

Moral Pluralism and Christian Bioethics: On H. T. Engelhardt Jr.'s *After God*

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This article retraces progression of Engelhardt's work so as to place After God in broader context. In The Foundations of Bioethics, Engelhardt argues that given the moral pluralism that is at the core of postmodernity, only a merely formal morality of permission can bind moral strangers in peaceful coexistence. In The Foundations of Christian Bioethics, Engelhardt presents a bioethics that binds Orthodox Christian moral friends. After God shows itself more pessimistic about the possibility of a merely formal morality of moral friends and calls traditional Christians to wage a culture war. These reflections close with some criticisms of Engelhardt's philosophical-theological project.

Keywords: *Christian bioethics, Engelhardt, modernity, Orthodox Christianity, postmodernity, secularization*

I. INTRODUCTION

In stark contrast with much of the tedium of current specialist academic debates on bioethics, H. T. Engelhardt Jr.'s latest book *After God* is a refreshing experience. Engelhardt's philosophical approach fleshes out issues often reduced exclusively to mere legal and political facets. Engelhardt is one of the founders of bioethics, which he considers to be a specific form that moral philosophy takes in our present day societies, rather than as a free-standing discipline. Bioethics calls us to rethink the meaning of universal human experiences—such as birth, death and illness—in light of the dilemmas which medicine and emergent technologies raise.¹ Engelhardt's thought is an actual “ethics of life,” the meaning of which affects the entirety of moral philosophy, its history and fate, as well as its relationship with metaphysics and theology.

After God is a paradoxical and provocative book. It is ambitious, comparable to the work of Leo Strauss (1953) or Alasdair MacIntyre (2007): it aims to rethink the role of ethics within the framework of non-religious, post-Enlightenment modernity. The publication of the book gives us a good opportunity to retrace the progression of the Engelhardt's work.

II. MORAL FRIENDS, MORAL STRANGERS, AND THE ETHICS OF PERMISSION

H. T. Engelhardt Jr. is known to a wide readership through his most influential work, *The Foundations of Bioethics*, published in two editions (Engelhardt, 1986, 1996). The book follows a skeptical assessment of the capacity of reason: philosophy is unable to provide a rational demonstration of the ultimate goals and the founding principles of human life and civil cohabitation, and of supplying an adequate justification of their hierarchy. Contemporary societies consist of persons who have very diverse and complex notions of what "good" is. In virtue of these diverse notions, they are, in Engelhardt's terms, "moral strangers" to each other. In such a context, ethical theories cannot be both universal and content-full. According to Engelhardt, the categories developed by contemporary moral philosophy are not justified, and above all they are not justifiable. In the best case, such moral philosophies cannot hold true to their promise; in the worst case, they are misleading insofar as they claim universality for what is merely socially-historically conditioned. Substantial or content-full ethical theories unquestionably do exist, but they cannot be universal. On the other hand, an ethical theory can be universal, but only insofar as it remains merely formal, because any content-full morality requires a perspective which eludes rational justification.

In contrast to moral strangers, moral friends share first principles and a conception of the end or goal of human existence. These, in Engelhardt's view, are not won through reason or the strength of persuasion, but by sharing a content-full or substantial *ethos*. These moral friends do not purport to use reason to justify principles and goals, simply because they do not need to; although they do not exclude rationality as a means to describe their central principles and goals, they are unable rationally to justify the goodness of such principle and goals.

Although Engelhardt's account and arguments are certainly original, they do resemble Nietzsche's and Weber's diagnosis of a polytheism of values. Values can of course be analyzed rationally, but whether or not any given person adheres to any particular set of values has nothing to do with reason. It refers to extra-rational considerations, such as love, faith, or tradition. Pluralism is unsurpassable, or at least cannot be surpassed through the mere force of reason, claims Engelhardt. There are four means, in his view, to overcome controversies: (1) using force, (2) appealing to conversion, (3) persuasion by means of a correct rational argument, and lastly (4)

agreement. Once conversion and persuasion have been discarded as impractical or ineffective, the only solution to avoid the use of force is to establish purely formal moral criteria based on universally accepted *procedures*. Such procedures are necessarily limited in their effectiveness: the only principle that individuals belonging to very diverse moral communities may wish to respect is not to use other people without their permission.

