

Values in our Society – With Social, Historical and Anthropological Aspects

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ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Dieser Artikel bezieht sich auf die empirische, sozialwissenschaftliche Forschung und zeichnet zunächst ein Bild der vorherrschenden Werte in der gegenwärtigen Gesellschaft Europas. Auf dieser Grundlage erläutert ein historisch-philosophischer Ansatz (MacIntyre) den fragmentarischen und inkohärenten Charakter dieses Bildes, wie es sich aus dem nachchristlichen Zustand ergibt. Allerdings decken anthropologische Überlegungen (wie Moralbiologie, Moralpsychologie, kulturelle Anthropologie) einige gemeinsame und dauerhafte moralische Überzeugungen der Menschheit auf. Diese sollten Christen lehren, sich nicht nur über den Verfall zu beklagen, sondern auch offen zu sein für einen möglichen Fortschritt. Darüberhinaus bringt die theologische Analyse der (Post-)Moderne gleichzeitig sowohl die besten kulturellen Früchte der christlichen Wahrheit

als auch deren schlimmste nachchristliche Entstellungen ans Licht (Kuyper, O'Donovan). Die Moderne mit ihrem hohen Selbstwertgefühl kommt einer säkularisierten Eschatologie gleich, der Christen mit Vorsicht begegnen sollten, damit sie nicht diesem aufgeblähten Optimismus einen einseitigen Pessimismus entgegenzusetzen. Vorherrschende Werte stellen sich als moralisch widersprüchlich heraus, wie man z.B. an individueller Selbstverwirklichung, Freiheit, Toleranz, Gleichstellung, Privatsphäre, Demokratie, freiem Unternehmertum und Mitgefühl sieht. Der Artikel endet mit möglichen Ansätzen einer christlichen Ethik und mit den besonderen Herausforderungen für Christen, was die Werte eines (post-)modernen Europa angeht. Christen sind dazu berufen, Propheten zu sein, und zwar nicht nur zu kritisieren, sondern vielmehr die besonderen moralischen Systemblockaden unserer Gesellschaft zu präzisieren.

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RÉSUMÉ

À partir de recherches empiriques en sciences sociales, l'auteur dresse un tableau des valeurs dominantes dans les sociétés européennes contemporaines. Une approche historico-philosophique (MacIntyre) permet d'en comprendre le caractère fragmenté et incohérent comme le produit de la condition post-chrétienne. Des considérations anthropologiques (de biologie morale, de psychologie morale et d'anthropologie culturelle) laissent cependant percevoir certaines convictions partagées et durables dans l'humanité. Ceci devrait conduire les chrétiens à ne pas se contenter de déplorer la décadence de ces sociétés mais aussi à être ouverts à la possibilité d'un certain progrès. En outre, une analyse théologique de la (post-)modernité permet de détecter à la fois les meilleurs fruits culturels de la vérité chrétienne et leurs

distorsions post-chrétiennes les plus déplorables (Kuyper, O'Donovan). La modernité, qui se considère elle-même de manière très optimiste, est une sorte d'eschatologie sécularisée et les chrétiens devraient se garder de répondre à cet optimisme excessif par un pessimisme unilatéral. Les valeurs qui prévalent paraissent moralement ambiguës, comme on le constate pour des valeurs comme la réalisation de soi individuelle, la liberté, la tolérance, l'égalité, la préservation de la sphère privée, la démocratie, la libre entreprise et la compassion. L'auteur considère diverses approches éthiques chrétiennes possibles, ainsi que des problèmes spécifiques auxquels les chrétiens doivent faire face en rapport avec les valeurs de l'Europe (post-) moderne. Les chrétiens ont une vocation prophétique, non seulement pour critiquer mais aussi pour montrer précisément dans quelles impasses morales notre société s'est engagée.

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SUMMARY

Drawing on empirical social scientific research, this article first presents a picture of the dominant values in

contemporary European societies. Building on this, a historical-philosophical approach (MacIntyre) explains this picture's fragmentary and incoherent character as resulting from the post-Christian condition. However,

anthropological considerations (moral biology, moral psychology, cultural anthropology) uncover some shared and lasting moral convictions in humanity, which should teach Christians not only to complain about decay but also to be open to the possibility of progress. Furthermore, a theological analysis of (post-)modernity detects both the highest cultural fruits of the Christian truth and their most deplorable post-Christian distortions at the same time (Kuyper, O'Donovan). Modernity with its high self-esteem is secularised eschatology, which should make Christians careful not to mirror its inflated opti-

mism with one-sided pessimism. Prevalent values turn out to be morally ambiguous, as is shown in values such as individual self-realisation, freedom, tolerance, equality, privacy, democracy, free enterprise and compassion. The article concludes with a discussion of possible Christian ethical approaches and specific challenges for Christians with respect to the values of (post-) modern Europe. Christians are called to be prophets, not only to criticise but precisely to clarify the specific moral deadlocks of our society.

