

WILEY

Monica, Bill, and Ethics

Author(s): Thad Williamson

Source: *CrossCurrents*, Vol. 49, No. 2 (SUMMER 1999), pp. 153-163

Published by: Wiley

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24460764>

Accessed: 03-08-2018 18:29 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



Wiley is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *CrossCurrents*

The Clinton scandal is an occasion for ethical reflection, but it is far from the most important issue facing ethicists.

Thad Williamson

Monica, Bill, and Ethics

Professional ethicists are sure to get mileage for years from analysis of the Bill Clinton-Monica Lewinsky scandal and subsequent impeachment trial. But how well can ethicists, and religious ethicists in particular, respond to such a crisis in “real time,” and help clarify both the issues at stake and the next steps that should be taken?

Two recent books, offering strikingly divergent perspectives on the Clinton scandal, provide primary evidence with which to answer those questions. The first (*From the Eye of the Storm: A Pastor to the President Speaks Out* [Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press], 1998), was written by J. Philip Wogaman, a respected academic ethicist who now holds the perhaps unenviable position of pastor to the President. The second volume (*Judgment Day At the White House: A Critical Declaration Exploring Moral Issues and the Political Use and Abuse of Religion*, edited by Gabriel Fackre [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans], 1999) consists of ruminations from both signatories and critics of a “Declaration Concerning Religion, Ethics, and the Crisis in the Clinton Presidency,” dated December 1, 1998, and signed by over 140 scholars, the bulk of whom are faculty members at historically conservative or moderate mainline Protestant seminaries.

The Declaration itself is an unimpressive document, woodenly written and lacking a clear statement of what the signers think should be done in the Clinton case (other than a platitudinous call for “national

THAD WILLIAMSON is a doctoral student in political theory at Harvard University and a member of the ARIL board. He holds an M.A. in Christian Ethics from Union Theological Seminary, New York.

courage in deliberation that avoids ideological division" on the part of Congress and the country in the impeachment debates). The Declaration's fundamental contention is that "serious misunderstandings of repentance and forgiveness are being exploited for political advantage." The lightning rod for this charge is the Presidential Prayer Breakfast (an annual ecumenical gathering of over 100 religious leaders) that on September 11, 1998, featured a public display of contrition by the President for his recently revealed misconduct. Clinton's words were reportedly well-received by the religious leaders, many of whom personally offered words of "spiritual support" for Mr. and Mrs. Clinton. The implicit claim of the Declaration is that Clinton used the occasion to dupe the clergy present and to forward his own political advantage. (It might be asked whether what happened at the 1998 Prayer Breakfast was different only in degree from past breakfasts. The willingness of the American religious establishment to participate in publicity stunts designed to place politicians in a favorable light hardly began with the Clinton presidency.) The Declaration goes on to decry the debasement of public trust and ethical norms which the President's behavior is believed to have engendered, going so far as to claim that the crisis raised the question of "whether the moral basis of the constitutional system itself will be lost."

The Declaration, unfortunately, does not make clear whether the ones in need of hearing these exhortations are church leaders who have been "duped" by Clinton, other academics, the media and the public at large, or the President himself. Many of the specific claims are effectively placed in doubt by Declaration critics Nicholas Wolterstorff of Yale University and Lewis Smedes and Glen Harold Stassen of Fuller Theological Seminary in their contributions to the volume. (For instance, the Declaration criticizes the publicity given to Clinton's ongoing pastoral meetings with a team of three ministers, but as Stassen points out, it was the ministers, not Clinton, who informed the public that these meetings were taking place.) Equally troubling, the Declaration presumes, implicitly, to know that Clinton's contrition, as expressed on September 11 and other dates, could not be sincere. (To his credit, one signatory, Max Stackhouse, explicitly expresses doubt on this point, while Stanley Hauerwas of Duke University allows that "I suspect Clinton was as sincere as he could be.") Rather than resort to such highly questionable presumptions, the signatories of the Declaration might have better served the aim of expressing their anger and concern simply by explicitly stating that "Bill Clinton is a chronic liar, a sickness on

the body politic, and cannot be trusted in any setting, public or private, under the cloak of religion or not."

