

Cult books revisited: Joseph Fletcher's *Situation Ethics*

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Abstract

This is the first article of new series for *Theology* on 'Cult books revisited'. Written in this instance by the Editor, it re-evaluates Joseph Fletcher's *Situation Ethics*, setting it into context and assessing its strengths and weaknesses.

Keywords

Joseph Fletcher, *Honest to God*, legalism, love, moral objectivity, relativism, situation ethics

Five decades ago the 61-year-old Joseph Fletcher published a small book in the United States and UK that made him famous or notorious (depending on your perspective) throughout the theological world. It was quoted and denounced by conservative Catholic and Protestant theologians across the West who regarded its message as dangerously relativistic, and it was applauded by others who saw the 1960s as a much-needed decade of sexual and moral liberation.

At the time Joseph Fletcher was an ordained Episcopal priest who had taught social ethics at the Episcopal Theological School at Cambridge Massachusetts since 1944, having served as a parish priest earlier. He retired from ETS in 1970, severed his connection with the Episcopal Church and spent the next eight years working explicitly as a humanist professor of bioethics at Virginia University. He died in 1991. On the publication of *Situation Ethics*, the Christian ethicist Professor Gordon Dunstan depicted him in *The Guardian* as 'a generous and lovable man' but still found it difficult 'to forgive the SCM Press for publishing it'.

Leading up to publication

Those working in Christian ethics and, especially, in medical ethics at the time would have known his earlier book *Morals and Medicine*, which was also published

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in both the United States and the UK. It is much more sober in style than *Situation Ethics*, lacking its jokes, provocations and fanciful examples. Yet it was still a polemical work, written to provide a counter to traditional Catholic moral theology on medical issues, stating in the Preface that to his knowledge 'nothing of this kind has been undertaken by non-Catholics as yet'.¹ His challenges to Catholic teaching were made directly on the issues of contraception, artificial insemination, sterilization and voluntary euthanasia.

Many other non-Catholics, especially in Anglican and liberal Reformed denominations, were later to echo the points that he made in this early book on the permissibility of contraception and artificial insemination. In fact, the Lambeth Conference of Anglican Bishops in 1930 had already made a tentative reversal of their complete rejection of contraception at their conference ten years earlier. However on sterilization and voluntary euthanasia Fletcher already held positions yet to be adopted by many non-Catholic denominations – accepting voluntary euthanasia as 'a means of ending a human life enmeshed in incurable and fatal physical suffering'² and (just as controversially) involuntary, punitive sterilization 'as a means of social justice' when 'it may sometimes be necessary to deprive a criminal – say a rapist – of the power of procreation'.³

He was yet to use the term 'situation ethics' in *Morals and Medicine*, but this approach was clearly emerging as can be seen from this paragraph from the Preface:

The bias of my ethical standpoint, apart from its frame of reference in Christian faith, is probably best pin-pointed as personalist. It is not naturalist, humanist, utilitarian, or positivist. As will be seen, by personalism I mean the correlation of personality and value; the doctrine, that is, that personality is a unique quality in every human being, and that it is both the highest good and the chief medium of our knowledge of the good.⁴

However by the early 1960s he was using the term 'situation ethics' to depict his approach and was even linking it to a form of utilitarianism (or at least consequentialism) as well as to humanism. Bishop John Robinson had already picked this up from Fletcher's articles when he wrote his seismic *Honest to God* in 1963. Robinson summarized the moral teaching of Jesus as 'saying that love, utterly unconditional love, admits of no accommodation; you cannot define in advance situations in which it can be satisfied with less than complete and unreserved self-giving'⁵ and continued as follows:

In ethics this means accepting as the basis of moral judgements the actual concrete relationship in all its particularity, refusing to subordinate it to any universal norm or to treat it merely as a case, but yet, in the depth of that unique relationship, meeting and responding to the claims of the sacred, the holy and the absolutely unconditional. For the Christian it means recognising as the ultimate ground of our being which is thus encountered, and as the basis of every relationship and every decision, the unconditional love of Jesus Christ, 'the man for others'.⁶

Honest to God sold many thousands of copies and was extensively debated in books, periodicals and newspapers immediately after its publication. Only Richard Dawkins's *The God Delusion* has achieved similar popular attention for a book on God in the last 50 or so years. Paradoxically Robinson's use of notoriously difficult theologians such as Paul Tillich, along with Latin tags, meant that many readers struggled to understand what he was saying. However his use of caricature, allied to his earlier reputation for defending the publication of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, would have been evident to most people. Here was a bishop saying 'something' (whatever it was) provocative, perhaps even (they might have concluded) 'heretical'.

Joseph Fletcher clearly noted all of this. He dropped many of the Latin tags used in *Morals and Medicine*, raised the level of caricature and provocation, and added rather weak jokes and fanciful examples to *Situation Ethics*. And to make his point abundantly clear his publisher put a quotation from *Honest to God* on the front cover and he mentioned Robinson's book on the first page. In other words, he and his publisher planned to make his new book also into a bestseller like *Honest to God*. And they succeeded.