Engelhardt's choice of the term "permission" is deliberate. Permission should be contrasted with autonomy—one of the main tenets of secular bioethics, as seen, for example, in the work of [Beauchamp and Childress \(2013\)](#), or in certain types of political liberalism. Unlike autonomy, permission, in Engelhardt's view, does not represent an independent value or an ultimate goal of human existence. Rather, permission is a mere "side constraint": it is a necessary condition in which to ground cooperation rather than conflict among individuals. This is why Engelhardt cannot be listed among the champions of pluralism: he merely acknowledges its primacy (see [Engelhardt, 2011](#), 400). Given that we lack universal, content-full principles, permission is seen as the origin of moral authority. Engelhardt's focus, then, is on the use of permission in solving conflicts without the use of force; permission for him is not the ultimate truth of a secular, liberal morality. If one wishes to avoid conflict, we have to keep within the boundaries of a minimum agreement among individuals. In addition, it has yet to be proved that the principle of autonomy should prevail over considerations of beneficence or justice (cf. [Engelhardt, 2011](#), 405).

From this angle, the public square is seen as a place where individuals from a range of perspectives meet as moral strangers. The libertarian nature of Engelhardt's ethics does not stem from seeing permission as an essential aspect of individual autonomy. Permission must be understood not as a content-full principle but, one might say, as a precautionary choice: Permission is merely the lesser of two evils when compared to conflict. In fact, the formal and libertarian morality of *The Foundations of Bioethics* is wholly compatible with lives within communities of moral friends, which are not always libertarian and always content-full. If, on the contrary, permission were seen as akin to autonomy—as a normative and content-full principle—it would have to be applied even within communities of moral friends. In many cases, it would end by clashing with communitarian values, if and when they proved incompatible with the idea of individual self-fulfillment at the core of secular accounts of autonomy.

III. A CHRISTIAN BIOETHICS

But, such a position is easily misunderstood, perhaps because it is outdated. For example, Engelhardt has been at times presented as a theorist of a libertarian and secular ethic and a defender of a "strong" secular idea of morality (see [Engelhardt, 2011](#), 10). In fact, Engelhardt's perspective can be

fully understood only when one takes into account his later work, starting with *The Foundations of Christian Bioethics* (Engelhardt, 2000). The book affirms its Christian perspective right from the title. Yet, the understanding of “Christian” is quite radical, and is informed by the author’s choice to leave the Roman Catholic Church for Orthodox Christianity in 1991. Given Engelhardt’s decision to articulate a bioethics from a content-full Christian ethics, the path outlined in *Foundations of Bioethics* becomes even more apparent in *After God*. The former intends to describe the actual conditions for a minimal universal ethics in a post-Christian or neo-Pagan society. In the latter, the fundamental issue seems to be how to establish conditions for a content-full Christian ethic to be possible in a society after God. Although it cannot be described as a shift, because both the main theoretical tools and the solutions proposed are basically the same, there is a different background hue, which corresponds to the different angle Engelhardt employs to look at the same phenomena. His perspective is no longer that of “moral strangers.” Rather, he develops at length the perspective of “moral friends,” specifically, the minority view of Orthodox or traditional Christian moral friends.

The dialectic in *After God* develops along three guiding lines:

- (1) gaining a better understanding of the historical, philosophical, and cultural roots of the present day crisis where the opposition is not just to secular ethics, but to secularized Christian theology, be it Roman Catholic or Protestant;
- (2) a critical rethinking of types of life in present day societies as well as of secular ethics itself; secular ethics is perceived not just as a false form of universalism—the result of a specific community presuming to develop a universal ethical-political proposal—but as the demoralization and deflation of morality, in other words, a non-morality or amorality;
- (3) attempting to deal with the fact that the minimal, universal, and purely formal ethics that had been outlined in *Foundations* cannot be put into practice.