Fortunately, the essays contributed by eleven of the signatories to this volume offer considerably more punch, precision, and questions to ponder than the Declaration itself. With characteristic sharpness, Hauerwas finds in Clinton's pattern of deceit evidence for what happens to religion when it is separated from the ongoing practices of a disciplined community. Hauerwas declares: "It is not just that President Clinton has no sense that a public sin requires public penance... but that American Protestantism has no sense of it either." Robert Jewett of Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary deconstructs Clinton's earliest apologies to illustrate how far short they fell of genuine Christian confession, which requires taking specific responsibility for specific actions, not simply being sorry for the way things turned out. Klyne Snodgrass of North Park Theological Seminary provides an effective critique of the efforts of some of Clinton's defenders (including Wogaman) to use the story of David and Bathsheba as an argument for allowing Clinton to keep his position, noting that while David himself was spared a series of disasters fell upon his kingdom and his progeny in the wake of his own sex (and murder) scandal. Edward Wimberly of the Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta decries the uncritical attachment of African-American church leaders to Clinton, "settling" for "leaders who cannot, in their private and public behavior, meet our expectations... We would be better off without such leaders." (A similar critique could be made of the close relationship between Clinton and leaders of mainline institutions such as the National Council of Churches, in which the NCC has offered implicit political support for the President, even as he pursued policies, such as welfare reform, directly contradicting the stated social agenda of the mainline churches.)

The critics of the Declaration published in the volume express dissent at a variety of levels. As noted, Wolterstorff and Smedes express doubt regarding the Declaration's suspicion towards Clinton's sincerity, a point supported by William J. Buckley's impressive exposition of Catholic doctrine on sin and forgiveness. John P. Burgess of Pittsburgh Theological Seminary argues that truth-telling is the highest good that can be achieved through the political and constitutional process and that theological observers should content themselves in the Clinton affair that at least the truth has (finally) been told. Donald and Peggy Shriver express dismay at Clinton's behavior but also concern that dis-

cussion of the scandal has appealed to a narrow definition of morality that ignores larger social evils. Meanwhile, Stassen calls for a return to the "rule of civil decency," a rule which understood that the sex lives of politicians should be out of the bounds of normal political discourse, while also stressing that, even in the case of misdeeds like Clinton's, redemption and restoration are possible if the sinner in question has entered into a sincere program of church-based discipline and repentance.

The President in fact has entered into such a program under the leadership of three ministers, one of whom, Philip Wogaman, is his pastor at Foundry United Methodist Church in Washington. Wogaman's book betrays no inside knowledge derived from his pastoral work with the President. What Wogaman does do is to call for the moral priority of forgiveness, decry the spirit of incivility which motivated all sides in the year-long scandal, and offer an essentially political defense of the Clinton presidency. While Wogaman's call to civility should draw few objections, far more contentious are the conclusions he draws from the claim that "we are a society that should understand itself more deeply as a community of love than as a community of law." Wogaman, who urged a censure resolution to resolve the crisis as opposed to impeachment, challenges not just the excesses and possible illegalities of the Starr investigation, but, by implication, the moral legitimacy of the investigation itself. He thus asks: "Will we be a society that is grounded in compassion and a generous spirit — as exemplified by the themes of the White House prayer breakfast . . . or will we allow ourselves to be increasingly hard-hearted, as exemplified by the Starr Report and the manner of its presentation to the nation?" The skeptical reader can be excused for asking whether Wogaman really means to support blanket absolution of presidential wrongdoing whenever a case presented against the President is excessively strident. If Congressional Democrats in 1986 and 1987 had played political hardball and gone for the jugular of the Reagan Presidency (as they most certainly did not), would that have made Reagan's (probable) crimes in the Iran-Contra affair easier to pardon?

