Introduction

For the past few years I have been working on a case study of the involvement of the Canadian churches in the Mackenzie Valley pipeline debate.¹ My aim in this paper is to use the pipeline debate to illustrate a method for the clarification of ethical issues. This approach was developed in a contemporary issues course that I have been helping to teach since 1969 in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Toronto.² It therefore reflects the influence of developments in religious studies and religious ethics during the past decade and a half, and of an academic setting characterized by religious diversity and public funding. After I have used the pipeline debate to illustrate this ‘comparative religious ethics’ approach, I will suggest that it is appropriate for both university and theological college contexts.

Although the term ‘comparative religious ethics’ might suggest that I intend to compare different religious traditions, or at least to examine the distinctive features of different Christian denominations, that is not the purpose of this paper. My aim, rather, is to use a comparative ethics framework to analyse a debate within a particular denomination. This focus for the paper is related to the particular problem that currently preoccupies me. How can the ethicist both encourage openness and respect for differences and contribute to a more disciplined and rigorous approach to the clarification of ethical issues? In relation to this view of the ethicist’s task, the term ‘comparative’ symbolizes the desire for alternatives to foundationalism in its various forms. The particular ways of achieving rigour and closure which, in my view, need to be transcended are positivism in the sciences, Cartesian foundationalism in philosophy, imperialism in religion, and the notion that ethicists and theologians should have the authority to bring debates to a close with authoritative binding declarations. My limited aim in this paper is to illustrate some of the elements of a method for the clarification of

1. This study has now been published as Prophets, Pastors and Public Choices: Canadian Churches and the Mackenzie Valley Pipeline Debate (Waterloo, Ont.: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1992). I gratefully acknowledge financial support from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, and the co-operation of the many persons who have been interviewed, consulted and troubled for relevant documents. The debate itself over proposals to build a pipeline to carry Alaskan and Mackenzie Delta natural gas to southern Canada and the United States has been described more fully in previous papers such as: ‘Native Peoples in a Technological Society: The Struggle for Self-Determination,’ XIVth Congress of the International Association for the History of Religions, Winnipeg, Manitoba, August 17-22, 1980; ‘Citizens, Experts and Public Policy,’ with Gibson Winter for the American Association for the Advancement of Science,’ Toronto, Ontario Jan. 3-8, 1981; ‘Political Ethics and the Mackenzie Valley Pipeline Debate,’ with Gibson Winter for the World Council of Churches’ Consultation on Political Ethics, Cyprus, October 18-25, 1981; and ‘The Dene and Project North: Partners in Mission,’ William Westfall et al., eds., Religion/Culture: Comparative Canadian Studies/etudes canadiennes comparees (Association for Canadian Studies, 1985), pp. 391-410.

2. For an earlier description of this method see, “Towards a Pedagogy for Allies of the Oppressed,” Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses, 13, 2 (1984), 145-150. An additional reason for thinking of my case study of the pipeline debate as a study in comparative religious ethics is to indicate my affinities with other scholars associated with the Comparative Ethics Series of the Canadian Corporation for Studies in Religion. A key feature of that series is a commitment to the study of moralities as cultural systems. In my study of the pipeline debate I have discovered different cultural systems warring within the bosom of a single religious tradition. That at least seems to be a useful way to look at the debate.
ethical issues which combines openness to and respect for different positions with a disciplined approach to the verification or validation of particular claims.

The claim that I am introducing a method for the clarification of ethical issues might sound pretentious considering what is actually done in the paper. What I have in mind as a method has been well-described by Bernard Lonergan. He has observed: ‘Method is not a set of rules to be followed meticulously by a dolt. It is a framework for collaborative creativity’. His task in Method in Theology, was to outline ‘the various clusters of operations to be performed by theologians as they go about their various tasks’. A method for doing ethics has a similar aim. As a device for facilitating disciplined inquiry it identifies different dimensions of an issue and the different operations associated with different levels of discourse. Thus, there is a time to tell our stories and to report how we feel about an issue. There is also a time to back up our claims and to subject our views to the scrutiny of others. Insofar as we make claims about the facts of a case, such claims must be backed up by appealing to empirical evidence. Insofar as value judgments and differences in world views and religious beliefs enter into our disagreements about what ought to be done, these dimensions of an issue must be dealt with in relation to appropriate disciplines or ways of validating and grounding particular claims.

The Fact of Diversity and the Need for Disciplined Enquiry

It was the fact of religious and ideological diversity in my religious studies classes that initially motivated me to develop a method for the clarification of ethical issues that takes nothing for granted regarding religious commitment or affiliation. If I had started out teaching in a theological college I would probably have experienced an analogous need to respect differences in spirituality and in deeply-held commitments, while at the same time encouraging critical thinking. The non-confessional character of the university setting did, however, increase my self-consciousness about the relationship between my own religious beliefs and what I took for granted about critical thinking and appeals to the authority of traditional religious teachings.