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1. Introduction

Some recent examples will serve to indicate what our society values:

- a A Dutch Christian police-officer was severely criticised after publishing a tweet in which he called the Amsterdam Gay Pride a dirty happening;¹
- b Members of the Italian parliament from Berlusconi's party engaged in a physical fight because of a sarcastic remark from a social democrat;²
- c Highly educated women increasingly give up their careers and opt for motherhood;³
- d The recent novel, *The Circle*, by Dave Eggers shows a terrifying picture of our society being obsessed with social media and webcams and caught in a movement towards hyper-transparency;⁴
- e Some years ago, the Dutch neuro-scientist Dick Swaab declared: I want to decide the moment of my death myself, since it irritates me that I have not been able to choose the moment of my birth.⁵

I will return to these five examples later. This article consists of four parts.⁶ After the introduction, I will build on social research in order to present a sketch of our society's values. Then I will interpret that image from a historical, an anthropological and a theological perspective. In conclusion, I will draw some lessons for Christian ethics.

This article was originally a paper at a conference aimed at the development of a Christian ethic for contemporary Europe. How we conceive of our society's moral condition affects our choice between possible routes for Christian ethics. With the Dutch ethicist Gerrit de Kruijf, I distinguish three possible routes for Christian ethics today, and I would add a fourth one of my own.⁷ The first is that Christian ethics could follow the German

ethicist Trutz Rendtorff and take an anthropological route in order to connect with non-theological ethics. An alternative would be the ecclesiological ethics of the American ethicist Stanley Hauerwas, who stresses the particularity and the counter-cultural character of the Christian narrative. The British theologian Oliver O'Donovan represents the third possibility. From an exclusively Christological starting point he has developed a concept in which the knowledge of reality and history plays an important role, resulting in residual possibilities for a critical dialogue with non-Christian ethics. I add a fourth route that is common among many evangelicals, such as the reformed Dutch ethicist Jochem Douma. Its focus is to find the ethical building blocks contained in the Bible and to apply these today.⁸

To form a picture of our society's morality, I will use the concept of 'values'. It is debatable whether this concept is suitable for Christian ethics.⁹ During the nineteenth century, it entered ethics from the context of economics. Hence, it could enhance today's dangerous dominance of economic categories in non-economic life-spheres. For example, in ethics this is reflected in the appropriation of expressions like 'social' or 'moral capital'.¹⁰ Besides, the concept of value originates in the Kantian separation between morality and knowledge of reality. Alongside the world of hard facts, a separate world of subjective values was postulated. Values are constructs with an elusive and vague character,¹¹ a feature that became all the more manifest with the inversion of all values that Nietzsche was able to advocate.¹² Despite these objections, however, the concept of values is useful for our aims. Already in itself it illustrates some traits of modern ethics, namely its subjectivism and post-Christian zeal.¹³ Moreover, it forms the central concept that social and empirical sci-

ences use when exploring the moral state of affairs in societies.¹⁴ When we consider the integration of non-theological findings indispensable for theological ethics, as I do, we cannot escape interacting with the concept of values.

2. The moral situation of our society: an impression in the light of social science

We now turn to a social-scientifically informed exposition of the values in our society. One of the most prominent social-scientific research programmes in this field is the *European Values Project*, which began to survey European citizens periodically in the seventies. It has produced dozens of studies and even spread to other continents so that we now also witness a *World Values Project*.¹⁵ Interestingly, in its early days, the project was instigated by Christian social scholars who were concerned about the impending disappearance of traditional Christian values in Europe.¹⁶ As a matter of fact, complaints about the lack of Christian values have been voiced by successive generations of Christians since the Enlightenment.¹⁷ The symptoms they mention include sexual morality, abortion and euthanasia.¹⁸ In recent decades a comparable moral unease has spread to non-Christians as well. They refer to hassles in neighbourhoods; aggressive behaviour in schools, public transport and sport stadiums; increase of sex and violence in the media; weakening decency; and excessive greed among corporate executives.¹⁹ Are complaints like these confirmed by the facts?

Europe's core value today turns out to be 'individual self-realization', a value connected with the pursuit of happiness.²⁰ The achievement of this aim has become the project of many lives. Other values, often with older roots, take on the features of this new central narrative. Values such as freedom, autonomy, equality, justice, human rights, democracy and tolerance thus all become servants to this higher aim. Meanwhile other early modern values persist, like rationality, progress, privacy, transparency and relativising authority. Communitarian philosophers and social scientists in particular²¹ have predicted that social values will not be able to survive the late-modern individualist narrative. However, research points in the opposite direction. Values like compassion, solidarity, respect for life, commitment to a greater good, and faithfulness remain in esteem as ever.²² The centrality of the stress on individual self-

realisation is reflected in the popularity of the so-called 'four principles ethics' of Beauchamp and Childress, which was developed for the context of medical ethics but is now advanced in most fields of professional ethics.²³ Beauchamp and Childress' combination of the values of autonomy, benevolence, non-maleficence and justice turns out to be neatly tailored towards an ethic that does not prescribe the personal choices of individuals but only regulates and guarantees the co-existence of such individuals.

