# From virtue ethics to rights ethics: Did the Reformation pave the way for secular ethics?

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In chapter four of his book, *The unintended Reformation*, Brad Gregory argues that ethical thinking since the 1500's experienced a major shift in emphasis from the teleological concept of a 'substantive morality of the good' to liberalism's 'formal morality of rights'. He attributes it to the religious upheavals and 'sociopolitical disruptions' during the Reformation era. This article probes three elements of Gregory's argument. Firstly, the article offers a critical assessment of Gregory's depiction of the Reformation's stance towards reason. It pays particular attention to the Reformation's understanding of the effects of sin on the human being's image of God, reason and the possibility for a shared social ethics. Secondly, this study scrutinises Gregory's argument that the Reformation created an individualist notion of selfhood in contrast to the Roman Catholic communal notion of selfhood and thereby paved the way for modernism. Lastly, the discussion probes into Gregory's claim that the Reformation's ethical paradigm diverged radically from the Latin Christendom paradigm and that this contributed to the subjectivisation of ethics, by replacing a virtue ethics with a rights ethics.

## Introduction

Brad Gregory's controversial and much debated book published in 2012, *The unintended Reformation: How a religious revolution secularised society,* identifies the Reformation era as the major historical epoch that set the events in motion that eventually led to modern secularism. A central feature of this argument is Gregory's observation in chapter four that ethical thinking since the 1500's experienced a major shift in emphasis from the teleological concept of a 'substantive morality of the good' to liberalism's 'formal morality of rights' (Gregory 2012:184). Whilst this claim of Gregory is widely accepted, his theory on the cause of the shift is more controversial. Whereas most historians and philosophers ascribe this shift in ethical paradigm to the rise of the Enlightenment, Gregory (2012:185) attributes it to the religious upheavals and 'sociopolitical disruptions' during the Reformation era. Gregory (2012) states his central thesis on the subject as follows:

> The fundamental historical realities that drove the central change were the religious disagreements and related sociopolitical disruptions of the Reformation era, because in the Middle Ages Christianity – with all its problems – was Western Europe's dominant, socially pervasive embodiment of a morality of the good. (p. 185)

The research question that this article will address is the following: Is Gregory correct in describing the Reformation era as the fundamental historical event that paved the way for secular ethics by causing a shift from a 'substantive morality of the good' to a 'formal morality of rights'?

This article's response to the research question will proceed as follows: Firstly, an explication will be given of Gregory's argument. Thereafter, Gregory's argument that the Reformation paved the way to secular ethics will be evaluated. The evaluation will probe three elements of Gregory's argument. Firstly, the article offers a critical assessment of Gregory's depiction of the Reformation's stance towards reason. It pays particular attention to the Reformation's understanding of the effects of sin on the human being's image of God, reason and the possibility for a shared social ethics. Secondly, this study scrutinises Gregory's argument that the Reformation created an individualist notion of selfhood in contrast to the Roman Catholic communal notion of selfhood and thereby paved the way for modernism. Lastly, the discussion probes into Gregory's claim that the Reformation's ethical paradigm diverged radically from the Latin Christendom paradigm and that this contributed to the subjectivisation of ethics by replacing a virtue ethics with a rights ethics.

## Explicating Gregory's argument

The term 'substantive ethics of the good', in Gregory's reasoning, denotes Latin Christianity's preference for a teleological ethics that was oriented towards the cultivation of virtues that would

enable humans to reach their *telos*. Thomas Aquinas, in particular, integrated a range of Aristotelian, Neo-Platonic and Augustinian perspectives into an ethical system that dominated Roman Catholic thinking during the late medieval period. Central to Thomistic teleological ethics is the idea that all things come from God and returns to God. Humanity is, according to the Aristotelian scheme of potency and act, in motion towards a *telos* determined by God. Human beings are moved by habits that are in essence dispositions towards good and evil (Aquinas 1989:225, *Summa Theologia*, 1a2ae.49.4). Whereas good habits draw humans towards the fulfilment of their *telos*, bad habits lead them astray from it (Oliver 2005:58). Good habits are in essence virtues that perfect human actions by directing human passions within a specific context towards a good end (Aquinas 2005:14).

Aquinas (2005:97) distinguished between theological, moral and intellectual virtues. As a result of the infusion of nature with divine grace, humans are able to acquire and comprehend these good virtues through teaching and training. By acquiring virtues, individuals are empowered to serve the common good and communal political life with their moral and virtuous behaviour.