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4 The approach I will describe in this paper has greater affinities with Jeffrey Stout’s hermeneutical holism’ than with the ‘theory of moral knowledge’ proposed by David Little and Sumner Twiss in their book, Comparative Religious Ethics. See Stout’s ‘Holism and Comparative Ethics’ A Response to Little,’ The Journal of Religious Ethics, 11, 2 (Fall 1983), 301-316. See also Richard J. Bernstein’s Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics and Praxis (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983).
I assumed that, in a university context it was important for a Christian teaching religious ethics to make it very explicit that all religions were respected and that the aim of an ethics course was not to provide instruction in Christian answers to the issues being studied. However, it took insightful comments by Roman Catholic and conservative Protestant students to awaken me to the implications of my own basic orientation. I was forced to reflect on the fact that the ‘new morality’ or ‘situation ethics’ that seemed to be appropriate for a university context had far greater affinities with my own liberal Protestant orientation than it did with the taken for granted starting points and ways of thinking of Roman Catholic, evangelical Protestant or Orthodox Jewish students. I became aware of the need to be more self-consciously pluralistic regarding basic outlooks and more explicit about the basis upon which particular claims could be challenged. A useful starting point was the identification of different dimensions of an issue or different levels of clarification.5

As background for an analysis of conflicting views regarding the pipeline, the debate itself must be introduced. Interest in an energy corridor along the Mackenzie Valley was stimulated by the 1968 Prudhoe Bay Oil discovery, natural gas discoveries in the Mackenzie Delta area in the early 1970s, and reports of impending energy shortages in the southern States and southern Canada. In a pre-election speech in 1972, Prime Minister Trudeau promised to construct a Mackenzie Valley highway as the first step toward a transportation system which would be the key to rational development in the North. He compared his proposal to the Canadian Pacific Railway, and declared that it would be too big a project for Canada only in the view of those who have lost faith in what Canada is all about.

By the time Canadian Arctic Gas Pipelines Limited, a consortium of 27 of the world’s largest oil and pipeline companies, applied in March 1974 for the necessary clearances to build a natural gas pipeline to carry northern gas to southern markets, native peoples and their supporters and environmentalists were asking hard questions about what Canada was all about. In response to growing criticisms of the proposed pipeline, the Federal Government appointed Mr. Justice Thomas Berger of the Supreme Court of British Columbia to conduct a full inquiry into its likely social and environmental impacts. Three years later in the first volume of his report, Berger recommended that no pipeline should be built along the Mackenzie Valley until native land claims were settled, and that for environmental reasons a pipeline along the Alaska highway would probably be the least undesirable way to transport Alaskan gas to U.S. markets in the South. In the longer case study on which I am working more attention is paid to this history. My interest in this paper is in the way in which conflicting evaluations of the pipeline proposal were grounded in appeals to the same religious tradition.

Levels of Clarification

1. Different stories, different definitions of the problem

5. I should make it clear that my interest is in the usefulness rather than the originality of this emphasis on different levels of discourse. I am making no claims regarding the originality of this approach. An early influence was H. David Aitken’s article, ‘Levels of Moral Discourse,’ which first came to my attention in James Gustafson’s ‘Context vs Principles: A Misplaced Debate in Christian Ethics,” Martin E. Marty and Dean G. Peerman, eds., New Theology No. 3 (New York: MacMillan, 1966), pp. 71-72.
Clarifying different perspectives on ethical issues is like reading texts. First it is necessary to notice the genre of the texts and the general orientations of the authors. What kinds of stories are being told or presupposed? Arguments for and against the pipeline took shape within the context of different basic assumptions about Canadian society and about what the pipeline proposal represented. For example, the threat of the pipeline and related northern development projects prompted the Roman Catholic bishops to claim that:

A cry for justice rings out today from Native Peoples who inhabit the Canadian North. Dramatically, on a massive scale the Native Peoples of the North find themselves and their way of life being threatened by the headlong search for new energy sources on this continent.

Different assumptions about the pipeline and about what the debate was really about were reflected in the following statement, before the Mackenzie Valley Pipeline Inquiry, by one of the lawyers for Canadian Arctic Gas Pipelines Limited:

Mr. Commissioner, the hard fact is that without some sort of economic development, this land—this northern land, enormous, beautiful and awe-inspiring as it is—(will not support) the population of the Northwest Territories. The hard fact is that many northerners whose forebearers lived off the land do not want to go back to the traditional means of making a livelihood. The hard fact is that at present there is insufficient economic activity in the North to give the opportunity for all those who seek wage employment to fulfill themselves in these territories.

A similar illustration of the differences in outlook between critics and proponents of the pipeline was provided by a ‘Church Speaks—Business Replies’ exchange in The United Church Observer. One article by a member of the United Church national staff was called, ‘Firmly on the side of the poor’. The reply by a United Church layman, who works for a large corporation and belongs to the Confederation of Church and Business People, was called, ‘Using the church to promote a one-sided economic view’.