From a Christian perspective we could register radical moral shifts and even moral decline in the form of hedonistic individualism and the accompanying diminishing weight of given institutions and moral frameworks, such as churches, families and traditional moral codes.²⁴ Another intriguing and perhaps problematic change to Christians concerns the concept of conscience.²⁵ Rather than an inner compass through which good and evil are sensed and guilt is felt, conscience has turned more and more into a kind of radar: we pick up various signals from people in our surroundings, and combine these into a resulting direction. During this process we are driven by our longings to preserve our good relations with those who are important to us. An internally oriented ethic of guilt turns into an externally driven ethics of shame. Acting immorally is often experienced and characterised as stupid rather than as sin. Nevertheless, guilt continues to play its part, not in the form of one's personal burden but as something one transfers to others. This is reflected in the widespread tendency towards scapegoating and in an encroaching culture of claiming and blaming.

Yet, despite such – probably worrying – transitions, much continuity and even progress can be noticed, while countries also differ substantially from each other.²⁶ For example, volunteering has not really decreased.²⁷ On some themes, moral indignation has even been strengthened rather than weakened. Here we could think of themes like animal rights; rejection of discrimination, violence and abuse; indignation about prostitution, drugs, joyriding; concern about human rights, the environment and food (biotechnology); and forms of dishonesty such as social security fraud and tax evasion. Therefore, we can conclude that, from a Christian perspective, our society's values and moral condition are best characterised as ambivalent.²⁸

In particular the domain of family, relationships and sexuality serves to illustrate this combination

of continuities and changes.²⁹ Here radical shifts have occurred, raising serious concerns for many Christians. Stressing individual self-realisation and the pursuit of happiness have caused a privatisation of relationships into a domain of free individual choices, which leaves the community irrelevant. Sexuality took on new meanings such as the expression of the romantic unity between two selves or even as a basic human need and means of enjoyment. Single life has become an accepted choice. New types of partnership have developed, forms like cohabitation, 'living apart together', being 'friends with benefits', one-night stands, self-chosen communal structures, multiple parent families and gay marriage. Traditional role-definitions between men and women have faded away. Producing children has become an option. On the one hand technology is required to make impossible pregnancies possible, while on the other abortion has become an honourable way to end unwanted pregnancies.

However, despite those changes most Europeans still consider 'family' to be of utmost importance for their lives. Moreover, the appreciation of marriage has not really decreased, as cohabitation is more and more reinterpreted as a kind of pre-marriage; in the words of Adrian Thatcher, it is a modern version of the traditional betrothal.³⁰ Further, within relationships faithfulness still counts as highly important and adultery as unacceptable, notwithstanding the acceptance of divorce and of serial monogamy. Mutual communication and togetherness are even valued more than in the past. Most couples still want children. For most citizens even sexual hedonism does not completely reduce sexuality to a means of enjoyment. According to a majority, it still requires mutual familiarity and confidence. We even witness the development of new taboos, perhaps as a counterbalance to the prevalent sexual freedoms. With regard to incest, pedosexuality and sexual harassment, moral attitudes have become less tolerant and are now even stricter than in most periods of history. Researchers conclude that there is no convincing empirical support for the often repeated complaints about an impending breakdown of the family or an underlying general moral decline.³¹

However, at a second glance, such lasting traditional moral accents appear to be founded on new justifications, which reflect the new core values of our society that we came across.³² Why do highly educated women today return to motherhood?

Not because they find shelter in traditional moral frameworks, but because they have come to conceive of motherhood as a possible mode of self-realisation.³³ Why is marriage making a comeback today? Not because it is honoured again as a creational structure, but because creating a unique personal experience on your wedding day suits the wide-spread longing for authentic self-expression. Why is volunteering even more popular than some decades ago? Not because we have departed from our individualist orientation, but because in our post-materialist context we yearn for meaningful ways to spend our increased spare time.³⁴ Even the new sexual taboos do not mark a renewal of traditional moral standards. They circle around the central value of respect for individual autonomy. As Foucault has articulated, sexual harassment is not so much considered problematic for its sexual dimension but because it implies abuse of power.³⁵ In this light we should interpret the moral ambivalence that we noticed in our society. This ambivalence does not relativise the transition towards individual self-realisation but it exists within that context.³⁶

3. Interpretation of our society's values

3.1 Historical-philosophical

We now turn to the interpretation of this moral ambivalence from three perspectives: the history of ideas, anthropology and theology.

Today no less than 30 years ago, no one can bypass Alisdair MacIntyre's proposal for understanding modern morality.³⁷ This prominent philosopher has constructed a historical narrative that proposes a convincing interpretative framework of our society's moral ambivalence. According to MacIntyre, the Enlightenment departed from the classical and Christian teleological framework. Within that framework every creature and phenomenon possessed a well-defined place where it should serve a specific divine purpose. Good was what suited this aim; bad what contradicted it. In the mechanistic universe of modernity, which moreover denied religion a public function, this foundational framework collapsed so that only rootless moral fragments were left. Initially, the consequences of this development remained hidden, because faith in God survived in the private sphere and most citizens shared an optimistic vision of human goodness and the potential of universal human reason. However, with