All of the various virtues, however, cannot function on their own, but need to be informed by the supernatural virtue of *caritas*. Aquinas viewed *caritas* as the 'mother' of virtues and the source that gives all 'virtuous behaviour its life and existence' (Aquinas 2005:249, 1989:351, *ST* IIaIIae.23.8). *Caritas*, which consists of a love for God and fellow human beings, directs the human being to its ultimate goal, which is God and eternal happiness (Aquinas 1989:351, *ST* II-II.23.7). All particular goals in society have to comply, according to Aquinas, to the ultimate goal of *caritas*, which in turn serves the larger good of society (cf. Aquinas 2005:266, 1989:351, *ST* IIaIIae.23.8). Only when *caritas* governs our desires there can be peace and tranquillity of order.

Gregory (2012:206) claims that the magisterial Reformation deliberately attempted to dispense with the teleological ethics developed within Roman Catholicism because it did not correlate with the Reformation's cosmology, anthropology and soteriology. Whereas the Thomistic worldview viewed reality as participating in an analogical sense in God, Gregory implies that the Reformation was influenced by the univocalist view of Duns Scotus, which separated God and creation by emphasising God's absolute sovereignty. Given that God and humanity share in the same being, we can talk in the same terms about God and creation (univocalism). God was no longer seen as the origin of being, but as a 'discrete, real entity' or the highest being amongst beings (Gregory 2012:38).

According to Gregory (2012:207), the Lutheran and Protestant Reformation regarded human nature as corrupted by sin, and as possessing no inherent ability to comprehend the human *telos, whereas the teleological ethics of Latin Christendom, which was embedded within a realist worldview, held that the human has an innate ability to comprehend his telos.* Seeing as

the reformers rejected the notion that any 'positive remnant of the *imago Dei*' remained in the human being after the Fall, they regarded the Catholic notion of a gradual disciplining of passions and nurturing of virtues through habituation as improper, because it would deny the total depravity of human nature. For the Reformation, 'salvation had nothing to do with virtues, because it had nothing to do with human freedom or the human will' (Gregory 2012:206). Sanctification 'is a consequence of salvation by faith through grace' and 'effected' only by God (Gregory 2012:206). The virtue ethical premise that holds that the human is naturally disposed to reaching the human *telos*, violated the Reformed principle of *sola gratia* by creating an avenue for the Pelagian notion that humans can contribute to their own salvation through a virtuous life. Gregory (2012) states it as follows:

> A gratuitous gift divinely guaranteed, God's grace came all at once, not in sacramentally dispensed dribs and drabs or through the free exercise of acquired virtues. Indeed, exhortations to practise the virtues as part of the process of salvation were blasphemous: they amounted to covert calls for human beings to try to save themselves. (p. 207)

Gregory (2012:209) argues that the Protestant Reformation contributed to the demise of a substantive ethics of the good by rejecting the notion of 'a free, rational exercise of the virtues in pursuit of the good'. The recognition of the human's capacity for virtue would contradict the biblical teaching of the depravity of human nature (cf. Gregory 2012:208). Instead, the Reformed tradition, especially Protestant rulers, replaced Catholic teleological virtue ethics nurtured by habituation with a rule-based morality founded on biblical revelation. Order had to be maintained 'commensurate with the depravity of human nature' through 'biblical moralism'. The new emphasis was no longer on *caritas,* but on 'obedience', because 'ethical regimes' ought not to be dominated by 'habituation in Christian virtues but by the following of moral rules' (Gregory 2012:209). Ethics was thus no longer understood as a 'pursuit of holiness linked to human flourishing', but as a pursuit of rules that were legalistically enforced, given that not all people are capable of virtuous behaviour (Gregory 2012:210).

Religious divisions and the wars waged by rulers of different Christian communities would give further impetus towards a rights-based ethical discourse (Gregory 2012:209). Doctrinal disagreements, religious divisions and wars shattered the existing moral order and consequently rights-based institutional frameworks had to be devised to end 'Christian contestation about the good' (Gregory 2012:226). Seeing as there was general disagreement 'about the meaning of God's word', individuals created in the image of God, not institutions, were seen as the bearers of rights, who had to be protected against external coercion and be allowed to determine the good for themselves (Gregory 2012:216).

The rights-based institutional frameworks that originated in the Dutch Republic and the United States eventually formed the foundations of the modern liberal state, but in a manner that 'departed in critical ways from the conception

of rights both in medieval Christianity and in magisterial Protestantism during the Reformation era' (Gregory 2012:214). Given that the religious wars revealed how costly the pursuit for a substantive moral community could be, politics and religion were radically separated and the ideal of a substantive morality that integrates politics and ethics was abandoned (Gregory 2012:216). The fundamental duty of rulers was no longer 'to promote a moral community and a substantive common good' (Gregory 2012:216). James Madison's theory on the individual's right to practise religion according to his conscience and free from external constraint received 'institutional sanction and political protection within an American Protestant moral establishment' from where it was exported to the rest of the world (Gregory 2012:212). The result, as Gregory (2012:212) was that the right to religious freedom soon also included the right not to believe 'the institutional framework of the liberal state and its ethics of rights provided the political protection for individuals to reject religion altogether'.

