

William C. Spohn's Contribution to Moral Theology

By James T. Bretzke, S.J.
CTSA 2006

Introduction

Verba volant, scripta manent ["Spoken words fly away, written words remain"] usually is an exhortation to commit one's teachings to paper, or perhaps the Latin equivalent of "publish or perish," and in occasions such as this panel dedicated to the work of our beloved colleague Bill Spohn the genre usually calls for the accent to fall on the individual's published corpus as the focus for his contribution to the discipline.¹ While I intend also to honor this tradition I would like to point out that the *Verba Volant* do not in fact disappear, and in the age of globalization Bill's unpublished contributions also constitute an important part of his legacy to moral theology. To this end I would like to weave together Bill's contribution not only as author in the discipline of moral theology but also his wider impact as teacher, ecumenist, mentor, and friend.

It was as one of the absolute best all-time teachers I'd had (next to another former teacher seated on this panel!) that I first came to know Bill in 1981 at the Jesuit School of Theology-at-Berkeley, and those of us who had Bill as a teacher remember a number of his oft-repeated phrases that he would employ as mnemonic aids, such as "History doesn't repeat itself, but it does rhyme." Looking over some of my course notes in

¹ I'm sure a full bibliography dedicated to a complete listing of Spohn's works will be published soon, but I have counted thirteen page entries included in my *A Research Bibliography in Christian Ethics and Catholic Moral Theology*, (Lewiston NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2006), and a further seven page entries in my *Bibliography on Scripture and Christian Ethics.*, Studies in Religion and Society, 39, (Lewiston NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1997). Both of these books give brief annotations to the publications listed, so this might be of help to someone wishing to look at the works discussed here below (as well as those which could not be included in such a brief presentation).

conjunction with reviewing some of Bill's key writings I did find a number of compelling thematic rhymes which run throughout both his teaching and publishing.

One of these which I would judge to be perhaps Bill's central contribution to Roman Catholic moral theology is his emphasis on Jesus and the Gospels not merely as sources for moral norms but as change agents in the lives of the disciples. I remember Bill often remarking about a typical German manual of moral theology which would not mention "Jesus" until about page 200, and then only in a footnote. It may have been a slight exaggeration, but only slight. Certainly Bill took seriously Vatican II's call to make Scripture the soul of all theology, and especially to reform the approach to moral theology.²

While others obviously tried to take seriously this same Conciliar charge, none has done more in my opinion than Bill to let Jesus and the Gospels structure the blueprint and framework for approaching moral theology, rather than building the ethical project on a different foundation and then turn to Jesus and Scripture when it was time to move to the stage of interior decoration of the moral dwelling. "Rhyming" with St. Paul a bit, Bill used to say "It's hard to die for a 'moral norm,' but we might imagine doing this for Jesus or another." What Bill was pointing at here was the absolute essentialness for reconnecting a Gospel-centered spirituality to the practice of moral discernment as foundational for doing moral theology:

Spirituality here means the practical, affective, and transformative dimension of a religious tradition. It is accountable to the norms and convictions of a faith community. The practices that express spirituality are pedagogical and transformational. They are the basic repertory for an engaged reading of the story of Jesus.³

² Cf. *Optatam totius*, #16.

³ William C. Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise: Jesus and Ethics*, (New York: Continuum, 1999), 33.

If we follow Bill's lead here then the task of moral theology points less towards making correct decisions and more to the whole process of conversion.⁴

Doing moral theology with this goal in mind meant that many of the fonts of Roman Catholic tradition would not provide us with the resources we needed. What Bill did then, and which I would also count as a major part of his legacy to the whole discipline of moral theology, was to turn to other thinkers and traditions. In this Bill showed himself to be a master ecumenist, and speaking as one who has both studied and taught for considerable periods of time outside of the United States, I have relied immensely on the ecumenical approach to moral theology which I learned from Bill in doing my own work. Now I realize that in this regard I am probably preaching to the choir, but names like Jonathan Edwards, H. Richard Niebuhr, or James Gustafson would *not* have enjoyed the recognition or cautious acceptance among the seminarians and scholars in Rome, Asia and Africa if it had not been for Bill. Bill never discounted Thomas Aquinas and the classic natural law theory, but neither did he confine himself or us to these sources.

For my own work in moral theology I am particularly indebted to Bill for introducing us to James Gustafson's own appropriation of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral of Scripture, Tradition, Experience and Reason (which I have renamed the "Normatively

⁴ Spirituality was a theme in much of Spohn's later writings, including "Scripture" in *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Spirituality*, ed. Arthur Holder, (Blackwell Publishing, 2005): 93-111 and "Christian Spirituality and Theological Ethics," in *The Oxford Handbook of Theological Ethics*, ed. Gilbert Meilaender and William Werpehowski, (Oxford University Press, 2005): 269-295. See also his "The Need for Roots and Wings: Spirituality and Christian Ethics," *Theology Digest* 47 (Winter 2000): 327-340, which was given as the fifth annual Henri de Lubac Lecture in Historical Theology delivered at St. Louis University 21 March 2000. Christians cannot be spiritual without being religious. Spohn argued that to be spiritual one needs the roots of religious tradition and community, while to be religious in a Christian way one needs the wings of committed spiritual practices. Also helpful is his "Spirituality and Ethics: Exploring the Connections," *Theological Studies* 58 (1997): 109-123.

