

THE ETHICAL DILEMMA FROM DR. RUSSELL MOORE'S CHRISTIAN ETHICS COURSE:

“As you listen to your three friends, you find it hard to keep your attention. You wonder if maybe it’s your age. You never expected to still be in ministry at this age. But, then again, with life expectancies and medical technology as they are these days, seventy seven really isn’t all that old. You also never expected to be back in Louisville, where you went to seminary, but here you are, and you are one of the most respected Christian voices in the country. Your insight matters to Christians all over your town, and beyond to believers throughout CentriFuge (the denomination formerly known as the Southern Baptist Convention). That’s a heavy burden, especially today.

Kentucky isn’t the Bible belt anymore. The United States has become much more pluralistic than what you experienced growing up, and the religious landscape has shifted. It’s still kind of hard to drive down Lexington Road, and see The Southern Buddhist Theological Seminary there where the Beeches used to be. The “Just as I OMMMM Christian-Yogic Meditation Center” where Mohler Hall once was still unnerves you a little. Most of Kentucky, like the most of America, is generically secularist, much like Western Europe when you were younger. Christianity is still vibrant, of course, but not at all what it once seemed in terms of public presence.

The fastest growing religion in Kentucky is Islam. Immigrant communities from the Middle East and Africa most often are Muslim these days, but the largest growth is through conversion. Young people tired of the burned over anti-spirituality of post-Christian secularism seem drawn to the authority, the community, and the perceived authenticity of Islam. You’ve seen many of your former youth group kids now Muslim. At the same time, you have a lot of sympathy with your Muslim neighbors. They’re committed to strong families, and they seem better than most at navigating their children away from cultural rot.

The largest Muslim group is not much like what you’ve always known as Islam. It’s a far-right “restorationist” group that is to historic Islam roughly what the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is to historic Christianity. While differing significantly, this group insists it has recovered the ancient Islamic faith, and alone “refuses to compromise with modernity.” Mainstream Muslims, mostly overseas, denounce it as a “cult” but the “restorationist” Muslims are by far the dominant Islamic group now in America and Europe.

That’s what brings the meeting together this morning. The meeting consists of three members of a small group in your church. Emily Schreiner is a faithful church member, the granddaughter of one of your old seminary professors, and currently the governor of Kentucky. Jeremy Bazelon, also a church member, is the mayor of Metro Louisville-Nashville-Cincinnati (“One City/Three Locations” goes the motto). Alya McKenzie is the third figure in front of you. She’s a former Muslim. You led her to Christ, and you’ve seen her thrive in discipleship. They each have a connected dilemma, and they need your help.

1.) Mayor Bazelon has to weigh in on an issue with the city schools to keep from sparking civil discord. Public school is now compulsory all over the country, with no private education or homeschooling for students in grades three through nine. The public schools have required all students to wear uniforms, for years now. The largest Muslim group is outraged.

Reacting against a pornographic American culture, the branch of Islam that has grown the most is the one with the most extreme view of modesty. Women, from young children to the elderly, are required by the decree of their religious leaders, to cover every part of the body, except for the eyes. This is why Kentucky Muslim women are immediately identifiable, by the wearing of these restrictive religious robes and head scarves. The school system mandated the wearing of uniforms, thereby banning this kind of religious dress, sparking outrage from Muslims (led by the Council on Koranic Manhood and Womanhood) and civil libertarians.

Now the city is reconsidering the decision, with heavy opposition from feminist groups (who believe these practices are degrading to women; especially minor girls who cannot consent to this kind of treatment) and conservative groups (who believe the loss of a common American culture, through Muslim “identity politics,” is fracturing the country and segregating Muslims from becoming part of the American mainstream).

Mayor Bazelon worries about whether the rule is a violation of Muslim religious liberty. At the same time, however, he wonders where things will stop if the city grants an exemption. After all, another fast growing group is the racist/nativist/Satanist white supremacist religion, the Church of the Aryan Nation, which requires its male adherents to go shirtless to display the bigoted and violent sayings they've carved into their skin. The mayor worries a "loophole" for the Muslims will open the door for this too.

2.) Governor Schreiner is concerned about the most talked-about human rights issue in the world today. The reactionary Islamic communities, along with some reactionary Christian groups, now practice ritual female "circumcision," known by human rights activists as "genital mutilation." While the vast majority of Muslims have never done this, this particular sect of Islam justifies the practice as ancient, and grounded in a valid interpretation of their religious teachings. The older, more mainstream, Islamic groups denounce the practice, as does a coalition of feminist and Christian groups, who believe it is inhumane and assaults the dignity of women.

Governor Schreiner is horrified, as you are, by female genital mutilation. There are efforts in the Kentucky legislature to restrict or outlaw the practice. The Jewish community, while denouncing the practice too, is concerned that such efforts might also lead to the outlawing of circumcision generally. After all, many of the courts have started ruling that the circumcision of men is also cruel, inhumane, reduces later sexual sensation, and happens without the consent of the one circumcised. Most Jewish leaders abhor the awful practice, but also worry about whether court application of the laws would inhibit the religious liberty of their synagogue.