Contrary to the intentions of the Reformation, the formal ethics of rights that originated in the Reformation era developed into a tool of modern secularism, whilst ethics become radically individualised and subjectivised (Gregory 2012:218). Modern philosophy could not stem the tide of the subjectivisation of morality 'rooted in the Reformation' (Gregory 2012:220). Despite the 'enthusiasm' in the late 18th century for natural law theories as the basis for a new integration of politics and ethics, philosophy also became entangled in a 'welter of rival truth claims' that 'replicated the open-ended indeterminacy of the Protestant appeal to Scripture' (Gregory 2012:221). Whereas Roman Catholicism regarded *caritas* as the main virtue and the Reformation in turn attached the same importance to *obedience*, the modern subjectivisation of morality demanded that *toleration* be regarded as the central value, in order to mitigate between various conflicting interests (Gregory 2012:232). The end result was contemporary Western hyperpluralism, because individuals now 'choose their respective goods' in an 'open-ended way' (Gregory 2012:232).

Concisely summarised, Gregory develops his thesis as follows: Pre-Reformation Latin Christianity provided an institutionalised worldview and acted as a 'bearer of teleological ethics' (2012:189). Protestant objections to the institutionalised worldview of Catholicism however, resulted in 'an open range of rival truth claims about the true meaning of Scripture' (Gregory 2012:185). These contestations created social upheaval and 'yielded rival claims' about what a good Christian life and a good communal life entails (Gregory 2012:185). Whilst the Reformation accepted the natural rights tradition, it rejected the teleological Aristotelian tradition within which the natural rights tradition was 'embedded' (Gregory 2012:185). Instead, a new 'trajectory' was created towards a deontological ethics of rights that could address the 'violence of the Reformation era' (Gregory 2012:185). Discord amongst early modern Christians about 'the objective morality of the good' led to the development of the right of religious freedom, which itself gave rise to an open-ended expansion of rights that would eventually include the right not to believe (Gregory 2012:188). The recognition of the right to religious freedom thus became one of the major developments that animated the transition to a secular and liberal understanding of rights.

# A challenge to Gregory's narrative

The fundamental problem with Gregory's historical account is his one-sided and highly tendentious depictions of Latin Christendom and the Reformation era. His narrative does not appreciate, in my view, the social complexity of both the Latin Christendom and Reformation era, nor does he approach his topic by referring to the whole spectrum of Reformed doctrines that are relevant to the subject. He tends to one-sidedly highlight certain Reformed doctrines such as *sola scriptura* and the total depravity of human nature at the expense of other important Reformed doctrines such as God's common grace, thereby creating a simplistic picture of Reformed theology.

This section will contest Gregory's claims on three grounds. Firstly, it will argue that the Reformation did not devalue reason as Gregory seems to suggest, but that the Reformers rather challenged the notion that reason can function independent of the human's relationship with God. Secondly, the Reformation did emphasise rights and individual liberty, but cognisant of the danger of autonomous selfhood, deliberately developed a theocentric grounding of individual selfhood in order to avoid the extremes of medieval communalism and emerging individualism. Gregory's claim that the Reformation is the most distant source of individualism is therefore not valid. Lastly, Gregory's argument that the substantive virtue ethics of medieval society safeguarded social cohesion, whilst the rule based rights ethics of the Reformation contributed to the subjectivisation of ethics, is fundamentally flawed. There was no Golden Age of common agreement on ethical behaviour. Moreover, the ethical systems of Roman Catholicism and the Reformation did not diverge as radically as Gregory suggests.

## The Reformation on faith and reason

Gregory (2012) depicts the rationality of the Reformation as 'moralistic', legalistic and arbitrary:

> Conscientious Protestant rulers oversaw ethical regimes that were dominated not by habituation in Christian virtues, but by the following of moral rules. These moral rules were based on God's biblically revealed laws ... Through biblical moralism Protestant reformers and rulers sought to close the pre-Reformation gap between Christian prescription and practice ... Public morality simply was following the rules stipulated by the restored church's leaders working with the political authorities established by God. (p. 209)

He goes on to state that 'soteriological convictions influenced the moralistic character of magisterial Protestantism' (Gregory 2012:209). Clearly, his contention is that because the Reformation viewed human nature as inherently flawed and corrupt, it had no choice but to reject Roman Catholicism's

rational justification of rules and to subject itself to an arbitrary and moralistic following of biblically revealed laws. The human being, after all, has no rational capacity to comprehend the moral structure of things, nor to grasp the *telos* of being.

