

The free-wheeling society: what values should be on the agenda and the role of the Christian education in the promotion of these values

ABSTRACT

The focus of this article is the role that Christian ethics can play through the curricula of higher education institutions to combat the moral decline of society. The author reasons that there can be no such thing as neutral ethics and that every ethical belief is influenced by for instance religion, culture and circumstances. Ethics in the framework of post-modernism are thus disapproved of. This article shows that by integrating ethics in the curriculum, students as prospective employees and employers are prepared to live ethical. Finally an agenda is proposed of how ethical questions can be reflected therein.

Failure to perform, be a team player and avoid gross transgressions such as stealing, lying, or drinking on the job was hazardous. Poor performance was the surest way of earning discipline. In contrast, unethical behaviour was rarely mentioned ... Ethics was a matter of exit, rather than loyalty or voice (Badaracco & Webb 1995:13).

1. BACKGROUND: AN EMERGING ETHIC

Society cannot go without ethics on its agenda.

This statement is supported by, amongst others, the Enron scandal, the Second King Report on Corporate Governance, crime and corruption in business, the moral crisis in education, the possibilities of modern technology, etcetera. This need can be explained in the context of business. The American company, Enron, had the best-formulated values, but without any impact. This is, needless to say, meaningless. For corporates to be ethical is not a once-off activity only. It requires continuous commitment towards the values of a corporation and the implementation of these values in all the activities of the organisation. It therefore asks for ethical commitment – something that is very often missing in corporations. Ethical statements should have “teeth”. “Empty value statements create cynical and dispirited employees, alienate customers, and undermine managerial credibility” (Lencioni 2002:113). This situation leads to the important link between business ethics and corporate governance. Although the four core values of corporate governance are fairness, accountability, responsibility and transparency, it (corporate governance) cannot be excluded from an ethical perspective (see Rossouw 2002 for a detailed discussion on the levels of ethical responsibilities in corporate governance). When Hooper & Porter (2001:39) discuss the “values-

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driven organisation” they argue that organisations should be consistent in their approach to challenging situations in that they live by their values. The organisations should “walk the talk”. Fisher (2002b) rightfully emphasises the importance of manager’s moral integrity to take responsible ethical decisions. Drucker (2003:128) argues along the same lines. He says that in decision-making one should decide on what is right rather on what is acceptable. From an organisational perspective, values should be integrated in all the activities of the organisation. If not, then the unethical behaviour of an organisation can seriously harm it. Future customers and employees will not associate with the practices of these organisations (Newell 2002:232). Business is no longer characterised by a *tell me culture*. What is now needed is a *show me culture* (Visser & Sunter 2002:78).

Resulting from this emerging ethics are two associated sets of realities influencing contemporary society:

The first reality is the post-modern philosophy, which advocates that there are no absolute truths and values (ethics). Truth and values lie within oneself. Truths and values are formed by man’s individual consciousness. Smit (2000:146) rightfully lays this development in front of “the macro-motive of individual liberty”. He says that the dark side of individualism is that it is self-centred, egoistic and narcissistic. He refers to Charles Taylor who called individual liberty “a precious gift of civilisation and a central norm in modern culture”. This liberalism teaches that man is free of any norm or idea. This liberalism co-insides with the view that no man is longer his brother’s keeper. Each person is now taking responsibility for him- or herself. The only bond the liberated person recognises is his of her **own individualistic rational insight**. This liberalism also influenced the way ethics is understood and implemented. De Villiers (2002:41-43) gives a useful explanation of this view by contrasting a modern and a post-modern understanding of ethics. He says that in the **modern world** the contents of moral law is self-evident and can be known through reason independently from Christian religious beliefs. The Christian religion provides only extra motivation for adhering to Christian principles. In the **post-modern world** there are no absolute truths. Truth lies within oneself. A person has become the reference for his or her own truths.