According to the church leader, the Church must be faithful to the example of the Hebrew prophets and of Jesus, who stood firmly on the side of the poor and oppressed. The businessman, on the other hand, granted the Church’s right to speak out on issues but disagreed with what was being said in his Church’s name. He lamented the strident tone of recent criticisms of business, and worried about the consequences of the policies promoted by church leaders. He claimed that, ‘The United Church, through its support of Project North, has contributed to strife in many northern villages, division among many northern people, and unemployment for large numbers of them’. He quoted with the approval the view of the Presbyterian Superintendent of Missions that: ‘Instead of helping (native people) to earn their livelihood in a 20th century wage economy, we’ve forced them into unemployment and bankruptcies’. In his view, the problem is not that the Church speaks out on economic issues, but that it has been promoting the wrong policies and attacking the wrong institutions.

The first step of the method involves noticing the auras of approval or disapproval which hover over the specific claims and arguments presented by each side. It also involves becoming conscious of one’s own relationship to these general orientations. My own initial response was that the churches were right to stand openly, officially and whole-heartedly with the native groups which were demanding a moratorium on large northern development projects until land claims had been satisfactorily settled.

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7 ‘Northern Development at What Cost?’ 1975 Labour Day Statement of the Canadian Roman Catholic Bishops. In September, 1975 the Anglican, Roman Catholic, and United churches created the inter-church coalition, Project North, to help the churches to be more effective allies of the native peoples in their struggle for justice.
Years ago, when I was working in the oil industry in Alberta, I would no doubt have shared the view of my former colleagues in the industry that the pipeline was both necessary and desirable. The next steps are designed to get behind these general orientations. They require a degree of detachment and a willingness to test the adequacy of initial responses by examining particular claims and arguments. Although factual claims and value judgments are intertwined in our actual conversations, it is useful for purposes of clarification to distinguish between them. The next two steps, therefore, identify and analyze conflicting factual claims, on the one hand, and value judgments and ethical arguments, on the other.

2. Conflicting Factual Claims

Two areas of dispute which received a great deal of attention during the public hearings of the National Energy Board and the Berger Commission will be used to illustrate the main features of this level of clarification.

One of the most basic disagreements was over whether or not the pipeline was needed. Facts and projections about natural gas supply and demand were presented to the National Energy Board by both sides to support opposite conclusions. The official position taken by the churches, that there ought to be a moratorium on major development schemes until native land claims had been satisfactorily settled, was based on the assumption that a Mackenzie Valley pipeline would not be needed for at least a decade, if at all. In part, this assumption was defended by citing the inconsistencies and unexplained reversals in government and industry supply and demand reports. It appeared that, when increased export licences were being sought, surpluses were reported. When permission to build a northern pipeline was required, drastic shortages were forecast.

Judgments about whether or not the pipeline was needed were based in part on technical findings regarding how much gas had been discovered and the rate at which it could be delivered to market. Such findings presupposed expertise in highly technical fields, such as reservoir engineering. It was this type of expertise that was assumed to be authoritative by the NEB. However, supply and demand projections were also influenced by ethical or political choices about lifestyle, energy consumption levels and export policies. Critics of the pipeline were able to demonstrate the importance of these ethical factors. That is, they moved the debate beyond a narrowly technical focus to underlying political and ethical concerns.

A second area of dispute came into focus around conflicting claims about economic and social conditions in native communities. Critics of the pipeline proposal assumed that native communities

11 For a good description of the ‘world’ of the Calgary oil and gas industry personnel, see J.D. House, The Last of the Free Enterprisers: The Oilmen of Calgary (Ottawa: The Carleton Library No. 122, 1980).

12 ‘A Call for a Moratorium: Some Moral and Ethical Considerations Relating to the Mackenzie Valley Pipeline Inquiry,’ Ottawa, June 1976: ‘These four steps, M. Commissioner, would bring the non-Northern gas supply figures to 26 years, composed as follows: present reserves, 12 years; conservation, 4 years; export cutbacks, 7 years; Alberta swap, 3 years. Surely the Churches and the Native organizations are justified in asking, “What’s the rush to build the Mackenzie Valley pipeline when there are so many unanswered questions?” (pp. 18-19).

13 The arguments relating to supply and demand projections are summarized in the three volume National Energy Board report, Reasons for Decision: Northern Pipelines (Ottawa: Minister of Supply and Services, 1977). It is important to distinguish between the ‘hard facts’ about supply and deliverability and the relevance of these facts in the overall assessment of the merits of the pipeline proposal. There is a further question as well regarding how hard the facts themselves are and how they are known. My limited aim in this paper is to show how the dogmatic claims of particular experts can be challenged without encouraging a general countervailing experts were used by the native organizations and the public interest groups.

14 As I pointed out above, Mr. Justice Thomas Berger was appointed to conduct the Mackenzie Valley Pipeline Inquiry in March, 1974. One of the best and most readable analyses of the pipeline debate
along the route would be disrupted and that the traditional way of life would be destroyed. Proponents of the pipeline, on the other hand, assumed that the old way of life had already been undermined by population growth, depletion of fish and game and the loss of interest of many natives in hunting, fishing and trapping as ways to make a living. The former assumed that the pipeline would have a primarily harmful impact. The latter, on the other hand, assumed that the impact would be beneficial. It would provide badly needed jobs, which would enable more natives to make the inevitable adjustment to the modern wage economy. These initial assumptions were backed up by studies carried out by each side’s experts.