This portrayal of the Reformation's approach to rationality is, in my view, problematic. From the ensuing discussion it ought to become clear that the Reformation did not discard the importance of human rationality in ethical thinking, as Gregory supposes; in fact, they emphasised that reason can only function properly when 'captivated and transformed' by God's grace (Mouw 1985:252). Revelation does not merely supplement human reason, but it liberates the human mind from the slavery of sin and ignorance, whilst sanctification enables the human mind to understand the rationality of God's commandments, to live in communion with God, to subdue evil passions and to grasp the human *telos*. Clearly, the magisterial reformers did not oppose nor denigrate reason, but they attempted to 'dynamize' reason (Mouw 1985:253).

But does the emphasis of the Reformers on the importance of saving grace for ethics mean that the Reformation rejected the possibility of a commonly shared social ethics? Gregory answers in the affirmative. Given that the Reformation rejected the notion of a remnant of good in the *imago Dei* after the Fall, the reprobate have no access to true virtue. Rules therefore have to be imposed upon them by authorities, as Gregory (2012) indicates:

> The reprobate were by contrast deprived of God's saving grace and thus by definition lacked any genuine exercise of *caritas* regardless of appearances, just as they were unalterably lived and listed toward wickedness, divinely established magistrates (Rom 13:1–4) assisted by pastors could at least try to make them conform to laws consistent with the Gospel, and were obliged to punish their regressions. (p. 208)

This depiction, however, does not do justice to the teachings of the Protestant Reformation. The magisterial Reformation's doctrine on the fallen and total corrupted nature of the *imago Dei* cannot be understood in isolation from its doctrine on God's common grace, the natural law and the existence of two kingdoms.

Far from being a biblical moralist, Luther taught in continuity with the medieval tradition that moral questions cannot be approached through a biblical regime alone, but have to be complemented with natural law reasoning (cf. Simpson 2010:420). Luther distinguished between natural law and positive law. The natural law is the practical first principle on right and wrong that is imprinted by God in everyone and binds all men at all times, whereas positive law applies to specific situations and is not universally binding (Luther 1917, LW 16:371–372). Positive law, which includes the biblical laws of Moses, are only binding on all people insofar as it rests on natural law principles (Luther 1917, LW 16:371–375). This distinction between natural law and biblical law enabled Luther to understand biblical commandments within

their particular social contexts and thus to avoid a biblicism that applies Scripture indiscriminately to all kinds of social contexts. According to Luther, biblical law only binds when it agrees with natural law, because all moral authority are eventually grounded in natural law (Luther 1917, LW 16:371–375). Simpson (2010) describes Luther's approach well:

> Luther's scriptural threshold for moral obligation is natural law, not biblical law. In other words, Scripture teaches that natural law trumps biblical law everytime. Therefore, the moral authority of positive biblical law is limited to its biblical time and place. Biblical law authoritatively binds only when it already agrees with natural law, because binding moral authority rests in natural law. (p. 424)

The importance that Luther placed on natural law was based on the premise that natural law is as divinely inspired as Scripture itself. In fact, biblical moral law is an expression of the natural law that is already written in human hearts. Whereas Thomas Aquinas taught that natural virtues ought to be infused by supernatural virtues, specifically *caritas,* Luther taught that natural law in fact expresses supernatural virtues, because God is its author. That is why it was possible for Luther to depict love as the fundamental principle of natural law (cf. Van Drunen 2010:65; Simpson 2010:423).

Closely connected to Luther's natural law theory was his doctrine on the two kingdoms that is most explicitly articulated in his treatise *Von weltlicher Oberheid, wie weit man ihr Gehorsam schuldig sei.* Luther used the two kingdoms doctrine on the one hand, to express the antithesis between the spiritual realm and the civil realm, but conversely, also to create 'a space for commonality between believers and unbelievers' (Van Drunen 2010:61). God rules both the spiritual and natural realm, whilst the Christian is citizen of both kingdoms (Luther 1917:72–73). For the benefit of society, Christians are obliged to obey earthly laws and rulers, because civil authorities are an institution of God (Luther 1917:70). Whilst the spiritual realm cannot function without the light of God's word, Luther regarded the light of reason as sufficient for human affairs. In fact, according to Luther, reason is in the human realm the highest law and all the written laws of the civil realm should be kept subject to human reason (Luther 1917:103; cf. Beeke 2011:205). Clearly, Luther did not regard reason as so depraved that the human realm has to be governed by 'divinely established magistrates' according to the moral rules of the Bible, as Gregory (cf. 2012:208) suggests. Instead, reason provides humanity with a shared ethical framework that is sufficient for the civil realm. Although Luther was a realist on the noetic effects of sin, and often portrayed reason as a power that opposes God, he also proclaimed God's ongoing creative providence over temporal affairs by not allowing his creation to degenerate into chaos. Part of this providence can be seen in God's preservation of the capacities of reason despite sin (cf. Simpson 2010:428).