The second reality is that values should be brought back to all walks of society. There is a growing resistance against the “free-wheeling society”. Whether values are defined in a paradigm of contextualism, post-modernism, ubuntu, etcetera the demand is that ethics should “heal” the (South African) society again. To highlight one example: Corporate governance requires more and more the input from non-executive directors for their impartial role and integrity. Vaida (2003:1) refers to a MBA study by Samantha Louis who found that companies ranked value-based skills higher than learnt skills and qualifications. In support of this, Fisher (2002b:13) says there is a growing need for ethics in business. Fisher did a survey on consumer sentiment in several American states after 11 September (the collapse of the Twin Towers in New York). He found that companies with ethics and responsiveness outperform others across a wide spectrum.

The question raises how to react to this complementary situation. The consensus is that ethics is important, but the problem is: *Who’s ethics?* This situation is troubled due to the fact that an individual can choose for a specific ethics but it cannot be forced onto society. In (higher) education – which is the focus of this study – a specific ethic is seen as infringing on the individual’s academic freedom. The spirit of the Higher Education Act (Act 101 of 1997) is that a university or technikon should deliver “neutral” education. This implies that all worldviews should be accommodated within an institution. Although the logical inclination is that science should be based on positive facts (positivism) it cannot be denied that contemporary science philosophy has made it clear that science is always influenced by presuppositions. A positivistic view is therefore declined. Ricoeur, Polanyi, Kuhn, Popper, Habermas, Chomsky, Thompson, etcetera are all representatives of the debate on science philosophy. All of them are arguing from a specific

premise in reality. Thompson (1987:532, 534) writes, “To justify is to provide reasons, grounds, evidence, elucidation ... our interpretations are in principle accessible to, and justifiable for, the subjects whose discourse we are seeking to interpret.” For Thompson science is always subjected to personal inputs and therefore presuppositions. To call on another witness: Strauss (2002a; 2002b) argues that science cannot go without presuppositions. In his articles he refers to the way in which philosophy is influencing theology. He remarks that philosophy is particularly needed in connection with the difference between conceptual and idea usages of modal terms (such as anthropomorphysical reference to God) and that even “objective knowledge” is not free from cultural, social, rational, etcetera presuppositions. The perspective on this necessity is also employed to avoid subjectivity in science – something that is an ever-growing danger in the production of knowledge. With the advent of globalisation, this production has not only become borderless, but has also led to the fact that people are no longer able to communicate meaningfully with each other, simply because people’s opinions are no longer disputable. For the establishment of a value system in science, it becomes an almost impossible task.

Taking the role of presuppositions into account, this paper will derive at the existence of Christian ethics. In addition, the logical conclusion will be that Christian ethics is opposing a post-modern understanding of ethics and that Christian ethics will have a confessional character.

2. OBJECTIVE AND HYPOTHESIS OF THE ARTICLE

With these realities, consensus and conflict in mind, the **objective** of this article is to identify the role that Christian ethics can play in combating the free-wheeling society. This paper will argue that Christian ethics should be included in the curricula of all scientific disciplines offered by higher education institutions. The reason for such an argument is that students are the future employers or employees. Through their future jobs they will have contact with all walks of society. By being sensitised in their formal studies of the ethical challenges faced by their future careers the students can influence the societies within which they will be working.

The **hypothesis** of this article is that Christian ethics will contribute towards the combating of the free-wheeling society.

3. CONCEPTUALISATION

The most common definition for ethics is that it is the integration of values in all walks of life. Looking at the Greek word *ethos* or *èthos* or the Latin word *mos* then it is evident that ethics should be part of one’s life or behaviour. In Greek ethics means habit, morality and habitat. The latter denotes the idea of one who is at home or comfortable with his or her normative behaviour. The Latin word holds the same meaning. Ethics or values are seen as the choice between right and wrong, good and bad (Douma 1983:10, 11; Mautner 1997:180).