Industry-sponsored studies documented a decreasing reliance on traditional economic activities and a corresponding increase in the need for jobs. On the other hand, the native peoples argued that hunting, trapping and fishing contributed far more to their livelihood than industry studies allowed. Anthropologists and economists such as Michael Asch, Scott Rushforth and Mel Watkins showed how industry-sponsored studies had underestimated the continuing contribution of fish and game by using incorrect techniques for measuring their value and an inadequate frame of reference for interpreting the role of land-based activities.

Berger concluded that the evidence before his inquiry successfully established the fact that renewable resources continued to be sufficiently important to the northern economy to justify measures to protect and strengthen that sector of the economy. The most dramatic measure, of course, was the recommendation that the pipeline be delayed for at least ten years.

Demonstrating the continuing reliance on traditional renewable resources performed a crucial function, particularly within the context of a commission mandated to inquire into and report on the impact of a pipeline. However, decisions to support or resist the pipeline did not depend upon such a demonstration. Different groups within the churches had already declared their support either for a

continues to be his report, *Northern Frontier, Northern Homeland*, 2 Volumes (Ottawa: Minister of Supply and Services, 1977).

15 For illustrations of industry-sponsored studies see the submissions by Charles Hobart, University of Alberta sociologist; ‘Communities of the Mackenzie: Effects of the Hydrocarbon Industry,’ prepared by Van Ginkel Associates Ltd. For Canadian Arctic Gas Study Limited and Gulf Oil Canada Limited, Imperial Oil Limited, and Shell Canada Limited, January 1975; and ‘Social and Economic Impact of Proposed Arctic Gas Pipeline on Northern Canada’. 7 volumes (Calgary: Canadian Arctic Gas Pipeline Limited, 1974).


17 Both the process and the findings of the Berger Inquiry represented gains from the standpoint of native participation in the decisions affecting their lives. As far as the responsible use of Canadian land and resources were concerned, the gains are less evident. By the fall of 1977, worries about freezing in the dark had given way to a burning desire to export more natural gas to the United States. The Federal Government first granted approval for an Alaska Highway pipeline to carry Alaskan gas to U.S. markets. Permission was then granted to prebuild the southern section in order to export more Alberta gas to the U.S. Just as there were unanswered questions regarding the proposals for a Mackenzie Valley pipeline, there are even more unanswered questions regarding who benefits from these gas exports and why no guarantees were obtained ensuring a future supply of Alaskan gas to replace the Alberta gas now being exported. See Francois Bregha, *Bob Blair’s Pipeline: The Business and Politics of Northern Energy Development Projects* (Toronto: James Lorimer, 1979 and 1982).

18 For an interesting discussion of the validation of claims before public inquiries or courts of law, see Michael Asch, ‘Native Research and the Public Forum,’ pp. 208-209. See also Richard Fenn, *Liturgies and Trials: The Secularization of Religious Language* (Oxford: Basil and Blackwell, 1982).
moratorium or for construction of the pipeline. These positions had been adopted before studies prepared for the Berger Inquiry and the National Energy Board had been completed. On the one hand, this reflected different initial assumptions about the facts regarding the native way of life and the implications of a pipeline. On the other hand, there were ethical and religious grounds for taking a stand. Critics of the pipeline stressed the rights of native peoples which would be violated if construction preceded a land claim settlement. Those who believed that the pipeline was necessary and desirable stressed responsibilities for providing jobs for northerners and new resources of natural gas for all Canadians.

3. Ethical Dimensions

The factual level of clarification highlights the relationship between ethics and the empirical sciences. Attempts to clarify value judgments and ethical arguments, on the other hand, draw on the discipline of moral philosophy. Different positions in the pipeline debate can be viewed in relation to traditional ethical theories. Some means of characterizing different ways in which reasons are given in defense of moral judgments serves two purposes. First, a recognition of different types of ethical reasoning should help to overcome the monopolistic tendency to equate ethics with a particular ethical theory. For example, utilitarians tend to assume that the calculation of consequences provides the only rational defense of a moral judgment. From the standpoint of a deontological ethic, on the other hand, persons who focus on calculations of costs and benefits instead of rights and duties appear to neglect the ethical dimension of the debate. An even more important consideration is that it is by giving reasons for moral judgments that discipline is achieved at the ethical level of clarification. In order to illustrate this point I will briefly show how positions taken regarding the pipeline reflected deontological, utilitarian and idealist types of ethical reasoning.