Calvin largely followed Luther's approach to sin and reason. He distinguished between the *imago Dei's* supernatural and natural gifts. The Fall has destroyed the *imago Dei's*

supernatural gifts such as faith and righteousness, which were originally sufficient for salvation. The result is that human beings are spiritually blind, unable to know God's will and therefore lost and incapable of salvaging themselves. Yet, the Fall has not destroyed the human being's natural gifts, such as reason and art. These gifts are weakened and corrupted, but not destroyed (cf. Calvin, *Inst.* 2.2.12). Reason cannot bring human beings salvation, but it does enable human beings to 'cherish' and 'preserve' society and to impress on men 'civil order' and 'honesty' (Calvin, *Inst.* 2.2.13). Calvin (2008) states it thus: 'The human mind, however much fallen and perverted from its original integrity, is still adorned and invested with admirable gifts from its Creator' (*Inst.* 2.2.13).

Calvin attributes the preservation of the natural gifts after the Fall to God's common grace that has the 'common benefit' of mankind in mind (*Inst.* 2.2.15). Sparks of the natural gifts survived in human beings, not because of endowments by nature, but because God 'engraves' his natural law upon the hearts of all humankind, believers and non-believers alike (*Inst* 1.16.9, 2.2.22). The remnants of the natural gifts do not relativise the sinfulness of human nature; they are purely gifts that emanate from God's providence in order to preserve creation: 'Had God not spared us, our revolt would have carried along with it the entire destruction of nature' (*Inst* 2.2.17).

In accordance with Calvin, some Reformed confessions state that despite the total corruptness of human nature, some vestiges of good remain in human nature. Here, we can refer to article 4 of the Canons of Dort (1619) and article 14 of the Belgian Confession (1561)[1]. On the one hand, these Confessions allude to vestiges of good in order to indicate that human beings cannot exonerate themselves from blame, because they were created good (cf. Berkouwer 1957:131, 133). The vestiges of good in the *imago Dei* are proof of this. Conversely, the vestiges of good indicate that sin does not demonise and dehumanise human beings and that God's creation is not so depraved that it can no longer be considered as a work of God.

Congruent with the distinction between the lost supernatural gifts and the weakened natural gifts, Calvin distinguishes between the spiritual and civil realms. The spiritual realm is the heavenly realm of righteousness and true knowledge of God, whereas the civil realm is the realm of politics, economics and art (Calvin, *Inst.* 2.2.13). With regard to earthly things, God's natural law that is engraved on the human mind enables human beings to achieve great things. With regard to the heavenly realm, however, natural law is not able to provide fallen human nature with knowledge of salvation (cf. Calvin, *Inst.* 2.2.22; Van Drunen 2010:112).

1. Canon of Dort (art. 4): 'There remain, however, in man since the fall, the glimmerings of natural light, whereby he retains some knowledge of God, of natural things, and of the differences between good and evil, and discovers some regard for virtue, good order in society, and for maintaining an orderly external deportment' (Beeke & Ferguson 1999:50). Belgic Confession (art. 14): 'And being thus become wicked, perverse and corrupt in all his ways, he hath lost all his excellent gifts which he had received from God and only retained a few remains thereof which, however, are sufficient to leave man without excuse, for all the light in us is changed into darkness' (Beeke & Ferguson 1999:46).

Luther's grounding of biblical law in natural law was followed closely by the Calvinist tradition. According to Calvin, the natural law provides all human beings with a sense of right and wrong (cf. Calvin 1.16.9, 2.2.22). The natural law is sufficient for instructing humans in 'a right course of conduct' (Calvin *Inst.* 2.2.22). Calvin understands all moral law as an expression of natural law. He (2008) states it thus in the fourth book of the Institutes:

> Now as it is evident that the law of God which we call moral law, is nothing else than the testimony of natural law, and of that conscience which God has engraved in the minds of men, the whole of this equity of which we now speak is prescribed in it. (*Inst.* 4.20.16)

In the same passage, Calvin proceeds to state that the reality of governments agreeing through different ages about fundamental wrongs such as stealing and murder testifies to the fact that there is a universal knowledge of right and wrong that can be attributed to God's providential workings in creation. It is God's common grace operating through the Holy Spirit and natural law that makes civilian government possible despite the effects of sin.