Situation Ethics: The central message

Ironically it is not at all clear that John Robinson himself did intend to write a bestseller, and he may well have regretted the damage to his academic reputation caused by reactions to *Honest to God*. Whether Joseph Fletcher subsequently regretted similar damage to his academic reputation (his subsequent adoption of secular humanism might suggest as much), criticism of *Situation Ethics* was sharp and widespread. Precisely because Fletcher used so much caricature, fanciful examples and hyperbole, it was all too easy for someone as clever as Gordon Dunstan in the UK or Paul Ramsey in the United States to demonstrate holes in his arguments. After all, caricature and hyperbole are typically used for effect rather than for accuracy. Even a casual reading of *Situation Ethics* shows this to be so, as the opening statement in the first chapter demonstrates:

There are at bottom only three alternative routes or approaches to follow in making moral decisions. They are: (1) the legalistic; (2) the antinomian, the opposite extreme – i.e. a lawless or unprincipled approach; and (3) the situational.⁷

Pedants will at once notice the sloppy use of 'alternative' here to denote three rather than two things. Ethicists will note no mention of consequentialism. And attentive readers of the rest of the book will puzzle about whether he really did eliminate legalism from his own thinking in the fanciful examples that he deployed. A year later he continued to write stridently: 'Law ethics is still the enemy, by far ... [its] suffocation is bad faith, and irresponsible'.⁸

However, to focus upon these features is to miss the central message of *Situation Ethics* – a message that has continued to attract followers and that does resonate

strongly with parts of the New Testament. In summary, it is simply this: love should indeed direct our moral behaviour to each other and love properly understood cannot readily be captured by moral laws. For Jews, Christians and Muslims alike love (or compassion) derives from a conviction that God first loves (or shows compassion to) us, so we in turn should show love (or show compassion) to each other *and* (some of us would add) to the rest of God's creation:

*Christian situation ethics has only one norm or principle or law (call it what you will) that is binding and unexceptionable, always good and right regardless of the circumstances. That is 'love' – the *agape* of the summary commandment to love God and the neighbour. Everything else without exception, all laws and rules and principles and ideals and norms, are only *contingent*, only valid if they happen to serve love in any situation. Christian situation ethics is not a system or program of living according to a code, but an effort to relate love to a world of relativities through a casuistry obedient to love. It is the strategy of love. This strategy denies that there are, as Sophocles thought, any unwritten immutable laws of heaven, agreeing with Bultmann that all such notions are idolatrous and a demonic pretension.*⁹

He put the first word here in italics because he wanted to emphasize that a non-Christian may have a norm that is different from 'love' or *agape*. Such a person would, in his view, still be a situationist but not a Christian situationist.¹⁰ For him 'the *Christian* is neighbour-centered first and last'.¹¹ Some recalled that it was precisely because he was so neighbour-centred as a young man that he became an Episcopal priest. His early ministry, so it has been argued, was driven more by this ethical conviction than by theology. If that is so then, despite all the hyperbole of *Situation Ethics*, there was at its heart a strong moral passion. Perhaps that is what still attracts some people today and what offended Fletcher most about critics who ignored this passion in his writings.

Critics, however, were often offended by another feature of *Situation Ethics* – its explicit commitment to some form of moral relativism:

It is necessary to insist that situation ethics is willing to make full and respectful use of principles, to be treated as maxims but not as laws or precepts. We might call it 'principled relativism'. To repeat the term used above, principles or maxims or general rules are *illuminators*. But they are not *directors*. The classic rule of moral theology has been to follow laws but to do it *as much as possible* according to love and according to reason . . . Situation ethics, on the other hand, calls upon us to keep law in a subservient place, so that *only* love and reason really count when the chips are down!¹²

Fletcher returned to the issue of relativism at several points in *Situation Ethics*, aware perhaps that this was its most vulnerable feature. At one point he claimed that 'the situationist avoids words like "never" and "perfect" and "always" and

“complete” as he avoids the plague, as he avoids “absolutely”.¹³ Or again: ‘No twentieth-century man of even average training will turn his back on the anthropological and psychological evidence for relativity in morals. There are no “universal laws” held by all men everywhere at all times, no consensus of all men’.¹⁴

He was, at least partially, aware that ‘to be relative, of course, means to be relative *to* something. To be “absolutely relative” (an uneasy combination of terms) is to be inchoate, random, unpredictable, unjudgeable, meaningless, amoral’.¹⁵ But he still faced an obvious problem. Dogmatic claims about relativism (such as those in the previous paragraph) are mightily curious. If someone, for example, claims that ‘everything is relative’, then that person might expect someone else to ask whether that claim itself is relative and, if it is, how it can then be trusted. This is a running problem in *Situation Ethics* because it made so many dogmatic claims about situationism.