The awareness of the project’s failure leads Engelhardt to state the need for a real culture war, seen as an extreme form of resistance against the advance of an immanentist modernity.

IV. SECULARIZATION: ATHENS AND JERUSALEM

As for the first point, let us see what Engelhardt means when he maintains that our secular society is post-Christian. Modern society is “after God” in that it has definitively decreed the death of God and the purity of Christian categories is radically questioned by society’s culture.² According to Engelhardt, secularization cannot be interpreted, as some hold, as the actual implementation or genuine fruition of Christian truths. Rather, he claims, it is quite the opposite: it is the total loss of the original meaning of the Christian

experience; secularization means that Christianity has been defeated and has dissolved into the secular culture. Secular humanism is doomed to fail precisely because it is unable to reconcile the content-fullness and universality which seemed to ensure the existence of Christian thought in a Christian society.

Christian ethics, endeavouring to come to terms with modernity, also has its own issues. Progressively, Engelhardt's focus has shifted from the more proactive approach of *The Foundations of Bioethics* to the mainly diagnostic approach of his later works, where the crisis of the modern world is retraced and the issues it raises for Christian ethics are addressed. Over the centuries, Christian theology has dealt with the paradoxes raised in the famous dilemma in Plato's *Euthyphro*: is what is in and of itself right and pious loved by the gods or it is right and pious because it is loved by the gods? In the former, the goodness of God's commandment is justified by its rationality and in the latter the justification of the moral norm is based on the commandment of God. This question is central to a proper understanding of theology. According to Engelhardt, the history of Western Christian theology is a virtually uninterrupted process aimed at avoiding the theocentric horn of the dilemma and the particular results which it entails.

However, opting for this rationalist approach has also led to major if not worse consequences: progressively, Christian ethics lost its identity and its ability to distinguish itself from secular ethics, as shown by the results of the twentieth-century Christian bioethics. When Christian bioethics sought legitimacy on the basis of its practical effectiveness, Christianity was reduced to a cultural or aesthetic phenomenon. It took on the guise of a vague cosmopolitan social gospel. A clear example of this is Karl Rahner's theory of the "anonymous Christian." According to Engelhardt, it owes its origin to the difficulty of accepting the paradoxical effects of the theocentric horn of Euthyphro's dilemma, concerning the contingency and the historical nature of the Christian Revelation. One should also consider that whole eras of history, parts of the globe, billions of good people, great philosophers and virtuous artists will die forever, whereas those who believe in Jesus Christ and His Resurrection will enjoy eternal life. The theory of the anonymous Christian is basically an adjustment of the religious rationalist theories of the seventeenth century and the Enlightenment; it is a way to include non-Christians in the salvific event. Anyone able to adopt the guiding lines of secular morality, on this view, in fact reconfirms the core of Western Christianity, even if unconsciously. This move occurs thanks to the capacity every human being has of perceiving grace as a result of natural reason. Yet, in such cases the affirmation of the core of Western Christianity cannot be made explicit and fully achieved, as that is only possible through faith. The paradoxical results of this line of thought—which hides a Pagan conceptual core—highlight the need to disentangle the close bond between Western Christianity and philosophical reason.

Engelhardt thus joins a debate about the de-Hellenization of Christianity which started in the first decades of the past century and continued until recently and does so in a provocative and paradoxical manner.³ From his standpoint, the definition of secular culture is very precise: philosophy, and specifically *Greek philosophy*. Using Leo Strauss's apt metaphor, surrender took place when Christianity chose Athens and repudiated Jerusalem. The Christianity of the Fathers of the Church did not place any special trust in philosophy and in the ability of reason to establish a canonical morality. For the Fathers, morality was based on the idea of a transcendental God. In *After God*, the author sees Jewish and Christian moral norms as not being based on reason but on God's commands; this is one of Engelhardt's fundamental theses. Theology is not seen as a philosophical discipline, but as implying a personal encounter with the Living God.

