective in a pluralistic society requires, contrary to his assertion, denial of the fundamental differences that are present among us. Heenan states that his curriculum has a number of essential characteristics, one of which is “that the mark of a truly pluralist and democratic society is that the philosophies that underlie societal and individual behaviour are open to contention.”¹² But the conflict arises from his attempt to deny that pluralist character of society by developing a core curriculum of ethical beliefs that we can all share, independently of our individual differences and diversity of religions. That is to persist in pursuing the Enlightenment project of discovering the transcendent, rational truth that underlies all our diverse convictions; that which we really have in common.

¹²

Heenan, *Cornerstone Values Curriculum*, p. 16.

Heenan requires that we accept that there is a “certain core of values principles” as the basis from which to evaluate actions and behaviour, as a basis from which to decide how best to act. But on what basis can Heenan require us to accept that there is such a set of core values, other than his commitment to rationalism in which such a view is grounded? Is he not then requiring those of other commitments to abandon their particular views in order to participate in the common ethical approach with those who share Heenan’s religious convictions in this matter? That is the essence of the Enlightenment project: if we would all just abandon our own individual convictions and accept the universal truth of Reason, all our disputes would be at an end. In other words, if you all abandon your false, irrational beliefs and convert to my rational, true beliefs, then we can live together in peace. The Enlightenment was not the abandonment of religion, it was the attempt to supplant Christian (and other) religion with a new religion of Reason. It failed then for the same reason it will fail now: because it will not accept that it is a competing, alternative religion, which requires others to forsake their convictions and accept another religion altogether. This people will not do; they do not convert easily.

Another contradiction inherent in Heenan’s approach is that he has argued against moral relativism because it is entirely self-centred, oriented towards what will be the best outcome for each individual. “Do what you think best, do what will benefit you the most.” But in the end, Heenan is able to provide no better justification for his approach to moral standards than corporate self-interest, that is, what is best for society as a whole. In contrast to his espousal of pluralism, he asserts that the role of the teacher is to “support the existence of core value precepts as realities necessary to a viable society and fulfilment of self.” Where in all this can there possibly be any recognition that the essence of Christian ethics is not “a viable society and fulfilment of self,” but obedience to God? Our purpose in education is not making moral people, but disciples of Christ, serving him in everything that they do, and our ethical beliefs are shaped and governed by that purpose to which we commit ourselves in faith. In other words, our ethical beliefs do not serve the purposes of society, but the purposes of God, and that is the over-riding criterion for Christian ethics, a criterion which has no place in Heenan’s scheme.

The law of consequences

Heenan explains his moral decision-making strategy in terms of “cause and effect.” This is what he calls the “law of consequences,” that is, any particular action may have a number of different consequences (effects) which are caused by the initial action. He outlines a variety of different outcomes that may result from an action:

- the immediate consequences may be misleading
- the immediate consequence may have less impact than the long term consequences
- there may be a domino effect in which a chain of consequences is set in place
- those affected by the consequences may not have been involved in the initial event
- the consequences may sometimes be irreversible
- the consequences may sometimes have greater impact than causal event
- had the consequences been known, the causal decision, action or attitude, would have been different.

As a result of these “consequences,” Heenan suggests a three-step decision-making process.¹³ These three steps are: 1) consideration of all possible alternatives, 2) realistic examination of the possible consequences of the alternatives, 3) willingness to accept responsibility for the consequences of the decision made. While these are certainly commendable considerations to bear in mind, which of us can claim to be able to consider all possible alternatives and all possible consequences, such that we would be willing to accept responsibility for those consequences? Is this then not an inadequate basis for making ethical decisions, and is not the basis in fact self-interest, in other words, can I cope with the likely outcomes of my action? Will I be better off or worse off if I proceed? In all of Heenan’s discussion of ethical behaviour there can of course be little consideration of the only real basis for decision-making, a consequence of his attempt to have a common, universally-valid code of ethics. That only real basis is, of course, consideration of whether or not a particular action or behaviour is right or wrong, and that he cannot espouse because that then requires the discussion of a faith-perspective, a religious conviction, personal beliefs in terms of which an action or behaviour can be seen to be right or wrong. Without such a

framework, all that can be done is to assert “the greater good of society” or self-interest. And at the end of the day, where is the difference between what Heenan espouses and the moral relativism that he affects to despise?

His “decision-making process” is designed to encourage “personal responsibility and recognition of the individual freedom to make choices.” But the question must be raised, and no doubt will be raised by those who are taught this process, responsibility to whom or what? What are the limits on the individual freedom to make choices? Or are there no limits? Who can tell, and on what basis will they decide? Self-interest? Communal well-being?

The use of “moral examples” to teach ethics

The inadequacies of Heenan’s approach can further be seen in his suggestions that we should teach these core moral precepts through the use of literature that portrays good examples from the lives of real figures, such as Charles Upham, Harriet Tubman and Joan of Arc.¹⁴ However, to treat these people as simply moral examples to follow ignores the roots of their lives in their convictions and beliefs. Can we simply follow the example of Joan of Arc without sharing her faith? What would that do except divorce life from its root, its religious motivations and convictions that shaped and directed her in all that she did? What particular example could we draw from Joan of Arc that demonstrates these “core moral precepts” while leaving aside the very blood of her life: her conviction that God had called her to free her people from the tyranny of the English? Are not her life and actions incomprehensible apart from her visions and the response of the English church hierarchy to her beliefs? Is not such a bloodless “moral example” exactly the kind of failed ethical approach that led to moral relativism? We cannot use such people as “moral examples” without also sharing the deepest convictions that made them the people they were. Otherwise we are merely imitating those whom people in authority have decided are good moral examples, while being unable to explain what it was that made them the people they were, or why that particular person was a good example rather than a bad one. Independent of any particular

¹³ Heenan, *Cornerstone Values Curriculum*, p. 24.