The firm and early demand on the part of the natives themselves, and support groups such as the churches, to block the pipeline until native claims were settled represented a “deontological” affirmation that building a pipeline before native land claims were settled would be unjust and therefore wrong. According to the church leader cited above:

Since anything which dehumanizes another human being is always morally wrong, the Church must stand against those things, whatever the cost. Whether those being dehumanized are Canada’s native people, the oppressed blacks in South Africa, people in jails and asylums in Czechoslovakia, or Moscow, or those suffering in the jails of South America, the Church has no alternative but to speak on behalf of those who have lost, or never possessed, any levers to control the forces that are determining their destiny.

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19 The decision to support the native people’s demand for self-determination was not, of course, made in isolation from knowledge already at hand regarding the consequences and implications of the demand. If the demand had not made sense in that context it would have lost its moral force. See Michael Asch, *Home and Native Land: Aboriginal Rights and the Canadian Constitution* (Toronto: Methuen, 1984).
20 Industry personnel were fully aware of the disruptive potential of resource development in the North. They assumed, however, that long-term benefits would be achieved, and that the assimilation of natives into the modern wage economy was inevitable.
22 ‘Church Speaks,’ pp. 17-18.
Defenders of the pipeline, on the other hand, did not believe that the pipeline would dehumanize native peoples. They shifted attention to the beneficial consequences of building the pipeline and the harmful consequences of the policies being supported by church leaders. The ‘Business Replies’ article referred to the growing number of church members ‘who have come to the conclusion that the current economic bias of the Church has done harm, not just in the Church, but very probably in the world’. Negative attitudes towards development had caused unemployment in the North and strife within native communities. This ‘utilitarian’ emphasis on assessing the goodness or badness of policies or actions, by determining their consequences, is a congenial position for persons who are responsible for the administration of mainline institutions. They accept responsibility for the clearly demonstrated consequences of particular policies, and find it hard to imagine how else responsible administrative or ethical judgments could be made. They take for granted the legitimacy of established institutions. They tend to react defensively when that legitimacy is challenged. Such a reaction is understandable, since the challenges were often experienced as a criticism of their personal morality or motives and an attack on their identities.

The initial opposition, between an uncompromising commitment to support the native peoples’ call for a moratorium and an equally uncompromising conviction that what was most needed was jobs, makes sense in relation to deontological and utilitarian orientations. The reason for drawing attention to this fact is not simply a desire to find labels for the different sides. Rather, the aim of analysis is to overcome distorted communication by moving beyond stereotypes and locating significant areas of disagreement. The real debate was not over whether the primary emphasis would be on the rights of native peoples or the responsibilities of corporate, government and church leaders. The important question was what each side affirmed or took for granted about the rights of natives, on the one hand, and the consequences of particular policies, on the other.

Business people believed that their proposals were in fact both in the natives’ best interests and what most native people actually wanted. Similarly, critics of the pipeline were not afraid to debate consequences. They were convinced that further studies of the pipeline’s impact would vindicate their negative attitude. Thus, it can be seen in retrospect that claims and inferences that business people were not concerned about native rights, and that church leaders were too naive and lacking in practical experience to appreciate the consequences of the policies they promoted, unnecessarily diverted attention from more significant levels of disagreement.

During the Berger Commission hearings the question of self-determination was discussed, but not with the same sustained intensity that characterized attempts to validate factual claims about existing conditions in native communities and about the likely impact of the pipeline. In part, at least, this reflects the utilitarian framework within which public inquires are expected to operate in a secular, pluralistic, liberal society. Some participants in the debate believed that this liberal framework itself needed to be challenged. For example, the churches insisted that the pipeline debate was not simply about technical issues, administrative problems or even legally binding claims about native rights. The whole way of life of the expansionist, industrial society of southern Canada, in relation to which the case for building a pipeline seemed so obvious, needed to be questioned. As the churches said in the Project North brief presented to the Berger Inquiry:

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23. ‘Business Replies,’ p. 20. I will return later to the charge that the pipeline proposal did represent a pattern of development which blocked the real human development of native peoples and other Canadians. For illustrations of this charge see Mel Watkins, ed. Den Nation: The Colony Within (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), especially the statements by Phillip Blake, p. 5; Rene Lamotho, p. 10; Frank T’Seleie, p. 12; and Peter Puxley, ‘The Colonial Experience,’ pp. 103-119.


26. ‘Business misunderstood: Lebel,’ The Canadian Churchman, June 1976. Louis Lebel, Vice-President of the Canadian Petroleum Association and active Roman Catholic layman, told a meeting of Roman Catholic bishops and priests that corporate capitalism was no longer mindful of social consequences. The corporations desire active participation of all concerned groups in discussions about northern development. ‘If this comes about,’ he said, ‘somewhere down the line Canadians could “get on with the job” of developing the north’.
We are talking about more than simple reformism and calling for more than mere individual conversion. We are calling for a conversion within our social and economic structures whereby policy making and decision making will begin to reflect and make practical the values of justice, dignity and fulfillment for every human being. Our corporate sins must be acknowledged and we must turn around, if we are to have a society that truly reflects the social consequences of the New Commandment. To bless the established order is to remain unconverted.