Engelhardt describes a complex historical development, but inside each of these lines decisive historical-political changes are discussed. First and foremost, Engelhardt addresses Augustine of Hippo. The new vision of the relationship between Christianity and philosophy starts to emerge with the first of the Latin Fathers of the Church who wrote great philosophical-theological works. Augustine's works inaugurate a new idea of theology seen as a rational discipline which sets the foundations for the subsequent rupture with Eastern Christianity. Augustine is the turning point which precedes the later developments in Western Christian theology that attribute primacy to reason for the discovery of natural truths—or at least attribute reason to their core, a core which, on this view, coincides with the truths of faith. Before that time, Christianity had made great use of a Greek approach without betraying Jerusalem, that is, without rethinking its theological and moral principles within the philosophical framework first developed in Athens.

Both in its Roman Catholic and in its Protestant versions, Western Christianity preferred to avoid sectarianism in favor of universality. As for Roman Catholicism, Engelhardt's thesis is that the break with the Church of the first millennium and the birth of Scholasticism were a major turning point. In the pre-Scholastic era, the Church's pastoral theological spirit was much closer to what it had been in the first millennium, where Christianity was proposed as fideism and mystic experience. The hallmark of the Scholastic period was a greater concern for a rational rethinking and systematization of concepts. Roman Catholicism has a historically determined origin, which has left Western culture with a false idea of the relationship between faith and reason. It raises the expectation that it will successfully develop an ethical-philosophical vision able to overcome moral pluralism. In spite of all the breaks and radicalizations in a very complex tradition, first millennium and present day Roman Catholicism share the faith in human reason which leads to the claim of a faith founded in rationality, as well as in the doctrine of natural law. Hence, the basic continuity between Scholasticism and the Enlightenment springs from this commonly held faith in human reason.

Engelhardt's paradoxical thesis is that Catholicism is at the origin and underlies the process of secularization that led to moral pluralism: in other words, it is not in direct opposition to modernity, as many would believe, but, in fact, it is the first major concession to modernity. Things are not very different where Protestants are concerned: with the Reformation, which is another radical break within the Christian tradition, the person and the Bible are interpreted outside of both the community and the tradition. On the one hand, the Reformation is an attempt to produce a new beginning and to go back to the purity of origins, letting go of corruptions brought with time; it appeals to constraint-free analysis, to the role of individuals who no longer have to mediate their contact with God. Thus, Protestantism destroys the historical and communitarian bond thinking outside and above the community. Although sixteenth and seventeenth century Protestant communities developed a wealth of content-full morality, the formal principle that they posited "undermined the contents of said morality and the cohesion of their communities" (Engelhardt, 2011, 107, translations mine). Since Kant, liberal Protestantism, in order to avoid the accusation of being sectarian, has tried to produce a secular, moral and philosophical vision able to speak to all human beings. Clearly, this heralds the later alliance of Protestant and secular ethics, both focused on the protection of persons and their autonomy, and aimed at achieving social justice.

Engelhardt sees Orthodoxy as the point of view which makes it possible for us to gain a better understanding of the crisis of the West, along two main lines: the first which dates back to fifth century B.C. Greece—the birth of philosophy—and the second which started when Western Christianity underwent a process of Hellenization, appearing as a philosophy. Medieval Christian theology acted as the transmission chain of Greek rationality, its unattainable aims, its failures, carrying those ideas to the modern world. In other words, there is a link between such claims (founding a content-full policy and ethics on reason), their failure (rationality is either purely formal or plural), and the emergence of an after-God (atheist) culture: once its handmaid, theology has now become the mistress of reason. The specificity of Christian moral constraints—the experience of a personal God who calls individuals to salvation at a given moment in time and space—is thus lost. Nowadays, it is theology that has to seek legitimacy in rational forms. We should thank scholastic theology, if philosophy has become the judge that can decide what comes under moral constraints and what does not.

