

# Religion or ethics: Jesus can join the dots

ANDREW CAMERON tackles a major question at the heart of the SRE debate. What is the fundamental relationship between 'religion' and 'ethics'?

**S**O a pilot program in 'ethics' is being run concurrently with special religious education. This article is not a direct contribution to that debate – a tangled mess of social, political and ideological disputes that I am struggling to absorb, let alone explain. Rather I want to answer just one question in that debate: what is the relationship between 'ethics' and 'religion'?

The proponents of the proposed school lessons imply that 'ethics' is practiced by all people everywhere, and that various 'religions' simply offer a boutique customised version of this general ethic. Some Christians reply that there is no basis for ethics apart from God; or that Christianity has a distinctive approach to right and wrong. The rival claims of non-God ethics and Christian ethics are complicated by the fact that Christianity has been around for so long, no one can tell any more who gave what to whom. Plenty of non-God ethics has forgotten its Christian roots (e.g. human

rights; free speech; mercy). Likewise, others often need to remind Christians of truths they should never have forgotten (e.g. not to split up indigenous families; or to diligently protect children under Christian care).

Meanwhile in daily life, everyone has to consider ethics together. What 'rights' are right? What 'values' are valuable? What 'results' are worth aiming for? Does a 'rule' help or corrode us? The mug-punter is surrounded by 'rights', 'results', 'rules' and 'values', and they do not easily mesh together. How are Christians to respond?

It turns out that Christians don't 'do ethics'. In Christian thought, people are called to something much harder. We are called to become people who are *wise*; who can *discern*; who make *canny judgment calls* in the moment. This is a blurry, difficult, and frustrating idea for us at first. Look at the following biblical texts (from the Holman translation). In comparison to talk of rights, results, rules or values, they feel extraordinarily 'open-ended':

*And I pray this: that your love will keep on growing in knowledge and every kind of discernment, so that you can determine what really matters and can be pure and blameless in the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God. (Phil. 1:9-11)*

*Walk as children of light – for the fruit of the light results in all goodness, righteousness, and truth – discerning what is pleasing to the Lord. Don't participate in the fruitless works of darkness, but instead, expose them (Eph. 5:8-11)*

*Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may discern what is the good, pleasing, and perfect will of God. (Rom. 12:2)*

*Test all things. Hold on to what is good. (1 Thess. 5:21)*

*Do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to determine if they are from God,*

## THE SRE CHALLENGE IN OUR PUBLIC SCHOOLS:

### Can it survive the ethics proposal?

The current public and political debate has raised concerns about both the Ethics course proposed by the St James Ethics Centre and the future of SRE within our public school system. A panel of men and women involved in this debate will inform us of the current state of play, the seriousness of the challenge to SRE and how we might best respond to maintain a witness to Christ in our public schools.

How do we take this threat seriously without being alarmist?  
Is this an unstoppable juggernaut or is there something useful we should be doing?

Thursday 15th July 2010, 7.30pm  
The Chapter House,  
St Andrew's Cathedral, Sydney

*because many false prophets have gone out into the world.* (1 John 4:1)

'Discerning', 'determining' and 'testing' is the language of people who have learnt to *recognise* things – who have a capacity to wrestle with what is in front of their eyeballs, while remembering that all is not what it seems. The 'mature', in this way of thinking, are 'those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil' (Heb. 5:14, esv). These New Testament texts extend and expand upon the great Old Testament category of a joined-up life – 'wisdom', an art of *pattern recognition and response*: a holistic way of *seeing* into complexity, *working out* what is needed, *making the call*, responsibly and faithfully *managing the result*, all the while paying attention to *what we will become* as we proceed in this way.

