

## THE MORAL THEOLOGY OF WILLIAM C. SPOHN

Topic: A Conversation with Scripture and Tradition:  
The Moral Theology of William C. Spohn

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Moderator: Michael Buckley, Santa Clara University

Panelists: James T. Bretzke, University of San Francisco  
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The panelists assessed the scholarship of William C. Spohn who died on August 3, 2005. A video of the session will be available at <<http://www.scu.edu/ignatiancenter/bannan/billspohn/index.cfm>> or via the religious studies department website at Santa Clara University.

I. *Moral Theology*. Bretzke identified four contributions of Spohn to moral theology.

A. *Allowing Jesus and the Gospels to Structure Moral Theology*. Spohn “let Jesus and the Gospels structure the blueprint and framework for approaching moral theology” rather than building an ethic on some other foundation and turning to Jesus and Scripture to decorate the moral dwelling. He treated the whole process of conversion as the center of moral theology.

B. *Looking beyond Catholic Tradition to Enrich It*. Spohn showed how American Protestant resources could help us to account for the process of conversion as the fundamental dynamic of the Christian moral life. Central to this process are what Edwards called the Religious Affections and the Reasons of the Heart.

C. *Attending to the Dynamics of Christian Moral Discernment*. Moral discernment is best understood in the holistic context of conversion and transformed affectivity. Spohn developed a notion of Jesus as “a concrete universal” who guides Christian moral discernment through the analogical imagination. Jesus challenges us to be “not clones of Christ” but truly our unique selves “all bound together to the Lord in the community of disciples.”

D. *Developing the Notion of Personal Identity*. Spohn developed a notion of personal identity that emerges from asking the right questions: not “Who am I?” but “Whose am I?” Identity comes from identification with specific people and causes. Spohn’s broader influence came through his identity as a teacher, ecumenist, mentor, friend, and, in the extraordinarily inspiring way that he faced and wrote about his own illness and impending death.

II. *Scripture and Ethics*. Donahue argued that Scripture is “the animating principle that gives life and identity to the whole body” of Spohn’s work “from the inside to external expression.” Spohn mapped the then largely unexplored territory

of Scripture and ethics, first, by drawing Catholics into the rich thinking of Protestant theologians such as Barth, Niebuhr, Bultmann, Yoder, and Gustafson, and second, by outlining a shift towards ethics as a primary mode of Scriptural interpretation.

Spohn charted a path through the territory of Scripture and ethics that rejected the moral autonomy school of Fuchs and Schüller that tends to reduce the role of Scripture to offering motivation for a natural law ethic. In contrast, Spohn focused on the figure and teaching of Jesus as paradigmatic for the transformation of the moral agent. His approach gave primacy to discipleship as portrayed in the Synoptic Gospels and configured by the Cross and Resurrection, in order to shape the character of Christians and their communities. Spohn argued that ethicists need to focus their research on the practices of communities of faith because of their central role in forming believers.

III. *American Sources.* Patrick observed that Spohn had been working on a book that would trace American thinkers as a source for a distinctively American moral theology and challenge the “standard” account of these thinkers, which held that the “tradition started religiously in Edwards and ended in a thoroughly secular pragmatism in Dewey.” Instead, at the end of this line Spohn placed H. R. Niebuhr’s deeply religious integration of “experiential naturalism” and “Augustinian piety.” Spohn drew upon American sources as a way to overcome limitations of European moral theology—particularly their Kantian blindness to the radical particularity of Christian living from which its lifeblood and power spring.

Edwards shaped Spohn’s views on the importance of (a) “religious affections that lay at the heart of the human response to God” and (b) prayer as “the place where we can hear the harmony that discernment seeks.” For Spohn “Christians must *experience* what the gospels are getting at in ways that affect their emotional lives profoundly.” Stories of Jesus and the spiritual practices that concretize these stories are the central forms of training in such experiences. They gradually transform our perceptions, dispositions, and identity so that we can “spot the rhyme” between Jesus’ life and our own or discern the spiritual harmony between the beauty of God and our own participation therein.

Where Rahner overemphasized the moment of discernment, H. R. Niebuhr’s *The Responsible Self* helped Spohn to develop a more dynamic account of the discerning self as responding to God’s action in history. Spohn embraced Niebuhr’s “ethic of the fitting” as well as his emphasis on Jesus Christ as the symbolic form by means of which Christians interpret experience. These took form in Spohn’s account of Jesus as the “Rosetta Stone” for Christian analogical imagination.

IV. *Future Challenges.* Gula isolated two themes for developing Spohn’s legacy.

A. *The Role of Moral Imagination.* Spohn clarified how moral imagination depends upon moral character and “committed his work to understanding how character is formed within a Christian moral culture. The problem we face in

forming character, however, is that . . . [w]e live within multiple cultures that overlap and often compete with one another.” To move forward we must draw upon social and cognitive sciences to grasp “the formative dynamics of diverse cultures and to understand how the mind manages metaphors and thinks analogously.”

B. *The Convergence of Spirituality and Morality*. Spohn was largely successful in showing how spirituality profoundly shapes the moral life, but now we need to show how our moral experience can lead us to reexamine and alter our relationship with God. We need to show how morality shapes spirituality so as to restore their mutual critical dialogue.

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