In contrast, Engelhardt affirms a distinct view of Christian moral constraints as coming from noetic experience of God; thus, mere moral philosophy cannot be real moral theology, and Christian theology cannot be a mere moral philosophy. It is in this general framework that Engelhardt places the brief blossoming and equally rapid decline of Christian bioethics. Now anachronistic sectarianism and a quest for universalism tear Christian bioethics apart and water down its specificity. Sectarianism means that Christian ethics do

not apply to all human beings, but are part of a special narrative marked by milestones such as creation, sin, the Incarnation, redemption and salvation. With the help of concepts from Thomas Kuhn, Engelhardt describes the existence of a Roman Catholic paradigm in medical ethics. For centuries, such a paradigm was able to structure a single and consistent research community where controversies could arise, within which there was a method to solve said controversies, and an authority to whom one could appeal in the case of conflict (Engelhardt, 2000, 8). This is a universalist paradigm in that it purports that it can speak to any human being, regardless of the person's accepting or refusing Christian grace and Revelation. Thus, moral duties stem from a natural law which binds all human beings, regardless of their choice of faith. Hence, we see the paradox concerning technology from which current Roman Catholic thinking suffers: it puts forward a thesis that everyone considers to refer to a specific group, but which Roman Catholic bioethics consider universal and an expression of natural reason (Engelhardt, 2011, 109). The aforementioned paradigm underwent further radicalization during the Second Vatican Council which, according to Engelhardt, led to a rethinking of the tenets of Christian ethics. Rethinking was not limited to Roman Catholicism, but soon spread to the other Western Christian denominations, further strengthening the universal value of the Roman Catholic ethics.

Following these developments, Christian bioethics found itself unable to uphold its own identity and ended, becoming part of secular bioethics. There seem to be two main reasons leading to its disintegration:

- (1) internal pluralism within Christian thinking, which was not perceived as a wealth of opinions but as a sign of frailty and conceptual confusion. This newer pluralism, in Engelhardt's view, is first and foremost the result of the schism from the Eastern Church, then of breaking with the Reformed Western Christianity, and lastly of the Second Vatican Council's rethinking of the Roman Catholic Church. Paradoxically, the Council created a new interdenominational division, between traditional and post-traditional Christians, a division which currently is present in all Churches. Faced with the challenge of secular humanism and its bioethics, this divided and uncertain Christianity inevitably succumbed;
- (2) the absence of clear theological foundations: because the highest truth of Christian bioethics was not grounded in a special Christian revelation, it was unable to establish itself as a consistent and constructive structure. Christian bioethics became useless because secular bioethics proved more effective.

V. NEO-PAGANISM

This conclusion leads us to the second set of core issues in *After God*, which concerns the relationship between modernity and post-modernity.

In *The Foundations of Bioethics*, and again in *The Foundations of Christian Bioethics*, Engelhardt defined the contemporary era and society as neo-Pagan. Unlike ancient Pagan faiths, the feature of neo-Paganism is that it comes after Christianity. This means that neo-Paganism has to come to terms with the same expectations that Christian culture had to come to terms with, that of universal moral justification. Further, neo-Paganism has to rely uniquely in fragments of moral intuitions, which come to us from a whole and once intact life form, that cannot be conceptualized within one single conceptual framework.⁴ However, strictly speaking a neo-Pagan society does not purport to be a completely godless society: it is a polytheist society which does without the Christian God or places it alongside other divinities, a God among Gods, thus denying the Christian God's existence in the light of monotheism. Both Paganism, which is unquestionably a form of religious experience, as well as some of the traditional forms of Enlightenment atheism that obsessively try to demonstrate the nonexistence of God appear to betray a form of naive nostalgia. There is a certain nostalgia for a metaphysical principle—even if not for the Christian God—which makes them still appear as a pseudo-religious form of thought. The same is not true for present day atheism, which appears to uphold a radical indifference toward any religious fact and displays a similarly radical dismissal of any form of transcendence.