Businessmen, on the other hand, believed that it was unfair for church leaders to use their positions to promote such a one-sided ideology. The Observer article reported that businessmen ‘feel it unfair of our church to use some of our contributions to fund outright attacks on the economic philosophy that we sincerely believe to be in the best interest of Canada’. This ideological dimension of the pipeline debate can be probed more deeply in relation to ‘idealistic’ theories of ethical justification. These theories, according to A. R. C. Duncan, ‘seek for the grounds of both the rightness of actions and the goodness of ends in their joint relation to whole patterns or ways of life’. This desire for a broader framework involves taking a more self-consciously contextual approach. Conflicting claims about what is right or good are assessed in relation to comprehensive attempts to determine what would be fitting in relation to rights, consequences and whole ways of life. In addition to their arguments based on appeals to native rights and the consequences of the pipeline, the churches also related their criticisms of the pipeline proposal to judgments about our whole way of life. In the Project North brief, the churches supported ‘a moratorium on all major Northern resources development projects, including the Mackenzie Valley Pipeline, to give Canadians an opportunity to work together to develop alternative life styles based on conserver rather than consumer attitudes’.

The churches also supported the native peoples’ claim that the pipeline proposal represented a colonial pattern of development. One of their briefs presented to the Berger Inquiry was based on a comparative study of Brazil’s Amazon Valley and Canada’s Mackenzie Valley. Its authors assumed that exposure to colonialism in its raw Brazilian form would make it easier to identify the more subtle Canadian variant. This brief included ‘hard data’ about what had happened to native communities in Brazil when the government allowed foreign-owned corporations to carry out massive resource extraction schemes on native land. It also, however, represented an attempt to shift the discussion into a broader framework so that ideological issues could be confronted as an integral part of the debate about the proposed pipeline. This brief, and the reactions to it during the cross-examination of its authors, provide interesting illustrations of the dilemma experienced by critics of the dominant liberal, technological society. When they do not stick to ‘hard facts’ their arguments tend to sound abstract and sweeping. If, on the other hand, higher level generalizations and typifications such as ‘colonial pattern of development’, ‘consumer society’, ‘capitalist system’, and ‘technological society’ are not used, it is difficult to move beyond a narrowly technical focus which simply presupposes the legitimacy of dominant structures. This post-ethical concern with the language required to assess particular proposals in relation to different evaluations of a whole way of life and different visions of the future points to the fourth level of clarification.

4. Post-ethical or Foundational Level of Clarification

The fourth stage in the analysis involves returning in a more disciplined way to the stories of each side, and in particular to the metaphors, images, symbols, sacred texts and authoritative traditions which shape and ground these stories. This step is called post-ethical because attention is shifted from verifiable factual claims and rationally justified arguments to the foundational convictions that are discovered and confessed as the depths of different identities are disclosed. Mutual acceptance and

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29 Duncan, p. 11.
31 Project North Brief, pp. 1-2.
32 The Corporate Action Research Group was convened by the churches in 1975. On the basis of its work a study packet and a brief for the Berger Inquiry, both called ‘We Stand on Guard for Whom?’, were produced in the spring of 1976.
understanding at this level helps to create the conditions that facilitate a return to the arguments carried on at factual and ethical levels. (I am not suggesting that all identities must be accepted no matter how repugnant we find the beliefs and values of an individual or group. A method for clarification of ethical issues presupposes a community in which moral discourse and persuasion are possibilities. A method such as this can, however, be used to help members of a community to decide when schism, or a declaration of heresy, would represent a fitting response to unacceptable beliefs and values.)

Whereas the empirical sciences and moral philosophy are sister disciplines at the factual and ethical levels of clarification, disciplines such as literary studies and cultural anthropology are particularly relevant for this post-ethical or foundational stage. At this level, explicit attention is given to the religious beliefs, symbols, metaphors, images, myths, etc., which shape the stories and convey the most basic convictions of the participants. I will once again return to the ‘Church Speaks—Business Replies’ exchange for my first illustration.

After his response to what church leaders were saying about northern development and about Canada’s economic system, the businessman indicated that there was a further issue that, as a layman, he was hesitant to raise. It had to do with “the way in which church leaders who attack corporations use the Scriptures to justify their actions.” He pointed out that the author of the “Church speaks” article quoted the Bible, “not only in an attempt to justify the right of the church to take political action, but also to imply the correctness of that action.” One quotation that caught his attention was “Woe to those who lay house to house and land to land, and grind the faces of the poor.” Could not such a passage be used to support a variety of economic views? From a business point of view, it was church activism in the North that had contributed to unemployment and poverty, “which are grinding indeed to the poor.” Was it not embarrassing that one of the church leaders most critical of the businesses which were trying to provide jobs and dignity for natives would “quote Scriptures telling business people that causing poverty is morally wrong?” Relating what the prophets had done in their context to what Christians should do in the twentieth century must surely involve more than citing passages from the Bible. “What is needed is a good deal of fresh scholarship to determine ways biblical theology can be applied with integrity from anything known before.” Meanwhile, “it is not helpful to have verses of Scripture quoted in an attempt to foreclose a debate before it is really underway.”

