

Convictions, Conflict and Moral Reasoning: The Contribution of the Concept of Convictions in Understanding Moral Reasoning in the Context of Conflict

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ABSTRACT: This research was motivated by a desire to understand better the process involved in framing attitudes to decision making in the context of conflict and peacemaking, especially as a result of experience in Northern Ireland. The study is located at the intersection of theological ethics and practical theology, as research that engages with theological ethics by addressing issues of moral reasoning in a manner that is informed by, and may also contribute to, the field of practical theology. The research explores the concept of convictions, as proposed by James McClendon and James Smith (drawing on the work of Willem F. Zuurdeeg), as a possible methodology for understanding the formation of attitudes toward, and processes of, moral reasoning in the context of conflict. The thesis also draws on the work of Glen Stassen and Parush Parushev in regard to convictions and moral reasoning and the results of the investigation are ‘tested’ by way of a case study, which examines the responses of selected groups (n=4) of Christians in Northern Ireland to the 1998 Belfast Agreement. Data consist of official church statements, other statements from Christian organisations and a wide range of letters and advertisements placed in local newspapers. Core convictions of the four groups are uncovered and identified as key influences on the moral reasoning behind each group’s response to the Belfast Agreement. The research concludes that the unique development of the concept of convictions by McClendon and Smith contributes an important means of understanding moral reasoning in general and Christian moral reasoning in contexts of conflict.

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