Life is now unfolding in a society after God, which means dealing with the latter's atheism. Modernity implies a critique and renouncing of Christianity. Postmodern societies imply renouncing God and in general any notion of transcendence. Enlightenment modernity is Pagan and deistic but not atheist. Postmodernity embraces a kind of atheism which has completely separated from transcendence and has happily embraced the closure of immanence. Engelhardt sees this as the difference between Kant and Hegel: Kant is one of the last modern philosophers to defend a perspective drawing from the past. Kant tries to found a traditional Christian morality without God. Hegel is defined as the first of the postmoderns: he was a Lutheran, with an immanent, philosophical God, which has resulted in the emergence of a merely historical, socially-historically conditioned ethics. According to this interpretation, there is no great distance between Hegel diagnosing post-modernity and post-modernity itself, as seen in thinkers such as Rorty to Vattimo. Post-modernity sees a pluralism of theories all floating in the finite, historically contingent, and asserting themselves. This kind of pluralism leads to a demoralization and deflation of morality which is reduced to nothing more than a choice among lifestyles, a purely aesthetic and cultural fact, left to the taste and preferences of individuals lacking an actual root in a content-full ethos.

A further subtle, but significant, development on this issue can be observed with reference to the theses of *The Foundations of Bioethics*. In claiming universality for itself, secular ethics is actually not more universal than the ethics of traditional Christianity, be they Orthodox, Evangelical Protestants, or any other of the religious denominations not compromised by modernity, such as

Orthodox Jews or Muslims. There are several communities of moral friends all sharing content-full, but not universal, ethical perspectives. Secular atheists are one of such communities, insofar as they offer a special interpretation of the principle of autonomy (and therefore of individualism) as a value and the ultimate goal of our existence. Conflict can be avoided if one abandons the expectation of universally imposing the principle around which a special form of life is organized. An agreement has to be reached whereby permission, that is to say a notion of limited autonomy as a pure and simple source of authority, is free of any content. However, progressively, a change of perspective took place. In *After God*, secular morality is not seen as especially dangerous because it is thought to be universal. Strictly speaking, it is no longer a morality in that the demoralization and deflation of morality deprives it of any meaning. Postmodern atheists are not a community of moral friends, since they reduce a now groundless ethical choice to a mere choice among alternative lifestyles. Thus, they deprive society of the seriousness and rigor required to classify it as a morality. Engelhardt proves that there are many forms of moral rationality and that it is impossible by argument to reduce this pluralism to a unity, because there is no argument able to prove that one type of life is better than any other. In fact, it is undeniable that even in a secular society there can be many ways of creating equally respectable hierarchies of the good, and that the lives individuals and communities choose can at times be loaded with values and ideals, tending towards good and a sense of responsibility. However, when one believes that life lacks an ultimate objective meaning, and that it all comes down to people using their own individual autonomy, when every meaning is socially and historically determined, it then becomes impossible to prove that it is irrational to embrace a vision which privileges either one's personal, familial or one's friends' interest over another.

This conclusion leads us to the third line to which we referred previously. This view has a strongly pessimistic view as to the possibility of a minimal universal and purely formal ethics, explained clearly in *The Foundations of Bioethics*. The nature of this pessimism strongly sways Engelhardt towards radical conservatism: the minimal state does not exist in any part of the world and probably never has. It is quite the opposite: the development of postmodern societies has increased the need for its being actualized more than in the past. Nowadays, Christianity must defend itself from being delegitimized by a secular culture which rejects any discourse outside of overtly rational and radically immanent forms. Furthermore, as Engelhardt acknowledges, these postmodern "secular fundamentalist states" do not merely recognize autonomy as the source of authority alongside moral communities: they view autonomy as a value and carry out a battle for the reform or the abolition of many content-full ethical views with which groups of moral friends have identified. Thus, *After God* goes beyond the constructive proposal in *The Foundations of Bioethics* and calls for active resistance, indeed, a real

cultural war which should add to—or better yet—even replace the secular state. When the authority of the state turns into the naked power of force and when the obligations to the state conflict with the organizing principles of one's life, a mediation is no longer possible, and resistance is preferable.⁵