Human”). This 4-Sector source grid has now become so well established in the English-speaking world that I find traces of it even appearing in certain Vatican documents!

Besides modeling for us an ecumenical and collaborative approach to Christian ethics, Bill also broke important ground in trying to outline what I would like to call an inculturated American moral theology. That famous gentle homily “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” was probably all that most of us knew about Jonathan Edwards’ work prior to making Bill’s academic acquaintance. I know that Anne Patrick will be detailing this contribution in a minute, but in terms of Bill’s overall contribution to moral theology I would underscore how he showed us we didn’t always have to look to either the distant past or a remote Europe for doing Christian ethics.⁵

Another important area that Bill helped us explore as a rich source for Christian moral living was what Edwards called the Religious Affections and the Reasons of the Heart. Using the work of a 17th century Protestant divine for the contemporary appropriation of the emotions in Christian ethics I believe was a master-stroke on Bill’s part—somewhat like the way that Josef Fuchs would cite Thomas Aquinas when he wanted to introduce a particularly novel interpretation on moral absolutes. If Bill had merely used a contemporary author (and I’ll not name names to protect the guilty) to make this important point I think the notion could have been more easily dismissed, especially by those influenced by the *patres graviores* working in the shadow of the

⁵ See, for example, William C. Spohn, “The Reasoning Heart: An American Approach to Christian Discernment.” In *Introduction to Christian Ethics: A Reader*, ed. Ronald P. Hamel and Kenneth R. Himes, 563-582. (New York: Paulist, 1989). This piece was originally published in *Theological Studies* 44 (March 1983):30-52. It is also found in *The Reasoning Heart: Toward a North American Theology*, ed. by Frank M. Oppenheim, S.J., (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1986): 51-72. Spohn outlines an approach to Christian discernment based on the thinking of some American theologians which stresses the normative contribution of biblical symbols and distinctive Christian affectivity in guiding moral evaluation.

Dome.⁶ While Bill was respectful generally of the Magisterium, he did not hesitate, with a genuine *obsequium religiosum*⁷ (usually!) to indicate instances in which he felt the Magisterium itself was not being as faithful as it could be in attending to the development of moral theology.⁸

What does one do though when one gets better in touch with one's emotions—moral or otherwise? The answer that Bill gave us marks the next important contribution to moral theology, namely the importance of the role of discernment in the moral life and how we can engage better in this crucial process. He published a number of works in this area, and time does not permit me to go into greater detail here on this contribution.⁹ However, in the whole discernment process he did help navigate between a biblical fundamentalism associated with *WWJD*¹⁰ on one hand, while steering clear of a somewhat cynical dismissiveness of those who would turn to the Bible for moral guidance. Spohn's approach was his articulation of Jesus as being a "concrete universal" which we can access and appropriate through the use of David Tracy's concept of analogical imagination.

⁶ "In the shadow of the Dome" refers to St. Peter's in the Vatican and indicates a mode of thought either closely aligned to (or done in fear of a negative reaction from) the Magisterium.

⁷ Cf. *Lumen Gentium* #25, and there is a wealth of commentary on what this does and does not mean.

⁸ See, for example, his critique of the first draft of the Universal Catechism's overall approach to moral theology, "The Moral Vision of the Catechism: Thirty Years That Did Not Happen." *America* 162 (3 March 1989): 189-192. This article with its reference to a Vatican Rip Van Winkle is the source of a very amusing anecdote which connects Bill to Pope Benedict XVI.

⁹ See though his "Passions and Principles," *Theological Studies* 52 (1991): 69-87, which Spohn published as part of the "Notes in Moral Theology: 1990." He reviews and discusses recent moral literature that stress aspects of the emotions and their involvement in morality. Two key concepts used in reference to the emotions are the criterion of "appropriateness" for moral assessments and strategies and the "education" of the emotions, and he provides ample reference to related literature on psychology and morality.

¹⁰ "What Would Jesus Do?" In my opinion Spohn discusses this problematic approach to Scripture and ethics in best in the First Edition of his *What Are They Saying About Scripture and Ethics*, (Ramsey: Paulist Press, 1984), especially in Chapter 5, "Call to Discipleship" where he references his discussion to Charles Sheldon's devotional classic of the late 19th century, *In His Steps*.