Such critical questions, asked not only of Wogaman but of the signers of the Declaration, should at least make it clear that neither side has an open-and-shut case. These ethicists are, for the most part, skilled writers with strong persuasive capacities, and most readers should find merit in points made by those on both sides of the Declaration. But what these volumes do not do is systematically analyze and evaluate

the various claims, a task perhaps appropriately left to readers. Now that the more specific legal and constitutional questions regarding the crisis have been resolved, what exactly are the issues at stake in considering the larger ethical meaning of the Clinton scandal? What central claims can be made about Clinton's behavior, and how should these claims be assessed? How does the love-justice tension characteristic of Christian thought best apply to each claim? What follows is a preliminary discussion of six distinct moral claims that have been pressed by ethicists regarding the Clinton scandal, four of which are claims against the President and two of which are aimed at the larger political system and culture in which the Presidency is located.

The Moral Claims Against the President — and the Country

1. *That the President committed adultery and betrayed his wife and family.* On this claim, it would appear to be clear that Wogaman's call for the priority of forgiveness over judgmentalism is well-placed. It might be further suggested that, as a purely private behavior, misleading others about one's sexual behavior is less to be condemned with moral swagger than to be accepted as part of the human condition. Professor Christopher Morse of Union Theological Seminary has called attention (in a recent public lecture) to Dietrich Bonhoeffer's problematization of conventional understandings of "telling the truth." Truth is contextual, Bonhoeffer urged, and "'telling the truth' means something different according to the particular situation in which one stands. Account must be taken of the one's relationships at each particular time." Further, not all who inquire have the right to know the truth — and in particular, Bonhoeffer noted, not everything regarding sexuality is meant to be exposed. "Exposure is cynical," wrote Bonhoeffer, "and even if the cynic appears to himself to be specially honest, or if he sets himself up as a fanatical devotee of truth, he nevertheless fails to achieve the truth which is of decisive importance, namely, the truth that since the Fall there has been a need also for concealment and secrecy."

More generally, Bonhoeffer wrote, "those who pretend to be executing God's judgment" are in fact pursuing "a truth which is of Satan." Such fanatical truth-seeking "wounds shame, desecrates mystery, breaks confidence, betrays the community in which he lives, and laughs arrogantly at the devastation he has wrought and at human weakness which 'cannot bear the truth.' He says truth is destructive and demands its victims." It is safe to say that Bonhoeffer would have much to say about the Starr investigation — and that he might also cast

a wary eye at religious ethicists publishing a book titled *Judgment Day at the White House*, a title which seems to imply that final judgement is in human hands, not those of God.

2. *That the President has exhibited a sustained pattern of adultery and of viewing women (in his private life) as instruments for sexual gratification, as well as a willingness to exploit his personal position for such gratification.* Even if Christian love and forgiveness should be readily extended to those who have been unfaithful in marriage but have expressed contrition and sought to repent, such forgiveness can become a form of “enabling” if the behavior in question does not change over time. Wogaman and the President’s defenders are notably weak on this point. As Jean Bethke Elshtain has pointed out, Wogaman makes no mention of the seriousness of the harassment charge brought by Paula Jones; nor does he address Clinton’s increasingly well-documented pattern of unfaithfulness, or the possibility that the inequality of power inherent in a liaison between the President of the United States and a young intern represents not only betrayal in marriage but an abuse of power. Wogaman never acknowledges the legitimacy of the Jones lawsuit, nor considers whether the right of a woman to pursue harassment charges should outweigh the obvious right-wing political motivations behind the suit. Wogaman’s case would be more convincing if he acknowledged Jones’ right to sue, while regretting that the Supreme Court allowed the trial to be brought against a sitting President (and that Clinton did not quickly settle the matter out of court.)

To the extent that Clinton’s behavior represented not just a tragic slip-up but an expression of more persistent patterns of behavior, there would be good reason for a community of fellow believers to insist upon more from Brother Bill than diluted verbal apologies that, as Jewett points out, failed to take explicit responsibility for specific acts, and instead fully insist, to use Jewett’s criteria for authentic repentance, on a full acknowledgment of sin as well as “renunciation of irresponsible behavior, and a return to a healthy relationship with God and one’s fellow humans.” Yet, even if one agrees with Jewett on this point, it is far from clear what citizens — outsiders who are not part of Clinton’s community of believers — can and should do about “getting Bill Clinton right with God” (and fellow humans), other than pray for the success of Clinton’s sessions with his spiritual counselors and his ultimate spiritual rehabilitation.