Ethics definitions are not limited to theology only. Numerous definitions of ethics from a range of disciplines embody the idea that certain behaviour is unacceptable towards other people. Although behaviour can differ from culture to culture, there is always the common line that all people should adhere to an acceptable standard of behaviour. Societal ethos, religion, culture, etcetera will all influence our understanding of ethics (Grace & Cohen 1996; Lategan 2003). To elaborate on this: Robbins *et al* (2003:533, 538) describe ethics as rules and principles that define right and wrong contact and values as basic convictions on what is right or wrong. Typical ethical dilemmas are environmental developments, executive remuneration, hiring of friends, nepotism, lying and cheating, power conflicts, pressures to conform, etcetera. Newell (2002:231-232) analyses two groups of ethical thought: The first group advocates that ethics should maximise

common good and minimises harm. The second group believes that a sense of duty or a set of moral principles guide ethical behaviour.

In taking these definitions into account, it is clear that ethics involves **decision-making**. Ethics is about making choices as regards principles or norms and values in daily life. Decision-making is influenced by one's **internal and external environment**. This **environment** is formed by religion, a sense for responsibility, worldview, attitudes and trust (for a detailed explanation see Lategan 2003). What should be clear is that decision-making is not **value-free**. This observation relates to the difficult issue of objectivity in ethics, something that is evident from the identification of the ethical dilemmas and the solution to these dilemmas. Badaracco (1998:40) observes the importance of having objectivity to bring balance in situations characterised by "viewpoints and biases of particular people in specific situations". In being objective, the identification of ethical paradigms and worldviews can be particularly helpful (see again par 1).

For the purposes of this article ethics is defined as **normative** and **value-driven** behaviour. This behaviour is manifested in the behaviour of people towards other people (**anthropology perspective**), systems and communities (such as the church, family, education, government, politics, etc) (**systemic and community perspective**), relations (friendship, courtship, marriage, partnerships, loyalty, etc) (**relational perspective**), culture (**cultural perspective**) and nature (**environmental perspective**). Since this paper is advocating a Christian ethics, all norms and values will therefore be biblically founded and confessed.

4. CONTEXTUALISATION: ETHICS IN THE CHRISTIAN CURRICULUM

4.1 Contemporary challenges in higher education

The higher education curriculum faces many challenges of which the implementation of technology-driven programmes, entrepreneurship and innovation in education are the most challenging. Technology has contributed towards the creation of knowledge that is labelled as the "knowledge ideal". The importance of innovation is on how to implement new ideas and schemes in education. In return entrepreneurship asks how money can be earned through technology-driven programmes (see Snyman 2002 for clear-cut distinctions between innovation and entrepreneurship). At the heart of these challenges lies the fact that education has become a commodity. It has become a meaning in itself to earn revenue through knowledge as consumable product. Education is now subjected to economic-driven ideologies and customisation (Lategan 2002b).

The immediate problem sensed here is that if technology, innovation and entrepreneurship dominate the curriculum, then an **instrumentalistic** approach has replaced sound pedagogical values such as the emotional and intellectual growth of the student freed from any domination and indoctrination. It is in this context that Schuurman (1995), Snyman (2002) and Snyman & Van Rensburg (2002) are pleading for an ethical appreciation of technology within all curricula to avoid distorting ideas in the technological programmes of institutions. But, ethics cannot be limited to programmes in philosophy and theology only. Heyns (1986:301) remarked that a comprehensive social-ethical policy for the university is essential, firstly due to the increasing relevance that should be enjoyed by the ethical dimension of science in a modern society, and secondly because the university can never stand apart from its community. This responsibility is confirmed by Meyer (2000) who showcases the success of ethics across the curriculum. In addition prove Brennan & Modras (2000) that both staff and students value ethics in graduate education.

4.2 Ethics in the curriculum

Smit (2000) writes extensively on ethics in the curriculum. He mentions three reasons why the teaching of ethics is important:

It is an **anthropological** matter because it influences the lives of people on a daily basis.

It is an **academic** matter because it serves as counterpart for reductionism.

It is a **social** matter because the academy also has the responsibility of addressing community problems.

Smit is of the opinion that ethics should be part of all higher education curricula. He says that although the students in subject disciplines do not have to be confronted with meta-ethical (philosophical) questions, they cannot go without ethical instruction. This approach to ethics, which can be typified as applied ethics, seeks to understand a problem from a specific science discipline. That in itself has something to do with the professionalising of vocations, and serves as preparation for the prospective student's entry to the labour market.