The scope of this article does not allow for a discussion of the views of other exponents of the Reformation regarding this topic. From the aforementioned, it is clear however, that the most representative figures in the Reformation did not regard sin as obliterating the relationship between God and human beings. Despite the total corruption of sin, the relationship between God and human beings endure, because God preserves his relationship with humanity through his common grace and natural law. Human beings cannot escape their ethical responsibility or accountability to their Creator. Gregory's claim that the Reformation discarded virtue ethics and instead developed a rule based ethics because totally corrupted human beings would have no access to any sense of virtue is clearly invalid. The fallacy of the argument lies therein that it does not take into account the close relationship between the Reformation's doctrine on the *imago Dei* and its doctrine on God's common grace, natural law and the two kingdoms.

## The Reformation's notion of selfhood

Gregory reasons that the Reformation was the most distant source of an individualist concept of human selfhood. Whereas medieval Roman Catholic substantive ethics viewed the human as a communal being that is inextricably part of an institutionalised moral community, the rights ethics of the Reformation conceived of individuals as 'their own arbiters' of the good, based on 'the word of God before him' and the 'mind of Christ in him' (Gregory 2012:216). This individualist understanding of selfhood would eventually, according to Gregory, prepare the way for modernity's notion of the autonomous self and thus contribute to the subjectivisation of ethics, the separation between politics and ethics and the erosion of substantive moral community (Gregory 2012:218).

Although the Reformation indeed created a platform for religious liberty by proclaiming the freedom of conscience

from ecclesiastical, clerical and political controls, it's notion of selfhood was far removed from that of secular liberalism. In fact, the Reformation not only reacted against Roman Catholicism's communal notion of selfhood, but was very much aware of the dangers of the emerging autonomous notion of selfhood (cf. Mouw 1985:255). This can be seen in the Reformers' insistence that ethics cannot be based on autonomous reason because of the noetic effects of sin (cf. Luther 2013:65). Witte (1998:261) rightly notes that the Protestant Reformation attempted to strike a balance between the extremes of 'libertarianism' and communalism by grounding moral norms in the 'creation order', 'covenantal relationships' and 'divine calling'.

The Calvinist Reformation in particular used the notions of creation order and covenant to conceive of the self as a being in relation to God and fellow human beings. They defined the human being as at once a singular being that is accountable to God, and simultaneously a social being that is a member of the covenant community and a participant in divinely created relationships. Johannes Althusius (1557–1638) utilised the insights of early Reformers on God's creation ordinances and covenant to provide the most comprehensive and influential Protestant explication of selfhood through his notion of symbiotic human relationships. Whilst acknowledging the Calvinist principle of the human being's total depravity in sin, he stated that human beings are naturally attached to God, neighbour and society, and therefore by nature long for symbiotic relationships with others in which they can share their lives and experience community (Althusius 1961, *Pol*. 1.1–10; cf. Witte 2007:10, 155). Because of their social nature, human beings are naturally inclined to form human associations through mutually consensual covenants 'sworn by all members of that association before each other and God' (Witte 2007:10). Each association is subject to the terms of the covenant and commands of God's biblical and natural laws that protect the rights and liberties of the subject (Althusius 1961, *Pol*. 1.3). Althusius applied this covenantal understanding of selfhood also to the state and many of his insights later became axiomatic in Western constitutionalism (Witte 2007:10).

The Reformation's high regard for tradition serves as a further caveat against rash inferences that the Reformation entertained an individualist notion of selfhood. The Reformers did not regard morality as founded on autonomous reason, but as revealed in natural and biblical law, and transmitted by the ecclesiastical tradition through the ages. Tradition was therefore viewed by the Reformers as a very important source of moral knowledge. Both Calvin and Luther believed that the interpretation of Scripture should not be a purely private enterprise. They regarded the church as the institution of God that preserves the *regula fidei* (Vorster 2013:61). Luther (2010) states it as follows in his larger Catechism:

We further believe that in this Christian Church we have forgiveness of sin, which is wrought through the holy sacraments and absolution and through all kinds of comforting promises from the entire Gospel. Therefore,

whatever ought to be preached about the sacraments belong here. In short the whole gospel and all of the offices of Christianity belongs here. (p. 92)

Calvin (2008) accordingly, equates the church to a visible 'mother' that sustains the faithful:

Let us learn from her (the church) single title of Mother, how useful, no how necessary the knowledge of her is, since there is no other means of entering into life unless she conceives us in the womb and give us birth, unless she nourishes us at her breasts, and, in short, keep us under her charge and government, until, divested of moral flesh, we become like the angels. (*Inst*. 4.1.4)

The Reformation viewed the Roman Catholic Church as preoccupied with worldly affairs, and therefore regarded the Roman Catholic Church as no longer able to serve its original purpose. The Reformation's rejection of the Roman Catholic Church and its rejection of a synthesis between the biblical message and Aristotelian ethics however, did not automatically constitute a rejection of tradition and community altogether. The Reformers even appreciated non-biblical literature and regarded the ethical insights of many non-biblical writers as confirmation of the biblical message (Alfsvag 2005:303).