The circumcision party of restorationist Islam insists that outlawing this practice would violate their free exercise. This practice, they argue, is what separates their group from what they believe to be the "corrupted" and "modern" versions of Islam that have been dominant since the Middle Ages. For them, they say, it would be tantamount to outlawing baptism.

But you've seen the horror of what happens to these girls and women.

3.) Alya is a godly Christian woman, an immigrant to the States, who grew up in mainstream Islam. She married a convert to the most extreme form of American futuristic Islam, and later came to know Christ. Her husband is not pleased with her Christianity. Alya is six months pregnant, with a little girl. Her husband has insisted that, when the baby is born, they "circumcise" her and that she wear the restrictive dress all of her life. Alya is strongly opposed to both scenarios (especially the first). At the same time, she wants to follow the mandate of 1 Peter 3:1 to be submissive to her husband that he might be "won without a word" by her conduct.

You must decide how to advise the mayor about religiously mandated dress, the governor about female genital mutilation, and the mother about the balance between submission to her husband and care for her daughter. What is right and just in these situations? What is loving to neighbor? Walk through each step of ethical reflection, explaining how you arrive at your answers, grounding your answer in Scripture, the gospel, and, if applicable, natural law and common grace. Think through the implications of your answer in each situation for unintended consequences, and show how you would resolve those.

Across the table are three Christians, each perplexed about what it means to follow Christ with their place of authority and responsibility. They look to you for an answer. You look down at your Bible, and blink. Outside you hear a lone cricket chirping in the night..."

CHRISTIAN ETHICS FINAL EXAM

There are two tiers of ethical dilemma presented to us here. The first tier, and most essential to correct because it is such a damaging practice, relates to the physical mutilation of Muslim females in order to "purify" them. The second tier, which relates to the first, concerns the purity of Muslim women regarding their dress in public. Although the first tier has more immediacy, the fundamental issue behind both questions is in understanding the God-given

human dignity of every person, whether male or female. This dignity and worth is grounded upon God's creative purposes for humanity to reflect His glory in their bodies.

These three persons need the same vision in order to address their respective situations. First, I must establish for them from Scripture what it means to be a human, male and female, and why our created bodies matter. From this foundation I must then explain the state's role in protecting human dignity and well-being. Then I must address what specific actions need to be taken immediately and which situations may require a longer, more patient remedy. First I will establish a biblical framework from which we will begin to think about and answer these pressing questions.

Human Dignity, The Body, And Pleasure

Ultimately every person finds their worth in their having been created in the image of God. This image extends from the embryo in the womb to the senile Alzheimer's patients in nursing homes across America.

God has created each person, in the image of God, and for God. From the beginning this has been the case. "God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them" (Genesis 1:27). Furthermore, this creation is a bodily creation. These bodies are both male and female. Every person is not simply spirit but has dignity and worth that is directly associated with their body. God regards murder as a direct assault upon this bodily image of himself (Genesis 9:6) with every human life. This care for the physical body is manifest with no less significance than when Christ was raised physically from the grave. So to will the Christian be raised bodily on the last day. God cares for the body and this care is founded upon Creation and given ultimate significance in the resurrection of Christ.

Moreover, human bodies have significance and value because they provide God-given pleasure and enjoyment. The Song of Songs is perhaps the most powerful example of this reality. Not only are human bodies infinitely valuable because they image God, but they also reflect God's gifts of joy and pleasure to each person. Pursuit of physical pleasure is not an end in itself but is a means by which a human being praises God for his goodness in giving us pleasures and enjoyment in this life. "There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God, for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment?" (Ecclesiastes 2:24-25)

Each person, young and old, has God given value and dignity and should be treated as image-bearers of God. When we assault a person we directly assault Christ and his gospel because He is the exact imprint of God's nature (Hebrews 1:3). Furthermore, true religion is one that cares for the orphans and the widows in our society because God is a loving Father who has already cared for us immeasurably in the giving of his only Son. Because of this mandate to care for the helpless ones in our society it is necessary first to address the second question directed at Governor Schreiner.

Question Two: Female Genital Mutilation

The Sermon on the Mount provides for us an important framework from which we can address the question of the fringe Muslim ritual of female "circumcision," especially as it relates to the centuries old practice of male circumcision. Not only are these two practices for separate purposes both physically and spiritually, but also the intention behind each action is the greatest distinction between these two practices. Because the practice of Female Genital Mutilation

(FGM) is not a long-standing religious practice and because this practice is fundamentally an assault upon the God-given body of each female this practice must be prosecuted by the state.

The first distinguishing characteristic of this practice is that it is only practiced among a fringe Muslim sect. FGM is not a long-standing and widely accepted religious practice even among Muslims and should not therefore be considered an acceptable religious practice that would be protected by the Constitution¹. But even if this were a widespread religious practice it would lose out to the greater concern to protect human life and dignity.