Of course, just claiming to be 'wise' does not make us so. The New Testament also mentions poor discernment (Luke 12:56; Rom. 1:28; 1 Cor. 1:19, 2:14). People have constantly to 'test' themselves and each other (1 Cor. 11:28; 16:3; 2 Cor. 8:8; 8:22; 13:5; Gal. 6:4; 1 Tim. 3:10), just as God 'tests' us in various ways (1 Cor. 3:13; 1 Thess. 2:4; 1 Pet. 1:7). Testing and being tested by the Scriptures are an integral part of this picture. Wise discernment does not grow in a vacuum. It is shaped in a matrix – in a relationship with the God who 'tests', and within a community where are all permeated by Scripture, since the biblical authors refract this wisdom into its component parts.

Our attempts to apply rights, results, values and rules are distorted by unseen undertows: the patterns of what we love, and the systems of group inclusion that we cannot live without – what the New Testament authors call our 'flesh'. Christians do not 'do ethics' precisely because we mistrust this broken aspect of ourselves. Instead, we 'follow Jesus' and are 'in Christ'. *He* becomes our human point of access to what we see erratically.

Broadly speaking, those 'in Christ' seek to uphold and protect the *created order*; to learn and mirror the *character of God*; to inhabit the repentance and forgiveness that sustains true *community in Christ*; and to become 'formatted' to fit their *new future*.

Scriptural *commands*, when understood within the Bible's overall 'story arc', serve to unveil these aspects of reality. They also act as an 'emergency braking system' when the immediacy of our 'flesh' needs closer interrogation.

This identity in Christ makes us both best friends and terrible annoyances to those around us. We seem to dodge and weave:

- We protect some 'right' – then object when the 'right' dismisses the weave of creation, or damages community.
- We work towards results – only to protest when the quest for some result denies or displaces God's good future, or compromises community.
- We listen to talk of values – and then complain when a value opposes God's character, or is too vague or self-promoting to support community.
- We respect rules – until we notice that the rule is destroying freedom, demolishing discernment, or becoming a loophole against community.

Now that all seems quite irritating, but we are only copying Jesus (if clumsily). He wreaked the best kind of havoc wherever he went. He upset everyone's moral categories all the time. To the law-stickler, he said: go discover compassion (Luke 14:3–5). To the goal-oriented security-seeker, he said: lose yourself in God's abundant creation (Luke 12:22–34). To the self-aware seeker of fulfillment, he said: learn some faithfulness (Matt. 19:3–6). To the justice-as-equality activist, he said: challenge your inner greed (Luke 12:13–15). To those wanting righteous judgment on others, he said: stop it (Luke 9:52–55). To evaders of righteous judgment, he said: wake up (Luke 13:1–4). Of those deserving righteous judgment, he prayed 'forgive them' (Luke 23:34).

He upset moral categories everywhere, yet inhabited the most joined-up kind of life imaginable. So Christians orient themselves to the cosmos 'in him'. Anything less – any adherence to some other code, set of values, principle or



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philosophy would relegate Jesus merely to becoming a fellow-traveller within that code or philosophy. And that would be a horrendous error, because we would then miss all the signals that he is the human who *knew how to be human*. We would miss the opportunity to be inducted into true humanity through him.

No discussion of 'ethics' does anyone any favours if Jesus' distinctive input is excluded. Kids 'in Christ' have serious input for other kids' attempts to 'do ethics'. Whatever happens with the current trial, I hope we do not drift into a kind of apartheid where non-God ethics seals itself off from any challenge by Jesus. We don't want anyone to be deprived the opportunity for Jesus' kind of joined-up life.

*This article is based on Andrew's forthcoming book, Joined Up Life: a Christian account of how ethics works to be published by IVP and planned for summer release.*

*Moore College is developing a 'Centre of Christian Life', a venue for Christians to explore ethical aspects of our lives, with Jesus at the 'centre'. For further information visit [www.sie.org.au](http://www.sie.org.au).*

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#### SPEAKERS:

**Bryan Cowling** (CEO Anglican Education Commission)

**Karin Sowada** (CEO Anglican Deaconess Institution)

**Russell Powell** (CEO Anglican Media)

**Zac Veron** (CEO Anglican Youthworks)

**Janet Simpson** (Scripture Teacher and Youthworks Executive)

Refreshments will be available at the conclusion of the evening.

Anglican Church  
LEAGUE