The appeal to Scripture as an authoritative basis for taking sides in the debate did, in my view, help to obscure the nature of the disagreement between church leaders and the business community. It also revealed both the depth of the division between the two sides and the way in which their shared Christian faith could have served as a more effective ‘framework for creative collaboration’. Attention was diverted from arguments about the impact of the pipeline by implying that business people did not share the Bible’s bias towards the poor. Debate was foreclosed by the tendency to project a one-sided, partial view of the biblical tradition. The appeal to biblical roots could have been used to facilitate a more fruitful exchange, if it had been more clearly recognized that different trajectories of biblical faith stretch forth from biblical times to the present. Or, to turn the image around, twentieth century Christians trace their roots along different trajectories. Biblical scholars such as Walter Brueggemann and Paul Hanson have shown how the Mosaic covenant and the prophetic tradition, on the one hand, and the Davidic covenant and the religion of the rulers or the people in charge, on the other, represent different strands of biblical religion.

33 The churches of the Reformed and Lutheran traditions did decide that an explicit theological defense of the apartheid system in South Africa was a heresy. Relationships with the white South African Churches which persisted in such defenses were severed. The pipeline debate became acrimonious at times but neither side viewed it as a status confessionis issue which could proved a basis for excommunication. Just as the earlier levels of clarification focused on ‘factual claims’ and ‘value judgments,’ identities and/or conversions are the subject matter for reflection at the post-ethical level. I am using the term ‘conversion’ in a Lonerganian sense. As Michael Vertin suggested in his response to an earlier draft of this paper, I should have made it clearer at the outset that ‘facts’ and ‘values’ must always be viewed in relation to ‘conversions’.


35 Lonergan, p. xi.

For the one side, “The Church that does not stand within the prophetic tradition as part of its spiritual and faith commitment is not true to its biblical roots.” Although the author acknowledges another part to the biblical heritage, his emphasis is clearly on the prophetic mandate to call to account the rulers in the name of justice for the poor. The businessman, on the other hand, appealed to the other trajectory. He pointed out that business people do not believe that religion is a private matter and that the world should be left in secular hands:

Life is at its best when the secular is inspired by the sacred—that is when our politics, culture, and commerce are informed by the values of religious faith. Thus men and women in business are helped to understand that in the ultimate sense the purpose of economic activity is not pure and selfish ambition but human improvement. Like David, whose dance was done for the Lord, business people also have a vocation that may be offered for the glory of God.

The church leader no doubt did not intend to be unfair to the business people who thought of themselves as faithful Christians. He was making it clear that his own ethical choices were grounded in a desire to be a faithful follower of Christ, and he expected others, including those church members who disagreed with him, to do the same. “Sometimes we may be out of step with one another, but I hope at least our loyalty lies in the same direction—and that for the rest we can work it out together.” As far as the pipeline debate was concerned, working it out together could involve discussing concrete issues such as whether or not the pipeline was needed and what impact the pipeline would have on native communities at factual and ethical levels of clarification. It could also involve attempting to have a more disciplined debate about the relative merits of that economic philosophy which business people think is in the best interest of Canada and an alternative society based on conservative values. Acknowledging the biblical roots of each side’s position would not resolve the debate, nor would it simply relativize the different perspectives. Such an acknowledgement could, however, help to create the conditions for a sustained and disciplined discussion about whether or not the pipeline should be built, and about which of the competing philosophies of development and visions of the future is most consistent with their mutual concern for human well-being.

A second illustration of this level of analysis is Gibson Winter’s treatment of the pipeline debate in relation to the root metaphors embedded in the different positions. In his book, Liberating Creation: Foundations of Religious Social Ethics, he related the ideology and reigning assumptions of the dominant technological society to an underlying mechanistic root metaphor. The pervasive and unquestioned influence of mechanistic assumptions made it appear to be inevitable that small local communities informed by an organic metaphor were destined (fated) to be assimilated. He suggests that bringing into view underlying metaphors helps to break the hold of mechanistic, deterministic assumptions. It does this by establishing the existence of this dimension of our identities and by recalling that the myths by which we live are both relevant for our lives and transformable human constructs. We are as accountable for their impact on our actions and outlooks as we are for the factual claims and value judgments of which we are more aware.

An analysis of root metaphors does not directly provide an authoritative basis for resolving disputes involving conflicting factual claims and ethical judgements or between conflicting appeals to the Bible. The pipeline proposal was not wrong because its proponents’ world view was shaped by mechanistic assumptions. On the contrary, the pervasiveness of mechanistic assumptions in a technological society are a source of concern because they help to make ‘wrong-headed’ schemes, such as the Mackenzie Valley pipeline, appear to be such natural, inevitable next steps in the progress of an industrial-technological society. Whether or not they are wrong-headed must be argued at factual and ethical levels of clarification.

