

Item #70 (Some Suggestions Involving Clarifications)

At the present time there is some confusion involving political and non-political choices in the United States. The present Item is offered with the hope that it contains suggestions that clarify.

The first suggestion is contained in a letter published in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* on October 3, 2020 on page A8. It is offered here on the presumption that once published it belongs to the public domain and can be re-published without the consent of the author or of the vehicle of publication. The author is Rev. Donald E. Henke, a friend of mine, and a priest in good standing of the Roman Catholic Church. Fr. Henke is an Associate Professor of Moral Theology at the Kenrick-Glennon Seminary in Shrewsbury, Missouri. The following text is exactly as it appeared in the *Post-Dispatch*.

Don't equate moral issues without moral distinctions

Regarding the letter "Abortion is an easy issue for lazy leaders to jump on" (Sept. 11) and the Rev. Charles Bouchard's guest column "Religion aside, abortion is inarguably a moral choice" (Sept. 30): If I understood them correctly, letter writer Rev. John Vogler advised readers to consider a wider array of moral concerns as they contemplate their vote in November, and the Rev. Bouchard advocated an expansion of "our agenda to build a respect for all life."

While their recommendations have merit, both are equally egregious in their failure to acknowledge the greater moral weight that certain issues have in relation to others. Thus, actions that directly attack the lives of the unborn through abortion or those that directly attack the long-born or seriously ill through euthanasia or physician-assisted suicide carry greater moral gravity than other admittedly important issues, like climate change or immigration.

It is a faulty, seamless-garment argument that equates moral issues without recognizing the essential moral distinctions between them. A properly formed conscience requires that moral issues be given their proper moral weight. Equating or overlooking important differences between moral

issues can only lead to flawed conclusions.

Rev.

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The argument advanced by Fr. Henke becomes self-evident to me on reflection. There are simply different levels of evil in evil acts: killing an innocent person is worse than cursing that person. What Fr. Henke presumes, reasonably, is that he is discussing *moral* evil, that is, evil that belongs to a type of human action that is accessible to human reason alone without the aid of religious faith. In Scripture these two types of evil must be distinguished: the refusal to recognize a miracle performed by Jesus (for example, the raising of Lazarus from the dead), and the sin of adultery (for example, the woman caught in the act of adultery in the Gospel of John). The United States of America was never formally a Christian nation as, for example, England, but the suppositions on which its culture was based were proper to a Christian nation, that is, Judeo-Christian. This situation presumed that moral evil was a given to be ascertained by reason (“natural law”), and basic religious beliefs served as guides for action (for example, in the Civil War both the North and the South justified their actions in terms of the Bible). There were always exceptions to this analysis, but in general it seems to be valid.

But in recent years a new point of view is gaining popular acceptance: that the individual is free to determine for himself/herself what is morally evil. This point of view was expressed by a justice of the Supreme Court of the United States (see Item #66). It was always presumed that United States’ citizens, with the exception of slaves, were free to choose for themselves how they were to live their life, but the intrinsic limits of an objective moral law were always presumed. Now such limits are becoming less and less objective. What the result will be is not clear.

Second suggestion: a nation where there is no agreed-on, objective frame of reference for morality cannot endure.

A third suggestion involves Christianity. Christ’s death viewed as redemption from sin. This is an act of *religious* faith, but it is an act that implicitly recognizes that what Christ died in atonement for was a violation of an objective moral norm as well as a religious offense against God. Thus the weakening of Christian religious faith intensifies a weakening of an agreed-on, objective frame of reference for morality. (**James Swetnam, S.J., April 30, 2021**)