The greatest ethical issue associated with FGM is that of protection of human life and the dignity of each human body. This practice cannot be qualified with the ancient practice of male circumcision because male circumcision is primarily practiced for religious purposes and the intention has not been for destruction but for protection and purification. The practice of male circumcision has medical benefits as well². The practice of FGM is not intended for medical benefits or religious purification but is intended to destroy the physical pleasure associated with sexual intercourse for the purpose of future marital fidelity. Whereas male circumcision is a widespread religious practice used to purify and provide medical benefits the practice of FGM is intended to do the opposite: to destroy the physical sensations which are given by God. This intention is paramount in distinguishing between the two practices.

The Sermon on the Mount gives us some helpful wisdom here regarding inward intent and outward motivation that helps us in distinguishing between male circumcision and FGM. Matthew 5 emphasizes the intensification of the law of God as it now pertains not just to outward deeds but the intentions of the heart. Matthew 6 further explains that even the good deeds of giving, prayer, and fasting are fruitless if done for the praise of men rather than for God. Finally, in Matthew 7 we see the good works of the false prophet, amounting to lawlessness. The difference of intention and motivation behind FGM and the long-standing religious practice of male circumcision is no small distinction. Inward intention can in some cases justify an evil action (defensive murder to protect a child's life) and in other cases even make outwardly good deeds wrong as is so powerfully illustrated by Jesus' words.

Governor Schreiner must urge the legislature to pass this bill protecting this physical mutilation for three main reasons: it is a fringe religious practice, it has no natural (physical) intention other than to destroy (natural sensation and pleasure), and it is fundamentally opposite to the religious practice of male circumcision and should not be equated.

Question One: Traditional Muslim Dress For Women

The fundamental motivation behind this practice and the first practice is the same. However two primary distinguishing characteristics must be made. First, the practice of Muslim dress is a long-standing religious practice among the majority of Muslims. Secondly, although this practice can be argued to be degrading to women and their individual liberties, it is not an assault upon the body or the physical well being of a woman. Because of these two distinguishing characteristics, Mayor Bazelon lacks a legitimate governmental authority in restricting the dress of these Muslim women.

¹ This argument is similar to laws against fringe religious practices such as polygamy among some sects of Mormonism.

² Even from a natural perspective, male circumcision has "existing scientific evidence" demonstrating "potential medical benefits". No such argument can be made for FGM.

The practice of covering the entire body except for the eyes is a legitimate and long-standing religious practice among Muslims. Although this practice can be argued against on a personal level (lack of recognition of individual liberties) and on a social level (the stigmas and fracturing of culture) the state has no legitimate authority to restrict this practice. The purpose of government is to protect people from harm and to judge bad conduct (Romans 13). The social concerns that come along with this traditional Muslim dress are real and should be addressed, but the government, whether local or national, has no legitimate authority to restrict this dress. However, this lack of action by the state does not then give fringe religious groups the right to be shirtless to display bigoted and violent tattoos. Public decency (being fully clothed) is a legitimate protection from the state and the covering of racist and offensive statements should be commended to protect the public.

I would advise Mayor Bazelon to not pass legislation restricting the dress of Muslims in public schools. However, I do not think this practice is personally and socially helpful, so I would advise the mayor to speak out publicly that this practice should be considered in community gatherings and should be cordially discussed in the pursuit of social unity with the goal of social reconciliation and understanding.

Having now addressed these two major issues I can now advise the young mother, Alya, on what she should do when her child is born.

Question Three: Submission And Protection

Whereas the first two ethical dilemmas affect the workplace, this last situation hits right at home for Alya. Pastoral sensitivity and over-the-top support must accompany this next answer. But with these ethical considerations already considered the advice for Alya is clear. In the next few months I would counsel her to ask her husband to consider talking with me and if he will not consent than I would make a reasonable effort to meet up with him. I would plead with him to not pursue this dehumanizing practice of FGM. I would plead with him as a father to love and protect his daughter and to not bring any harm upon her. If my counsel with him did not produce any real fruit than I would advise Alya to separate from her husband in order to protect her newborn child.

The husband and father have been tasked with protecting his household, wife and children, from the beginning of Creation. If he does not consent to abandoning his fringe sect's practice of FGM than he must be considered to be separating from his family according to 1 Corinthians 7:15. This counsel must be coupled with a place for Alya and her child to stay with her church family. If, after a reasonable amount of time and patience, the unbelieving husband does not commit to protecting his wife and child than I would advise Alya to seek a divorce.

Conclusion

The fundamental ethical issue underlying these questions is Christic. Assaulting any human body, whether physically or by way of devaluation, has everything to do with Christ. Because each individual is created in God's image and Christ is the exact imprint of God's nature in the flesh than an attack on a person is an attack on Christ. The worth of each individual person on this level trickles down and has implications for every level of ethical reflection as we have seen. In light of this possible future reality I can only conclude that my desire is that our Father in heaven will make it as it is in heaven here on earth. Thy kingdom come!