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37 ‘Church Speaks,’ p. 17
38 ‘Business Replies,’ p. 19
39 ‘Church speaks,’ p. 18
40 Berger provided a good description of the competing philosophies of development in Vol. 2, p. 4

The analysis of root metaphors does not in itself, therefore, provide an authoritative basis for ending a debate. Such a use of metaphor analysis would simply represent another version of the foundationalist quest for certainty. However, an identification of the basic images and root metaphors informing a position can help to clarify the normative framework within which particular claims are made and defended. It is at this level of analysis that the normative foundations of my own position can be clarified.

Although human beings are in many ways like machines and organisms, in a more fundamental sense we are persons. Therefore our basic outlook and our normative criteria ought to be grounded in the personal, rather than mechanical or organic, dimension of life. What is it about personal life that is most central or distinctively human? The key word is relationship, and the foundational symbol is mutuality. The basic model for human life is the relationship between friends. Each respects both the freedom and self-determination of the other and the fact of their inter-relatedness. Concerns for the rights of minorities and for the responsibilities of leaders can both be grounded in appeals to the well-being of persons. The relative merits of the concerns will depend upon the context. It is therefore important to have a framework for creative collaboration in order to assess what is going on in a particular situation.

Conclusions Regarding Method and Contexts

This method for clarifying ethical issues is based on the assumption that the ethicist is primarily a facilitator of disciplined inquiry rather than an arbiter who can bring debate to a close with an authoritative declaration regarding which position is right. This does not mean, however, that differences between a ‘confessional’ theological college setting and a ‘non-confessional’ religious studies context are unimportant. Since all analyses are carried out in relation to specific aims, interests, types of expertise, and so on, it is always important to ask whether one is engaging in reflection as a social activist, researcher, administrator, concerned citizen or pastor—or as a teacher and a scholar in a university or seminary context.

When I began this paper I assumed that I would want to close by observing that, in both university and theological college contexts, academics experience the tension between being detached and ‘objective’, on the one hand, and engaging in the value-laden, constructive tasks of whatever faith communities, political parties or causes particular scholars support, on the other. That observation still underlies my emphasis on the continuities between university and seminary contexts. However, comments by Stephen Sykes in his book The Identity of Christianity, have increased my awareness of another factor underlying my preference for a non-prescriptive notion of ethics in both university and theological college settings.

Sykes has reinforced my reservations about the professionalization of theology and ethics. As a systematic theologian, he acknowledges his growing sensitivity to the power that theologians have exercised in relation to what Christians believe or think they ought to believe. In particular, he challenges the bland assumption that the theologian’s job is to specialize in purely intellectual problems, apart from careful consideration of the setting of the theological disciplines in the wider context of Christianity’s identity as a religion. He suggests that “the forms of specialization strongly promoted by the compartmentalization of western intellectual life have led theologians into an uncritical adoption of vanguard to the Christian community.”


43 Stephen Sykes, The Identity of Christianity: Theologians and the Essence of Christianity from Schleiermacher to Barth (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), p. 6. Although I have not developed the point in this paper, I have taken it for granted that positivism in the sciences, foundationalism in philosophy and the notion that ethicists and theologians have a prescriptive task in relation to their communities represent analogous quests for certainty and analogous temptations to allow authoritative statements about some aspect of a debate to serve as a basis for closing the debate. The point alluded to in
of the intellectual life, but from the authority granted to, and the power exercised by, highly trained specialists.

Turning to “the difficult matter of the grounds of religious knowledge,” he says:

We have to take seriously...the possibility of a tyrannous use of intellectual power; and there has to be somewhere in the remarkable system of checks and balances in the living religious tradition where theology is simply not in charge. In the end I shall argue that the Christian community at worship is such a place, and that here are the grounds for religious knowledge which limit the control which the theologian is tempted to exercise by means of his or her superior articulacy.44

As a systematic theologian, Sykes finds his attention drawn to the Christian community at worship as the setting in which religious knowledge is disclosed through the multiple dimensions of the religious life, i.e., doctrine and myth, ritual and celebration, and the gathering of the community. As an ethicist, my attention is drawn to the fact that direct engagement in social justice activities, and in the routine administration of everyday affairs, is also a multi-dimensional source of religious knowledge. In these areas of life as well, ethicists and theologians are simply not in charge. We have important roles to play, but not as arbiters of disputes which can be resolved by authoritative appeals to Scripture, tradition or the correct analysis. We are, as I have suggested, facilitators of disciplined inquiry and participants, as partners, in the critical and constructive tasks of our communities. This also involves, however, a willingness to use our specialized training to check on our own tendencies and the tendencies of other experts to foreclose debates touching on particular areas of expertise before the various dimensions of an issue have been clarified.

my title is that a comparative approach is to be preferred to foundationalism in both university and seminary settings. A proper explanation and defense of this preference will require a different kind of paper. It is an issue that Peter Paris and I intend to address in a joint presentation at the Society of Christian Ethics meetings in January, 1986, called ‘Religious Social Ethics and Foundational Theology’. 44 Sykes, p. 7. See also my observations about the relationship between story-telling and analysis in “Cyprus Consultation on Political Ethics,” The Ecumenist, 20.2 (Jan-Feb., 1982), 27-29.