VI. CONCLUSION

At this point, it may be possible to draw some conclusions about Engelhardt's thought. The most interesting facet is the critical aspect which highlights the difficulties and paradoxes of post-Enlightenment culture, which has proved unable to communicate with and to everyone, believers and nonbelievers. Although it is possibly a little uncharitable to brush him off as a mere attempt to re-theologize ethics (cf. Müller, 1995, 152), his thinking is only addressed to the members of a traditional religious denomination. If and when Engelhardt addresses his ideas to nonbelievers, it is only to call for their conversion or to fight a cultural battle. Ever since his early works, Engelhardt had started from a very peculiar idea of pluralism. Pluralism is not to be seen as the soul and vocation of modernity, where individualism and freedom are milestone achievements in the philosophy of history, but quite the opposite, as a mere alternative to conflict. Peaceful coexistence is not an inherent value, but simply the lesser of evils for moral subjects, who believe their goals to be valid, but who have abandoned the idea of imposing them as such equally across the entire public sphere. Moral friends choose pluralism simply in order to avoid a struggle of everyone against everyone, which would make it impossible for them to cultivate and uphold their own values within special communities of moral friends. This somewhat disenchanting realism is certainly one of the reasons why Engelhardt has taken on increasingly antimodern positions. The relationship between universal and formal morality (which is the hallmark of moral strangers), and particular and content-full morality which binds moral friends (e.g., specific faith communities), had been left unsolved in *The Foundations of Bioethics*. It had been left unclear if traditional religiosity's acceptance of minimal libertarian ethics was a purely strategic choice or whether it was rooted in the ethos of its faith community. In other words, it was not clear why a community, which failed to adopt a vaguely Hobbesian, and in any case, modern sensitivity whereby safety is the greatest good, should wish to resolve controversies peacefully. The notion of a culture war clarifies beyond doubt how, when one uses a non-universalist ethical perspective, the choice to avoid conflict is a purely strategic option. In the present day world, a secular, liberal, and cosmopolitan society where traditionalist Christians are a minority, these moral friends are depicted as fundamentalists and intolerant. The temptation is to answer ethical controversies with violence, making a vocation to martyrdom a possibility (Engelhardt, 2000, 198), possibly even a necessity. However, if power relations were to change, it might no longer appear to be so. By definition,

this very particularistic vision does not address itself to everyone, be they believers or nonbelievers, and does not appear to go beyond the proposal of an ethics of resistance, a resistance against secular modernity and an immanentist attitude. This is why, faced with the bewilderment of our day and age, the only possibility to found a Christian ethic is a return to the origins, to the Christianity of the first millennium, starting with the acknowledgement of a transcendent God and the duties or obligations this entails. A basically mystic form of Christianity, which is founded in noetic theology, in ascetic experience and divine Enlightenment, is the keystone of Christian bioethics.

The perspective Engelhardt takes is rooted in the orthodox theological tradition, which enables him to hone in on a key problem for contemporary Christian ethics: the ongoing vacillation between the aspiration to have a particular, content-full (but potentially conflicting) view and the attempt to walk the path of universality (but risking the loss of one's content). This approach highlights the risks of a Christian moral philosophy trying to deal with pluralism and secular ethics: the risk of losing one's distinctive point of view and so fail to differentiate oneself from secular ethics. This approach seems to lead to a historical and conceptual leveling, which in turn means Engelhardt is overhasty in judging aspects of Western theology that must be more carefully understood and delineated with more precision. First, Engelhardt's approach stipulates not just a comparability but almost an equivalence between Roman Catholic and Protestant bioethics, since they are considered only from a formal point of view. Yet, their contents and results have differed greatly. Secondly, the purported equivalence between Christian and secular bioethics is just as problematic.⁶ In particular, Engelhardt fails to recognize those traditions within the Protestant denominations (e.g., Barths' dialectical theology, which greatly influenced twentieth century theology, and not just among Protestants; see [Savarino, 2012](#), 48–61) and within the Roman Catholicism (e.g., personalism) which reject the extremisms of liberal Christianity. Western Christianity is far from being a monolith. Even the process of de-Hellenization can be conceived in two different and mutually exclusive ways. It can be seen as returning to what there was before "Greek-ness" was introduced into the furrow of Christianity. However, it can also be seen as taking a new direction, retrieving the meaning of original Christianity without forgetting to face modernity. Ockham, whom Engelhardt mentions, is a case in point and a precursor of the young Luther. From the vantage point of Engelhardt's Christianity of the first millennium, it might be irrelevant to notice that Protestant theology in the early twentieth century also tried to follow in the footsteps of the young Luther, the path of a Christianity free of Greek influence. The attempt was to rediscover the meaning of a faith that fully recognizes the transcendence of God and His personal commands and that rejects the idea of a rationalist natural law. This Christianity did not identify theology with moral philosophy and faith with mere precepts or guides for action. That notwithstanding, such a modern Christianity still attempts to address the issue of the historical