Nietzsche, God, goodness and rationality became deconstructed, so that the already present hidden moral decay became apparent. Only individuals with their free choices could serve as possible uniting bodies for the many faces of morality. These individuals are no longer thought of as being guided by universal reason but, to the contrary, as being driven by subconscious and emotionally defined preferences dominated by a will towards self-realisation. If necessary, this goal could even be strived for at the expense of others. Ethics, traditionally directed towards good and evil, became aesthetics, circling around authentic self-expression. This new end reshapes individuals into consumers who select their personal portions from the menu card of ethical possibilities. They differ from each other and lack the instruments to communicate about these differences in a meaningful way. Ethical debates thus change into discussions about procedures to regulate unbridgeable rifts of opinion. Today, far-reaching decisions about ending severely disabled new-born lives are made by faithfully following existing protocols and without an exchange of genuinely ethical considerations. In sum, MacIntyre typifies modern morality as voluntaristic, emotivistic, pluralistic, relativistic and trapped in proceduralism. Even within the individual himself we notice a split. Given the many unconnected spheres in our highly differentiated modern society, our selection of 'moral snacks' often becomes inconsistent in itself.³⁸ The same person can both passionately advocate animal rights *and* consider abortion to be fully normal. I may be a good father *as well as* a ruthless manager at the same time. Likewise, we notice the acceptance of divorce *together with* a new stress on marital fidelity. People who passionately defend democracy against Islam, sometimes sympathise with authoritarian leaders, who in fact could cause the end of democracy.

From his analysis of Western culture, MacIntyre himself arrives at pessimistic conclusions. He expects Western societies to collapse and disappear as once was the fate of ancient Rome. In his view, only a return to pre-modern morality and a retrieval of monastic practices could turn the tide. Others, however, have taken up this challenge and display a more hopeful attitude.³⁹

3.2 Anthropological

The pessimism of MacIntyre, indeed, seems at least one-sided when we remember the moral continuities and the moral ambivalence that social research

has uncovered. Therefore, our historical-philosophical interpretation has to be supplemented with anthropological insights. Here, in particular new fields like moral biology and moral psychology offer intriguing insights, which can be connected with earlier results of the more traditional discipline of cultural anthropology. Operating from an evolutionary perspective, they suggest the existence of moral constants in humanity during the course of its development. These moral constants survive cultural shifts and historical transitions, and therefore also religious changes. Prominent and at the same time controversial researchers like Richard Dawkins and Frans de Waal have uncovered the development of moral traits in monkeys and bees.⁴⁰ According to them, in their ambition to survive, organisms – having originally been solitary and selfish – have discovered the importance of cooperating in more complex groups. From this arose the need for morality and its development was triggered. Social and good behaviour turns out to be stimulated since it contributes to profitable relations with others. Even altruism and forgiveness become explained as survival strategies in which organisms adapt to changing circumstances.⁴¹ For example, through a long practice of failures, humanity has learned that forgiveness in the end produces more cohesion than retaliation does. Likewise, to return to our third example, pregnancy hormones predispose even highly educated women to caring behaviour and thus influence their moral views and choices with respect to their careers. Despite the new cultural narrative of individual self-realisation, this anthropological reality is alive and growing in strength.⁴² As far as cultural anthropology is concerned, the earlier relativistic tendencies of the discipline have given way to more sophisticated conceptions.⁴³ Cultural contrasts at the surface turn out to hide corresponding values at a deeper level.⁴⁴ The seemingly barbaric practice of some Eskimo tribes, namely the killing of their elderly, on a closer look contains the same value that Westerners respect. Within their cultural framework, this practice of killing is meant to improve the position of parents in the hereafter. So it is a way to honour father and mother.⁴⁵ Another cultural anthropological finding even seems to confirm one of the main theses of Immanuel Kant. Generally speaking all humans in all cultures trust that sooner or later doing good will be rewarded. Notwithstanding deep conflicts about the content of what is good, this is the basis of the basic moral imperative, without which human life would be

impossible, namely: good should be done.⁴⁶ This unmasks Nietzsche's deconstruction of good and evil as an unconvincing play of words.

Another important strand of contemporary research concerns the moral function of basic human emotions. Brain research has uncovered that emotions rather than reason are decisive in making moral choices.⁴⁷ This relativizes MacIntyre's criticism of today's emotivism. Fashionable justifications of behaviour as feeling good or not feeling good contain at least a grain of truth. Research even suggests that, generally speaking, Christians who help their fellow humans remain emotionally more at a distance than others. A possible explanation would be that by basing their acts on external divine commands, Christians in a way 'spoil' their primary emotional moral reactions.⁴⁸ The American philosopher Martha Nussbaum has done extensive work on the emotion of compassion.⁴⁹ She accepts a biological foundation for compassion that is connected to so-called 'mirror neurons'. When humans and some animals are confronted with the sufferings of other organisms, they experience these as if they were their own. Precisely that motivates them to act and to help. In this light, it is no wonder that – as we saw earlier – social researchers could conclude that despite the centrality of the value of individual self-realisation, social values have not substantially weakened.