¹⁴ Heenan, *Cornerstone Values Curriculum*, p. 22.

convictions about life, that is, a religious faith, such people's lives make no sense, and cannot function as good examples in any real sense, because what it is that makes them an example to follow is removed from discussion. To deny children insight into the faith of these "examples" means that they have no understanding of the necessary motivations, power, and convictions that made them examples we consider worthy of following, while still demanding that they imitate them! It is to turn children into ethical eunuchs and then command them to be fruitful.¹⁵

This approach in fact falsifies the lives of those people we are holding up as examples. Heenan suggests that we use history to illustrate how "simple but enduring values guided great people of the past."¹⁶ But were those people in fact guided by "simple but enduring values," or were they in fact guided by something deeper, something more profound and more powerful than simply a set of values? People do not live by "values" such as being honest, or noble, or true, or compassionate, for the sake of those values themselves, but because they have a conviction, a faith, a life-perspective which guides them to be honest, or noble, or true, or compassionate. People are not ethical for the sake of being ethical, but because they have a conviction which leads them to be ethical, in accordance with what their faith leads them to see as being ethical behaviour. To teach the fruits without the roots is to falsify history, and to again hold up examples worthy of imitation while denying the possibility, i.e. the root purpose, of that behaviour.

There is another problem arising from the use of (fictional) literature, poems, stories, etc. to teach moral values. Any story written to teach a "moral" is usually poor literature, and good literature is not usually an adequate basis on which to teach "morals," because that is not its purpose, and to make that a purpose of literature is to again falsify something important in its own right. While many stories, plays, poems, etc. do treat moral dilemmas and problems, and can be helpful in assisting children to see how such situations are dealt with, this literature is not intended as a basis from which to "moralise," because to do so is to isolate one facet of a complex work (which is not its focus) and emphasise that to the exclusion of other elements.

¹⁵ With apologies to C S Lewis. **The Abolition of Man**, p. 21.

¹⁶ Heenan, **Cornerstone Values Curriculum**, p. 23.

The Foreword by Bruce Logan also suffers from this problem and the way in which John Heenan has addressed it. Logan says: “A great man once said, ‘You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free.’ We need to remember that without truth there is no freedom.” This quote illustrates the general problem with the **Cornerstone Values Curriculum**: it is an attempt to teach values and moral behaviour divorced from any specific context. Jesus, the “great man” Logan refers to, was not simply enunciating a general moral precept in the statement reported of him, but was claiming of himself that he was the incarnation of truth, and that it was only a relationship of trust in Jesus that would bring freedom. To attempt to divorce “truth” and “freedom” from a relationship with Jesus, who is Truth, is to falsify the very values they wish to teach. It is to isolate what Jesus meant by “truth” and “freedom” from the context which gives them their specific meaning, and reduces them to “codes” for whatever content we care to give them. Heenan has defended his approach (in a response to this article as originally published) as one that seeks to lead non-Christians from where they are at to the “Judaic-Christian heritage” and the Bible, through seeking to communicate biblical principles in secular language.¹⁷ I maintain to the contrary that in presenting his moral beliefs in a framework completely divorced from the context of Christian teaching in the way he has done, he is supporting and reinforcing moral relativism and dependence on rationalistic secularism that cannot lead to acknowledgement of God as the one who alone can lead us to right living through his grace and forgiveness.

What is “truth”? What is “freedom”? There is no universal, commonly-held absolute conviction concerning what these mean. Rather, they are given specific content by the religious perspective which uses them, content which varies widely depending on the religions themselves. For instance, for a Christian, “truth” is not an absolute moral value, but rightly relating to Christ, who is Truth Incarnate. For a Christian, “freedom” is not the liberty to live as you please, to choose as you please, but liberation from every constraint and hindrance to obeying the will of God, being able to do what God requires of us because we have been set free to do so. To teach “truth” and “freedom” devoid of specific content is impossible; which content then will we choose when teaching them in the context of the “core ethical beliefs” that Heenan espouses? And more

¹⁷ John Heenan, in a published response to this article after it first appeared in print. *Stimulus* 7 (May 1999) 2: 52.

importantly, how will the teachers handle those who do not wish to learn such bloodless, generic values, but hold to ethical beliefs which do have specific, contextual content arising from their religious faith? Will pluralism and diversity be acknowledged, or will it be submerged under a new, all-encompassing, transcendent religion that demands allegiance in order to produce the “good society”? John Heenan appears to be arguing in this direction, as he states:

The practice of cornerstone values (honesty and truthfulness, kindness, consideration and concern for others, compassion, obedience, responsibility, respect and duty) produces behaviour that advances the well being of all and prevents harm to the individual and society; it is the substance of healthy relationships and the basis of community.¹⁸

Heenan holds up his Cornerstone Values Curriculum as a means to re-invigorate moral behaviour in society. But before we buy into his programme too quickly, we need to be aware of its roots in humanistic rationalism, secular religion, and a traditionalism divorced from any sustaining vision of life or vision for life. I suggest instead that Christians teach ethical beliefs to their children on the basis of their faith, directed by the Scriptures, oriented towards love and obedience to God, and focusing on love for others as Christ loved us and gave his life that we may live new lives through faith in him. The rather simplistic approach taken by Heenan in his Cornerstone Values Curriculum is nowhere near as self-evident, as obvious, as universally acceptable, as he would like us to believe. We do need an alternative to the moral confusion around us. This is not it.

¹⁸ John Heenan, in a published response to this article after it first appeared in print. *Stimulus* 7 (May 1999) 2: 52.