## Substantive virtue ethics and rights ethics

Gregory portrays the teleological ethics of Latin Christendom and the rights ethics of the Reformation as two fundamentally opposing and contradictory ethical systems. This sets the stage for him to argue that the conquest of the Reformation's rights ethics over Latin Christendom's teleological ethics constituted a major historical shift that eventually paved the way for secular ethics.

Although the ethical systems of Latin Christendom and the Reformation indeed differed significantly, there was more convergence between them than Gregory's narrative intimates. The fundamental problem with Gregory's depiction is that he understates both the role of grace in Thomistic thinking, and the role of reason in Reformational thinking. This allows him to make a sharp distinction between the two ethical systems. If one accepts evidence that Latin Christendom Roman Catholicism and the Reformation were much closer to each other on the issues of grace and reason, however, then Gregory's theory that the Reformation's ethics inaugurated a major shift in human history, becomes less plausible.

Alien to Aquinas's thought, Gregory tends to emphasise *caritas* as the ground motive in Thomistic ethics, not grace. Aquinas indeed regarded *caritas* as the most excellent virtue, but it is nothing more than a directing force. Grace in Aquinas's thinking is that which makes sound ethics feasible. It is not merely a principle, but a new life form that makes it possible for the human being to return to God. Aquinas viewed virtues as flowing from God's grace and God's presence in history. He asserted that God infuses his grace in human beings by implanting gracious habits in them,

raising 'human nature' to 'partake' in its supernatural end (Oliver 2005:66). These gracious habits manifest themselves in the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity that enable the human being to follow the law of the Spirit (Oliver 2005:64; O'Meara 1997:265). Whilst not diminishing the role of acquired virtuous activity, Aquinas observed that only infused virtues are complete and deserve to be called virtues, 'since they direct a human being to the absolutely ultimate end' (O'Meara 1997:265).

This new movement of human souls towards beatitude is only possible because of Christ's passion that remits the sins of humanity and restores the principle of motion towards a goal (Oliver 2005:69, 70). Virtues are, thus, not qualities that can simply be acquired through habitation without any divine infusion. In fact, following the Fall, humanity requires 'the infusion of grace in order to move and be moved' to their proper *telos* in Christ (Oliver 2005:53). Sin has damaged human nature to such a degree that humans are not able to reach their *telos* through their natural abilities alone. Aquinas (2006) states it thus:

> We have a more perfect knowledge of God by grace than we have by natural reason. The latter depends on two things: images derived from the sensible world, and the natural intellectual light by which we make abstract intelligible concepts from these images. But human knowledge is helped by the revelation of grace when it comes to both of these. The light of grace strengthens the intellectual light. (p. 136)

Whilst Gregory understates the role of grace in Latin Christendom Roman Catholic ethics, as already noted, he also underestimates the role reason and tradition played in Reformed thinking. There is no evidence that the Reformation devalued virtues or regarded it as totally unattainable because of human depravity. Although the magisterial Reformation viewed virtuous behaviour, in the first instance, as a fruit of the sanctifying and regenerative work of the Spirit, it also acknowledged that all human beings have a sense of right and wrong because of God's natural revelation and common grace. The Reformation's understanding of love as the fundamental rubric of natural law enabled them to speak of the possibility of a virtuous life, even for unbelievers. One of the most important exponents of this line of thought was the Calvinist jurist, Johannes Althusius, who depicted human beings as virtuous creatures capable of a just life, because they are created by God as rational beings that are able to express and receive love (Althusius 1961, *Pol* 1.1–35).

In the light of this, Hauerwas's (1981:114) remark that attempts to contrast virtue ethics with duty ethics are often 'misleading', because neither the 'language of duty nor of virtue excludes the other on principle', is particularly apt. Hauerwas (1981) then proceeds to state:

> The recognition and performance of duty is made possible because we are virtuous, and a person of virtue is dutiful because not to be so is to be less than virtuous. (p. 114)

Seeing as notions of virtues are dependent on our understanding of duty, and vice versa, it seems highly superficial to set the ethics of Latin Christendom and the Reformation against each other in the absolute way that Gregory does.