nature of faith. In other words, it does not forget to address questions like the following. Where does the will of God present itself? How can His commandments be interpreted? Modern Christianity also considers the evolution of moral norms without slipping into biblical literalism or making a specific moral tradition a universal, absolute one.

Engelhardt seems to be constantly following a quest for a God who can guarantee peace and security as the foundation which can unify morality both in both its principles and practical results. However, that means he fails to conceive of Christian faith as a calling for individual responsibility. At the same time, Engelhardt remains outside any particular idea of reasonableness whereby human freedom is based on the impossibility of having knowledge of the Absolute. Thus, he is unable to move beyond indifference towards any revision of traditional doctrines. Deaf to any appeal to historicize Christianity itself, he appears unable to consider pluralism *inside* the Christian world as a wealth for many rather than a synonym of mental confusion.

NOTES

1. Developing a thesis by Stephen Toulmin, Stanley Hauerwas (1986) accounts for the great interest Christian ethics displayed for medical ethics in the late twentieth century.

2. An understanding of secularization can be classified, first, according to how continuity or lack of continuity between the secular era and the preceding time are organized, and second, by how the continuity or discontinuity is valued. Secularization can be interpreted either as the actual implementation of the Christian truths, or as the surrender and living of Christianity faced with modernity. For an introduction to these debates see Blumenberg (1985), Böckenförde (1991), Vattimo (1991), Taylor (2007), Berger, Davie, and Fokas (2008), Joas (2008), and Beck (2010).

3. The issue of the Hellenization of Christianity was the focus of Pope Benedict XVI's (2006) Regensburg's lecture. A philosophically important reading is offered by the young Heidegger who, in the years preceding *Being and Time*, interpreted the de-Hellenization of Christianity from its origins re-reading authors such as Troeltsch and Harnack. The traditional ontological critique and of the Thomistic interpretation of Aristotle was functional in developing a hermeneutical ontology which was to peak in *Being and Time* and in Heidegger's later works (Savarino, 2001). Engelhardt, on the other hand, offers a more radical criticism of the bond between Christianity and Hellenism: it leaves no room for mediation and aims at discarding any link between faith and reason, in the name of a sceptical criticism of the power of reason.

4. The idea that contemporary ethics face the scenario of unresolved and apparently irresolvable controversies because it has to deal with fragments of moral intuitions lacking the context which informed their meaning is discussed in MacIntyre (2007).

5. See Engelhardt (*After God*, 193): "A *modus vivendi* as I use it recognizes that many who acquiesce in the government as it is are merely biding their time until an opportunity exists for a regime change, perhaps even if this requires civil war."

6. The distinction between secular and Christian ethics cannot be exclusively conceived on a plane of metaphysical principles. Nor can it exclusively deal with the solution to moral and political problems. It refers to the manner in which such issues are understood and ultimately to the need to appeal to adequate frameworks of meaning. In fact, in some of his writing in the early 1990s, Engelhardt seemed to suggest a radical redefinition of the tasks of Christian ethics, moving towards a "theology which draws from all communities while not belonging to any" (Engelhardt, 2011, 63). He thus conceived that theology informed by authors such as John Findlay and Charles Hartshorne could teach secular bioethics what it cannot offer by definition because it deals exclusively with formal thinking: a rethinking of the meaning of life, suffering and death. Clearly this is not the approach Engelhardt chose in later years, when he embraced traditional Christianity.

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