His own ‘solution’ to this dilemma was to make another dogmatic claim: ‘There must be an absolute or norm of some kind if there is to be any true relativity’.¹⁶ But note the word ‘true’ in this claim. Later he avoided this word and used instead the term ‘the highest good’ (as he did in *Morals and Medicine*) resorting at this point to a Latin tag for greater emphasis:

Nothing is intrinsically good but the highest good. The *summum bonum*, the end or purpose of all ends – love. We cannot say anything we do *is* good, only that it is a means to an end and therefore *happens* in that cause-and-effect relation to have value.¹⁷

So for Fletcher there was a ‘highest good’ (i.e. love) beyond anything that we actually do. In most other places in *Situation Ethics* he claimed love to be the highest good only for specifically Christian situationists. Here, however, love seems to be the highest good for all people regardless of their situation. This is not the most comfortable position for a professed situationist. It also raises another important question:

Is anything intrinsically wrong?

The examples of human behaviour that appear throughout *Situation Ethics* were typically designed to make a single point, namely to refute a legalistic understanding of ethics. Whether he was depicting murder, adultery, paid sex work, human cloning or whatever, he usually claimed that what appeared to be intrinsically wrong (from a legalistic perspective) might sometimes be justified by a situationist examination of the competing demands of love. The sex worker might, for instance, be trying lovingly to support her family in need. Many of the examples he used focused upon individual behaviour.

Yet what about collective human behaviour? Is, for instance, slavery or genocide ever justifiable in terms of the competing demands of love? And at an individual level, is rape, serial murder or the sexual abuse of small children ever to be justified?

When Fletcher was writing *Situation Ethics* it was quite fashionable for moral philosophers to claim that they were relativists and that moral choices were basically about preferences and taste. The early work of Peter Singer still reflected this position, despite his own strong moral commitments, say, to animal welfare. Yet today even Peter Singer has doubts about preference ethics and is more inclined to follow the philosopher Derek Parfit's (secular) defence of moral objectivity.

Specifically, within Christian ethics there are strong grounds for believing in moral objectivity. Natural law exponents have always believed that some human actions are intrinsically wrong. So, too, do most divine command ethicists. They may not always be able to agree with each other on issues such as human sexuality. Yet they usually do agree that slavery, genocide, rape, serial murder or the sexual abuse of small children should never be justified – even though slavery, for instance, clearly was (wrongly) justified by some Christians in the past.

These examples – slavery, genocide, rape, serial murder and the sexual abuse of small children – are likely to generate a level of moral consensus today that Fletcher, writing half a century ago, thought was impossible. This is not say that these evil types of human behaviour have been eliminated from the modern world (obviously, they have not). It is simply to claim that most of us do not regard them as morally justifiable *whatever the situation in which they occur*. Some might use the language of basic human rights to reinforce this claim, whereas others may use the language of virtues or values. There are clear differences between people today at this level. Yet there does seem to be a consensus condemning slavery, genocide, rape, serial murder and the sexual abuse of small children – regarding such acts as wholly unjustifiable. There also seems to be a growing consensus against human ecological destruction and the mistreatment of animals.

Whatever the merits of *Situation Ethics* – especially its emphasis upon love that cannot properly be reduced to legal codification – it never adequately addressed some of the crucial social evils that bedevil the modern world. Ironically *Situation Ethics* appeared itself to be just too time-bound in the whimsical and individualistic 'All You Need is Love' version of the 1960s to address such evils effectively.

Notes

1. Joseph Fletcher, *Morals and Medicine: The Moral Problems of: The Patient's Right to Know the Truth, Contraception, Artificial Insemination, Sterilization, Euthanasia* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press and London: Victor Gollancz, 1955), p. xi.
2. Fletcher, *Morals and Medicine*, p. 208.
3. Fletcher, *Morals and Medicine*, p. 169.
4. Fletcher, *Morals and Medicine*, p. xii.
5. John A. T. Robinson, *Honest to God* (London: SCM Press and Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1963), pp. 111–12.
6. Robinson, *Honest to God*, p. 114.
7. Joseph Fletcher, *Situation Ethics: The New Morality* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press and London: SCM Press, 1966), p. 17.
8. Fletcher 1967.241.

9. Fletcher, *Situation Ethics*, pp. 30–1.
10. Once he became a secular humanist himself he might have changed his mind on this point.
11. Fletcher, *Situation Ethics*, p. 31.
12. Fletcher, *Situation Ethics*, p. 31.
13. Fletcher, *Situation Ethics*, pp. 43–4.
14. Fletcher, *Situation Ethics*, p. 76.
15. Fletcher, *Situation Ethics*, p. 44.
16. Fletcher, *Situation Ethics*, p. 44.
17. Fletcher, *Situation Ethics*, p. 129.

Author Biography

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