Contrary to MacIntyre's pessimistic outlook, these kinds of anthropological findings lead many contemporary ethicists to overt optimism. The Australian philosopher Peter Singer, founder of modern bioethics, has partly noticed the same moral ambivalence that MacIntyre uncovered, but he interprets this ambivalence in a completely contrarian manner. Singer considers it to be the birth-pain of the next stage of humanity's moral evolution and he even rejoices in the fact that Christianity is now dying off. This frees us to acknowledge our kinship with animals on the hand and on the other it offers the context for genuine autonomy to develop better versions of the good life.⁵⁰

Christian ethicists can only be very critical of this kind of self-conscious atheist evolutionism. However, at the same time, the anthropological substrate of such expectations should remind us of the fact that despite worrisome moral decay even a post-Christian culture could display points of moral continuity and even moral progress as well.

3.3 Theological

From this background of a historical-philosophical and an anthropological interpretation, we now proceed towards a theological hermeneutics of our society's values and their ambivalence. The existence of moral constants can be explained with and founded on the doctrines of creation, providence and common grace.⁵¹ Despite sin, God remained faithful to his world and – as some reformed confessions state⁵² – it is precisely the surviving human grasp of good and evil which witnesses to that reality. However, faithfulness is a relational and personal thing, which entails that we should not conceive of this moral continuity as a self-evident and self-sufficient reality. Even anthropological constants depend on God's continuing action, which is new every morning (Lam 3:22-23). According to Psalm 104:29, creatures will disintegrate as soon as God's spirit retreats. The dark destructive periods of Europe's post-Enlightenment history only confirm this truth.

Traditional Roman-Catholic as well as (often) Protestant ethics have distinguished a timeless fixed substructure of well-defined self-evident virtues and values that are universally shared. However, some of the radical changes in our post-Christian world undermine such an assumption. Especially radical changes in the domain of marriage and sexuality show how supposedly universal values can be completely reversed within a few decades. Therefore, in hindsight we should acknowledge that many of these 'universal' moral truths simply reflected Christianity's history of cultural dominance. However, we must be careful not to overreact and adopt the opposite position of an exclusively historicist approach. Neither MacIntyre nor Hauerwas escapes that danger. This overreaction does no justice to the undeniable fact that God's providence grants moral constants to humanity, which can even survive incisive religious transitions. Which constants these will be cannot be decided beforehand; this must be discovered through a combination of revelation, tradition, scientific research and experience. Because of the dialectical interaction between cultural transitions and anthropological constants the resulting outcome in a particular period of history or a specific context will often be unpredictable and provisional. However, while not forgetting this caution, building on our present knowledge, we can suspect which constants could be found. For example the deep bond between mother and child remains in

force under God's providence and cannot be suppressed. 'Would a mother ever forget her child', asks the prophet.⁵³ Even our highly emancipated Western society reflects the moral implications of this reality, as is shown in our third example, about educated women giving up careers and offering culturally acceptable justifications for it. Other candidates for the qualification of 'moral constant' are humanity's God-given social nature, which proves itself despite individualist modern narratives; respect for property, life and honesty, albeit in sometimes estranging cultural forms; compassion, which mobilises even individualized Western people to support mass actions of humanitarian aid; the golden rule of mutuality, which in some way appears to be respected in all societies; the awareness that sexuality contains a mystery, even if this awareness hides itself behind postmodern rhetoric about power transgressions; and the general conviction that, however defined, good has to be done.

The Dutch theologian Abraham Kuyper has proposed an interesting refinement of these doctrines of creation, providence and common grace.⁵⁴ He distinguishes between a general and a progressive dimension within God's common grace. With the former God prevents us from falling below the bottom line of what counts as human, while the latter serves to grant a movement of development to fallen creation, in which initial creational possibilities are continually disclosed during the unfolding of history. According to Kuyper, this progressive common grace has been influenced substantially, though indirectly, by the gospel. Since its entrance in the Roman Empire God's revelation has become a formative factor for cultural history. Especially after the Reformation it generated many cultural fruits that at least partly display a Christian character. However, at the same time, Kuyper allows for an antithesis that intensifies as history goes on and the gospel proceeds. As its parasite, sin indissolubly follows every good. The greater the good, the more devastating sin will be. Against this background, according to Kuyper, modern Enlightenment culture displays a breath-taking paradox, namely the coexistence of the highest Christian fruits side by side with their most deplorable spoilage. Both moral progress and moral degeneration reach a climax.⁵⁵ Oliver O'Donovan moves in a similar direction, albeit in a less speculative manner. He analyses how the moments of the Christ event have defined the historical identity of the church. This church in turn

has become an influential force in Western society, thereby causing societal reflections of its own characteristics. However, modernity's departure from God and the accompanying privatisation of the church have rendered these reflections rootless and distorted. With these thoughts, Kuyper and O'Donovan offer satisfying theological interpretations of the ambivalence that we identified in the values of our society.⁵⁶