A further point of contention in Gregory's (2012:209) depiction of the two ethical systems is his judgement that the Reformation replaced *caritas* with obedience as fundamental moral rule. He seems to imply that the Reformation, in contrast to Roman Catholicism, was a coercive movement. Witte (1998:258) rightly notes however, that 'the Protestant Reformation was, in part, a human rights movement' that attempted to free individuals from the coercive 'ecclesiastical regimes', 'central papal rule', 'intrusive canon laws' and 'oppressive princely rules'. Liberty, not obedience, was the rallying cry of the Reformation.

Lastly, Gregory's hypothesis that the substantive virtue ethics of Latin Christendom safeguarded the social unity of medieval society, whereas the rights ethics of the Reformation contributed to the subjectivisation of ethics because it made the individual the arbiter of good, does not seem well-founded. Why would virtue ethics be a better guarantee against moral relativism than a rights ethics? Hauerwas (1981:126) rightly notes that there was no golden age in which a society was so coherent that no 'internal or external moral conflict' existed. Closer scrutiny of the late medieval and Reformation period reveals that the moral discourse of Latin Christendom was more fragmented than Gregory would acknowledge. For instance, during the 16th century a variety of moral theologies emerged within Roman Catholicism that produced various and often opposing interpretations of Aquinas and also differed on the primacy, nature and content of various virtues. Ongoing controversies between Dominicans, Jesuits and Jansenists on the relation between grace and virtue attest to this (cf. O'Meara 1997:272). Since the 16th century, teleological ethics has diverged in various traditions following the same trends as the rights ethical tradition. O'Meara (1997) describes this phenomenon as follows:

> A moral theology of virtue can lead to tradition and community, but, as we have seen, there is not one neo-Thomist tradition on virtue, but presentation by different schools and religious orders over seven centuries. How those views of virtues have worked out in communities can be seen in the history of different religious orders and movements with their devotions, spiritualities, and ministries. (p. 284)

## Conclusion

This article questioned Gregory's hypothesis that the Reformation paved the way for secularisation by replacing the teleological virtue ethics of Latin Christendom with a rights ethics. Firstly, it contested Gregory's argument that the Reformation devalued reason. Instead, it argued that the Reformation attempted to 're-energise' reason by recognising the noetic effects of sin and the need of reason being transformed by the special grace of God. Despite the effects of sin on reason, the Reformation was positive about the possibility of a commonly shared social ethics. Given that sin

has not destroyed the human's rational faculties, and because God's common grace operates through the presence of the Spirit and the natural law in creation, the moral structure of things are accessible to all human beings who possess a divinely imprinted sense of right and wrong. Secondly, in response to Gregory's notion that the Reformation prepared the way for an individualist notion of selfhood, it was argued that the Reformation deliberately developed a theocentric grounding of selfhood precisely in order to avoid the kind of ills that later on emanated from Enlightenment thinking. The Reformation attempted to prevent communitarianism on the one hand, and individualism on the other, by developing an anthropology of symbiotic relationships based on the concepts of God creational ordinances and covenant. Seeing as the notion of autonomous selfhood was regarded as an anathema in Reformed thinking, it would be incorrect to suggest that the Reformation developed a concept of selfhood that unintentionally paved the way for autonomous secular ethics. Lastly, this article challenges Gregory's depiction of the Reformed era's ethics as a rule-based, moralistic ethics that deliberately dispensed with virtue ethics. It is argued that the distinction between virtue ethics and rights ethics is superficial and of little practical import because virtue does not exclude duty, and duty does not exclude virtue. Although the Reformation regarded virtue, first of all, as fruit of the regenerative work of the Spirit, it also considered the attainment of virtue as possible by non-believers, because love is the foundational principle of the natural law, which is accessible to all people.

Did the Reformation unintentionally pave the way for a secular ethics as Gregory suggests? I do not think that Gregory provides enough proof to make such a bold statement. It is hard to imagine that the Reformation could unintentionally prepare the way to a kind of ethics that totally contradicts the *Sola Deo Gloriae* worldview of the Reformation. The key premises of secular ethics such as autonomous reason and individualistic selfhood are totally anathema to the doctrines of the Reformation. The fact that classic liberalism utilised ethical notions of the Reformation, such as rights and contractual associations, are not sufficient evidence that the Reformation paved the way for secularism. Classic liberalism also utilised Roman Catholic ethical concepts such as natural law and subsidiarity, yet it would be absurd to accuse Roman Catholicism of being the forerunner of secularism. In the end, traditions often borrow concepts from each other, although their fundamental worldviews differ.

# Acknowledgements

## Competing interests

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