One of Bill's favorite sayings was the moral mandate of the footwashing in John 13 was "not about pedicures!" We were challenged always by him to be not "clones of Christ," but truly ourselves—that is, unique and individual, but nevertheless members bound together to the Lord in the community of disciples. Here I realize I'm beginning to tread in the garden plot assigned to my esteemed colleague Fr. John Donahue, so I will say no more at this moment, other than to acknowledge another real contribution Bill made to the discipline of moral theology was to model for us how a good moral theologian has to be cross-disciplinary and try and bring in the best insights from Scripture and the rest of theology, as well as anything which would help illuminate one or the other sectors of moral experience.

As we have probably intuited by now, Bill's accent in doing moral theology falls far less on the "what" of moral theology, e.g., deducing the various levels of abstract moral norms or applying them to concrete ethical quandaries through casuistry than it does on the "who" of morality, namely the individuals and the communities they live in in our morally complex world (to sneak in the title of a book near to my heart¹¹). Thus, the last contribution of Bill's that time allows me to make here would be his thicker description of our moral identity. Here again those of us familiar with Bill's work spot another few rhymes.

In *Go and Do Likewise* Bill helped clarify the notion of personal identity by asking and answering the question "To whom do I belong?" I think Bill would say that getting the right question was not only antecedent to, but methodologically more

¹¹ James T. Bretzke, S.J. *A Morally Complex World: Engaging Contemporary Moral Theology*, (Collegeville: Liturgical Press), 2004. I expressed in the Acknowledgements section of this book my gratitude to Bill Spohn for his very helpful feedback on the manuscript—another example of his mentoring in moral theology.

important, than getting the right answer: “The right question is not Who am I? but Whose am I? To whom do I belong? To what am I committed? Personal continuity is determined by the persons and causes to which we have committed ourselves, and the person who have promised themselves to us. Identity comes from identification with specific people and causes.”¹²

However, here Bill was echoing something he’d outlined 15 years earlier in an excellent monograph entitled “St. Paul on Apostolic Celibacy and the Body of Christ.” Here Bill gave what I still find to be one of the most compelling treatments not only of the promise of chastity priests and religious take, basing this not so much on traditional asceticism, but on a lived commitment of the God-given gift one’s whole sexual identity. Thus, despite the title, Bill really has given us a positive theology of sexuality for all states of life, and he stressed that a lived expression of our sexual identity for all should be first and foremost relationally oriented. Thus, no one, including those of us living out vowed celibacy, is dispensed from the life-long and life-giving striving to form bonds of intimate companionship: “We learn to acknowledge our personal worth the love [others] have for us, receiving their gifts as they have received ours. ... The celibate must be able to name specific people when the question is asked, ‘To whom do I belong?’”¹³

Certainly most, if not all, of us are here today because we realize that along with Marty we too belong to Bill as he does to us. The testimony of his illness and death is not yet on library shelves, but they are powerful words which have literally flown around the world and likewise constitute an important part of Bill’s legacy to moral theology. In going over my class notes I had for a 1985 course with him on moral discernment I found

¹² Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise*, p. 24.

¹³ On this point compare the above reference with Spohn’s earlier monograph “St. Paul on Apostolic Celibacy and the Body of Christ,” *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* 17 (January 1985), likewise on p. 24.

the following which might serve as a fitting valediction from Bill to us who remain behind: “God’s answer to theodicy was not a theoretical one, but rather a practical one—Jesus. Thus perhaps there is no apt theoretical answer to the question of theodicy—but only God’s practical answer.”¹⁴ Here Bill and Marty both have given us a humbling and inspiring glimpse into God’s practical answer to the problem of why good people suffer.

For my own conclusion, in the spirit of Bill’s narrative approach to theology, I’d like to relate a brief encounter I had when I first began teaching a course on the *proprium* or distinctiveness of Christian ethics in 1990 at the Pontifical Gregorian University. I had listed as a one of the core texts Bill’s WATSA book on Scripture and ethics¹⁵ and one of my erstwhile teachers and new chair, an eminent German moralist, was frankly somewhat troubled by my approach and asked me if Spohn’s book was really suitably “*valido*” for an STL course in fundamental moral theology at such an illustrious institution as the Greg. The response I gave him then remains my firm conviction today, not only for this one excellent book, but for the whole of the corpus of Bill’s contributions to moral theology as author, teacher, mentor, and friend: *Si Padre, è’ molto valido*.

*E così sia!*¹⁶

Further material and tributes to Bill Spohn can be found on Santa Clara’s web-site at <http://www.scu.edu/ignatiancenter/bannan/billspohn/index.cfm>

¹⁴ From my course notes to Spohn’s CEHR3200 Christian Moral Discernment, Jesuit School of Theology-at-Berkeley, 10 April 1985.

¹⁵ William C. Spohn, S.J. *What Are They Saying About Scripture and Ethics?* (Ramsey NJ: Paulist Press), 1984. Revised edition, 1995.

¹⁶ “Yes, Father, it is quite worthwhile. And let it be thus!” Further material and tributes to Bill Spohn can be found on Santa Clara’s web-site at <http://www.scu.edu/ignatiancenter/bannan/billspohn/index.cfm>.