Building on both Kuyper and O'Donovan, I tend to see modernity as claiming an inner-worldly eschaton, thereby surpassing the abandoned Christian eschatology. From its early days up till today – from Hegel to Fukuyama – modernity has considered itself the end of history and the beginning of the empire of freedom.⁵⁷ This end stage of human civilisation would return the lost paradise to humanity. The former Christian eschatology became historicised, so that achieving the end of history became seen as a human project to be realised in this world. No longer had a new world to be awaited as a divine gift. Moreover, the biblical eschatological aim of the full-grown, independent free human in Christ became secularised in the modern claim of autonomous freedom and self-realisation.⁵⁸ Interestingly, this overestimation of modernity clothed itself in two forms. Not only a wide-spread faith in progress, but also its periodically emerging pessimistic counterpart of complaints about imminent decline witness to this inflated self-conception. This should make us cautious in joining viable complaints about moral decay among both Christians and others because such complaints could reflect an unconscious dependence on modernity's overestimation of itself and they would then only mirror exaggerated expectations of progress.⁵⁹

Social scientific research unexpectedly illustrates this possible mechanism.⁶⁰ The ever higher demands for quality in a consumerist society have also affected so-called 'post-materialist values'. This means that our moral ideals too have become caught up in a perfectionist quest for quality. As a matter of fact, they seem to be higher than elsewhere and earlier in history. Precisely this could explain the increasing discomfort and uneasiness that have characterised Western societies for some decades. If this analysis is justified, orthodox Christians should also be prepared to acknowledge the possibility that their repeated complaints about moral decline in fact pay tribute to modernity's eschatological narrative. This, in turn, could challenge them into a more open-minded evalu-

ation of contemporary moral ambivalence. Even under the present conditions, fruits of Christianity remain interwoven with our post-Christian society. For example, Kuyper stressed that only after the separation of church and state – with all its accompanying anti-Christian sentiments – freedom of religion could develop.⁶¹ Moreover, Charles Taylor suggests that only the (in itself regrettable) abandonment of a framework of transcendent divine justice has paved the way for the valuable and nowadays indispensable concept of inalienable individual rights. Taylor likewise suggests that today's syncretistic revival of spirituality also includes the continued influence of the Christian tradition and even offers new chances to its spirituality and morality.⁶²

3.4 Ambivalent values

Using the preceding insights as a kind of lens, we are now able to interpret some core values of our society. When evaluating each of these, we will endeavour to uncover how they display both the legacy of the Christian truth and its anti-Christian distortion.

Individual self-realisation

Today's central value of individual self-realisation originates in genuinely Christian convictions. Pannenberg has shown how much the emergence of the modern individual was rooted in Biblical and Christian accents, such as:

- God's love for each of his children.
- The fact that every church member may contribute to the whole with specific gifts.
- Our growing up in Christ to find our ultimate identity in his future.
- The development of personhood in the wake of the doctrine of the Trinity.
- Augustine's exploration of the inner life before God's eyes.
- Luther's stress on personal freedom and conscience.⁶³

This modern accent on individuality has resulted in many fruits. No longer do we require persons to adjust to fixed prescribed roles. Class society with its unjustified hereditary privileges has been ended. The position of women has improved. Even Christians who remain opposed to homosexual relationships acknowledge the specific identity and circumstances of homosexuals. However, forgetting the rootedness of such insights in God's truth, we have turned self-realisation into a human project, which has to be accomplished in this life,

while at the same time we have lost the connection between personal growth in Christ and sharing in his cross and sacrifice.

Freedom

Similarly, freedom is rooted in God's liberating acts and flourishes under his authority, since the latter denies all other powers any authority of their own. However, without God, freedom emancipates itself from authority as such and therefore leaves behind given creational structures that were meant to be our natural life condition.⁶⁴ This becomes clear, for example, in medical engineering that surpasses the bond between fertility and heterosexual marriage and tends to 'produce' children by means of artificial donor insemination or uses reproductive techniques to grant offspring to gay couples. Besides, the ambivalence of modern freedom becomes apparent in a dialectics of revolution and authoritarianism, which has become typical for modern societies.

Equality

Likewise equality can be founded upon our equal positions before God, as we are all creatures, sinners and potential addresses for his salvation.⁶⁵ Thus, equality should include the structures into which God has embedded our lives and allow for differences in gifts and callings. However, without the relation to God we cannot understand any difference whatsoever anymore and we neglect the 'pluriform' character of human society.⁶⁶ Besides, we contribute to a reaction mechanism, which once more becomes obsessed with differences to such an extent that equality starts to suffer again.

Tolerance

Clearly, tolerance bears the mark of the above-mentioned ambivalence.⁶⁷ Originally, this value depended upon everyone's personal responsibility towards God and the acknowledgment that only he will judge. As a consequence, we renounce our own judgments of others and leave room for visions and practices that we consider to be wrong. This is experienced as painful and even a form of suffering, as already is indicated by the word tolerance itself. However, without this reference to God, tolerance finds new ground in our society's denial of universal truth. Elaborating upon a pluralist dogma, it turns into a demand for indifference to other lifestyles. At least implicitly, we feel obliged to affirm all opinions and practices as long as they do not hurt others. This is revealed in our first example about the policeman's critical utter-

ances on the Amsterdam Gay Pride. As a matter of fact, he was tolerant when measured by the old standards, expressing his opinion but at the same time leaving room for other practices that felt painful to him. However, the changed logic of modern tolerance is not satisfied with such a stance and demands the implicit approval of a gay lifestyle. While we remain free to make different personal choices, we are not free to publicly express critical opinions that would spoil the choices of others.