I regard applied ethics as a special science – as that science that analyses actual ethical problems from the ethical perspectives ... against the background of an anthropology and cosmology. It relates to the question how we should concretise our compassion for human beings and their environment in the problematic situations of life (Smit 2000:150).

The inclusion of ethics in the curriculum should reflect critically on the personhood in the curriculum. Normativity should underlay all scientific discipline. So, for example, can no higher education institution claim to be an institution that adheres to a Christian ethos when it allows abortion techniques to be taught in training hospitals. (Abortion techniques should be understood here in the context of *abortus provocatus* [abortion on demand].) The moral status of the human embryo is an example of what the viewpoint of science (in this case medical ethics) should be on the basis of a Christian ethos. It should be remembered that this ethos will be influenced by its environment. It is already a well-known concept that in future there will be more “click universities” than “brick universities”. This means that as a result of technology, the higher education institution will increasingly pursue its core activities by means of “e-education”. Higher education institutions may have many policies on the application of technology in the science and management of the institution, but very few are familiar with the normative position with regard to the use of technology. An ethical framework will not allow technology to be practised without boundaries. To take this issue further: It is an unavoidable phenomenon that technology has irrevocably influenced the very nature of the practice of science (as education and research). Indeed, no higher education institution of note can exist without it. It is also a well-known fact that technology can help to promote the learning experience. What should be guarded against, however, is technology stimulating the knowledge boom. There is now more technology available than ever before and this knowledge is not always scientifically founded. Not all knowledge on the worldwide web (www) is always scientifically verified or normatively justified. Although technology should assist in knowledge reaching a destination more rapidly and in a more understandable manner, this supporting mechanism cannot replace a human being. Man has been instructed to create knowledge in a responsible manner – and now man is creating a means to produce knowledge even more rapidly without taking into account the effect thereof on the lives of people. No normative higher education institution can permit this.

5. SETTING THE AGENDA

This paper has argued thus far that in spite of the post-modern influence on science there is a Christian ethics and that this ethics should be part of the curriculum. The advantage of employing Christian ethics in the curriculum is twofold. *Firstly*, it prepares the student to live his or her normative confession in his or her future career. *Secondly*, a Christian ethics questions the contents of science taught to students. With this in mind, an agenda will now be set that will impact on the resistance against a free-wheeling society:

Define what the contents of Christian ethics are.

What are the issues in Christian ethics?

How does a Christian ethics differ from other ethical confessions?

What should be the core of Christian behaviour?

What role does individual versus group ethics play in society?

Is the group more important than the individual?

Do communities or corporations influence ethical attitude?

Should religious orientation play a role in a company's ethical attitude and behaviour?

Should corporate ethics allow individual religious orientation and convictions?

Does the individual have the moral and ethical responsibility with regard to "whistle blowing"?

What role does "responsibility" play in ethics?

Does the Chief Executive Officer have a "bigger" ethical responsibility compared to junior management staff?

Should a person inform management if he or she has (sensitive) information available that might influence decision-making?

Can ethical dilemmas be compromised?

How does one balance the "lesser of the two evils"?

Do attitude and behaviour have an impact on ethical orientation?

What is the difference between ethical decisions and a pragmatic solution?

Are all "ethical" decisions in a company ethical?

Are all "business ethical decisions" in a company ethical?

6. APPLICATION

The Christian community has a responsibility towards building a sustainable society characterised by Christian values. In advocating these values the higher education curricula can be essential. The church (as institution) cannot bear the responsibility of this task only. The church as the dynamic body of Christ functioning within the kingdom has to take these values to all corners of life. Church ceremonies such as preaching and confessions are important building blocks in support of a society known for its Christian values. (Higher) education can set energy free to build the new community Christians are looking for. Education cannot replace typical church functions. But education can prepare students to act as responsible citizens in society through employing normative values. It is for this reason that an agenda has been set (see par 5) with only two items. Firstly to combat a free-wheeling society and secondly to call on man to be the keeper of his brother again!

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