Privacy

Originally, the value of privacy meant to protect personal life in its natural relationships and structures, such as family and work, from the supervision of the state.⁶⁸ Humans have a personal relationship with God and their neighbours, in which governments have no right to interfere. Rooted in this private sphere, citizens participated in the developing public sphere of upcoming nation states. However, without God, privacy has shifted towards the fencing off of self-enclosed and unpredictably authentic individuals. At the same time, the public sphere lost its moral input and ordering towards a common good. It fostered a secret ambition to interfere with private morality in order to guarantee its own safety. As a consequence, public morality progressively reshapes private choices. At first, for many people, public tolerance for practices such as abortion, voluntary euthanasia and homosexual marriage could co-exist with a less (or even non-) liberal morality in their private lives. Allowing others to opt for euthanasia, they would never consider such a choice for themselves. However, in the long run, personal morality tends to adapt to public tolerance, a mechanism which can also be noticed in many churches that started to tolerate practices which they still officially opposed at the same time.⁶⁹ Another consequence becomes clear in the manifest inconsistency that has caught the private sphere. Lonely individuals have developed an aesthetic longing to realise themselves and need an audience for that. This seduces them into voluntary transparency, as is shown in the popularity of Twitter. As a result, the cherished domain of the individual has begun to destroy itself. This again is related to a third consequence. Without dependency on God the public domain has become obsessed with its own security.⁷⁰ It feels obliged to protect itself against the unpredictable private morality of free individuals by enforcing forms of total transparency. However, both total security and total transparency are eschatological

categories for which we depend on God being all in all. Without God such ambitions will summon the kind of social dictatorship that Dave Eggers has portrayed in his novel *The Circle*, our fourth example.

Democracy

This observation connects to the value of democracy. Increasingly, historians have uncovered the Christian – early modern Calvinist or Medieval – roots of Western democracy.⁷¹ O'Donovan has even suggested that its background could be found in the church of Pentecost, where the voices of slaves were allowed to participate in the shared conversation about God's truth. Reflecting this, every citizen received a voice in public deliberation about the common good. However, without God, trust in truth and the expectation of shared insights have vanished. Therefore, having a voice has degenerated into voting, which at the same time adopted the character of exercising individual will power. The political arena is often just a stage to realise as much of one's own private ambitions as possible. Debates turn into ritual exchanges of arguments, mainly aiming to impress audiences and to mobilise support for this power play without the expectation to convince and unite.⁷² Thus, modern politics contains a germ of violence that takes away courtesy and civility. It is not by coincidence that over the last few decades political rhetoric has become more extreme, rude and offensive. This sheds light on our second example. A physical fight in parliament seems shocking, but it reveals the hidden violence in all post-Christian politics. Even Christians could fall prey to this style, when they use forms of power and take on a rather aggressive style to achieve their public concerns and ambitions in the context of a post-Christian society. The police-officer in our first example had the right to express his opinion indeed, but his choice of words did not serve mutual understanding and betrayed a trace of public Christian aggression.

Free enterprise and maximising growth

A comparable ambivalence can be detected in prevailing economic values like free enterprise and maximising growth. These became possible only after our culture's discovery of everyone's freedom to act under God's moral authority. They presupposed a given moral framework and the acknowledgment of the fact that real happiness will only be found in the world to come.⁷³ However, this ear-

lier capitalism under God degenerated into a secularised modern version of capitalism that strives for individual happiness in this life, while claiming freedom to serve that aim. From this, well-known deadlocks have resulted such as the opposition between capitalism and collectivism, and between saving and spending. For example, early modern Christians saw the virtue of frugality in the light of 1 Corinthians 7, which implied eschatological restraint. Collecting money had to serve earthly purposes that did not contradict the expectation of a world to come.⁷⁴ After the eclipse of this spiritual framework, frugality first secularised to serve the purpose of maximising happiness in this world and later deteriorated into post-World War II consumerism. This consumerism even lost the patience to wait in order to realise our human desires so that saving gave way to a practice of reckless borrowing, which enabled us to satisfy our longings immediately.

Compassion

The value of compassion reflects the historical victory of Christian love in Western culture.⁷⁵ The Roman world considered compassion as a weakness. This value has induced many moral characteristics of our society, like health care, attention to the weak, moderation of criminal justice, humanisation of war and even a readiness to sacrifice oneself for others. However, today, for example Martha Nussbaum's post-Christian re-interpretation of compassion judges it to be inappropriate when suffering is caused by someone's own fault. Moreover, while Christian compassion refers primarily to the sharing of sufferings in the expectation that sooner or later God will help, modernist compassion aims at fixing these sufferings by ourselves. As a result, unresolvable problems and pain become unthinkable and unbearable. In one way or another, sufferings have to be ended. Here we discern a background to the contemporary justification of euthanasia as an act of compassion, which sheds light on the fifth example, Swaab's ambition to rule over his own death. At first sight, such a claim of human autonomy over death sounds shockingly provocative⁷⁶ but as a matter of fact, it can be interpreted as a distorted reflection of something genuinely Christian. In Western culture Christ's triumph over death has indeed changed the traditional fear of death and the fatalist attitudes with which illness was accepted. Medical science developed, which bravely combated the powers of illness and death. Besides,

the courage developed to accept and – if necessary – even to choose death in the service of God and men. Swaab's boasting words of autonomy signal remnants of this typically Christian attitude towards death.

4. Tasks for Christian ethics

4.1 General direction

We return briefly to the challenge of developing a Christian ethics for today's society and we evaluate the four proposed directions. The *anthropological* approach of Trutz Rendtorff does justice to the observed moral constants and the implicit Christian values of our late-modern society. However, it deals insufficiently with the radical shifts and distortions that we noticed. As a result, such an ethics will remain vulnerable to adaptation, corruption and dilution.

The *ecclesiological* approach of Stanley Hauerwas honours the decisive moral significance of the particular story of Christ and its radical antithesis to the prevailing narrative of Western culture. However, this approach ignores the moral constants and the hidden Christian core of many modern values. Therefore it is unjustifiably unwilling to bear moral responsibility today.

The *Christological* approach of Oliver O'Donovan combines the strengths of both. Christ not only rules the Church, but also upholds and renews creation and has granted Western society historical blessings that are still effective. Firmly positioning ourselves in the context of gospel and Church, we may yet expect God-given contingent possibilities of communality and moral communication with post-Christian fellow-citizens. MacIntyre's fragments should not only be considered signs of impending decay but by God's grace also hopeful demonstrations of divine patience and potential occasions for a Christian contribution to society's moral condition. Thus it becomes an important Christian calling to clarify the many deadlocks that result from our society's post-Christian condition. Such clarification is included in the Church's prophetic calling.

The evangelical *biblical approach* of Douma runs the risk of neglecting conceptual implications of God's revelation in Christ and not engaging the specific ethical hermeneutics that today's post-Christian context requires. However, in the end ethics centre on God's will, as the third quest of the Lord's Prayer indicates. This will is revealed

in God's word. Being too preoccupied in our hermeneutics with the presumably special character of our context could result in yet another version of modernity's historicised eschatology and exceptionalism. Even when we acknowledge its specific character, we should not forget that modernity is just one of the many earthly contexts in which God's will has to be done as it is in heaven. God's word itself is able to pave its way through human lives in any given context.

4.2 Specific challenges

I see at least five more specific challenges that result from my analysis of our society's values. *First*, Christians should not oppose individualisation, as they often do,⁷⁷ but transform it by reconnecting it to Christ's sacrifice. Whoever wants to find himself should be prepared to lose himself. *Secondly*, the values of freedom and autonomy challenge Christian ethics to acknowledge a moment of relative autonomy and creativity. Knowing God's will requires maturity in Christ and a ripened exercise of the mind of Christ. Christians must learn to judge for themselves, albeit as a communal activity. This is indispensable to find answers to the majority of today's ethical questions, which after all are not explicitly dealt with in the Bible.

Thirdly, Christians should not only criticize emotivism, but also incorporate the newly discovered central role of emotions in their ethics. However, all emotion is formed emotion and contains implicit cognitions. Therefore, we should persist in publicly exchanging reasons for our choices, especially after they have been made. This will set the stage for new decisions and guide their emotional character.

Fourthly, the typical post-modern transition from ethics to aesthetics should remind us of the aesthetical character of the Christian life itself. Being an anticipation of the life-style of the Kingdom, our pattern of life will not be exhausted in choices between good and evil. As Jonathan Edwards and Augustine have already seen, our lives are destined to reflect God's beauty in a way that pleases God himself. Like in paradise, this call goes beyond the ethical.⁷⁸

Lastly, Christian ethics should welcome possible fruits of the gospel that appear to be implied in the values of our society. In the past, non-Christians rather than Christians were often the first to uncover certain consequences of the gospel. This has been the case for example with the acceptance of democracy, the separation of church and

state, the acknowledgment of human rights, protests against social inequalities, the critique of colonialism, the improved position of women, the abolition of slavery, resistance against racial discrimination and apartheid, and taking environmental responsibility.

Rooted in Christ, Christians should be prepared not only to criticise our society when necessary but also to receive what God still offers in it. Confronted with the values in our society, we have to be – in the words of Peter – 'watchful and sober' (1 Pet 5:8).

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 - 73 Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Until Justice and Peace Embrace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983) 133.
 - 74 W.B. Patterson, *William Perkins and the Making of a Protestant England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014) 135-142.
 - 75 Govert Buijs, *Publieke liefde: agapè als bron voor maatschappelijke vernieuwing in tijden van crisis* (Amsterdam: Vrije Universiteit, 2012).
 - 76 O'Donovan, *Desire*, 276; Vuijsje, *Macht*, 17, notes a kind of emancipation of dying citizens in contemporary society.
 - 77 Schnabel rightly claims that individualisation is not a moral choice but an inevitable feature of today's world. Being against it is as odd as being against the fact that it rains; see Paul Schnabel (ed.), *Individualisering en sociale integratie* (Den Haag: Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, 2004) 7, 11-30.
 - 78 Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Vol. 2: Religious Affections*, ed. John E. Smith (New Haven: Yale University, 1959); De Lange, 'Moraal', 35-36.