It may well be, as Hauerwas and others suspect, that Clinton is too much a political animal, too much a creature of pride, and too skilled a

liar truly to mend his flaws, at least within the context of being President of the United States. Perhaps it would be better for Clinton's soul if he gave up being President before the end of his term. But that is the kind of conversation that best takes place internal to a community of faith. Again, there seems to be little the public at large could or should do other than to pray for the wisdom of the counsel of Clinton's own community of faith, such as it is, in dealing with the very serious ongoing pattern of behavior the President has exhibited.

3. *That the President's actions violated the public trust and the implicit contract between leaders and citizens.* The signers of the Declaration, however, insist that there is a public dimension to Clinton's wrongdoing, even beyond the questions of adultery and perjury — namely, that he enlisted other public servants to participate in his lie over an eight-month time span. Elshtain concludes from these facts that "if . . . the president is of low moral character and his word cannot be trusted, then he cannot do his job effectively. If everything the President says is subject to ridicule and reinterpretation because he has become untrustworthy, it becomes difficult, if not impossible, for him to govern effectively." Wogaman and the other Declaration dissenters do not respond to this specific point — but perhaps they did not need to. Now that the impeachment trial is over, Clinton, although wounded, is still governing, and not everything he says is in fact subject to ridicule. Indeed, Elshtain's argument that leaders who are caught in lies are subsequently unable to govern effectively now appears to be ahistorical.

Far more persuasive than that failed attempt to build a consequentialist argument for why leaders should not lie, however, is the lingering concern that, in Elshtain's words, "we have moved into a zone of amoral Machiavellianism that ill befits us a people. . . ." One of the most chilling images generated by the scandal is that of the President speaking by phone with pollster Dick Morris in January 1998, weighing how to respond to the initial allegations of an affair with Lewinsky. Instead of consulting his pastors, biblical texts, or his own conscience, Clinton consulted a pollster in order to calculate what sort of response would produce the greatest political advantage. Much as Elshtain's words indicate, the episode symbolizes the priority of (short-term and short-sighted, as it turned out) political reasoning over moral reasoning in the Clinton presidency — and in a very tangible sense, the failure of the President to exercise *leadership*, not just follow the polls.

4. *That the President's actions, by weakening his presidency, represent a betrayal of the political contract between Clinton and those who supported*

him, in that he subordinated his larger social goals to his private gratification. This point has been stressed in the Fackre collection by self-described “Yankee Democrat” Max Stackhouse, among others. Placed in a position of unmatched power with so many possibilities for doing good in a world with so much need for good to be done, the President expended his energy, and eventually that of the entire country, on the narrowest, most short-sighted of gratifications. Academic students of the presidency, such as Richard E. Neustadt, have stressed the political acumen, shrewdness, prudence, and sense of one’s longer-term “power prospects” required to push one’s political agenda through the complex of checks, balances, and bureaucratic interests characteristic of the American system. Although Clinton is the rare President that has read such studies, once in office he brazenly disregarded their central tenets, sacrificing his own power and hence his political agenda for the sake of Monica Lewinsky.

This is a just cause of real anger at the President, not only from close associates such as George Stephanopolous but even more so from poorer Americans and disadvantaged constituencies who were counting on the President to give his best effort to deliver the goods. Yet, if one examines Clinton’s previous record in Arkansas, it can also be said that Democratic partisans got very much the man they voted for in 1992 — and more broadly, that the risks of such political betrayal are inherent in our form of democracy, in which failed leaders are difficult to remove and large amounts of power are concentrated in the presidency. (On the other hand, during the impeachment debates some observers, including Wogaman, appealed to what they believe has been the President’s success in fulfilling his political contract — “Many things have gone well on his ‘watch,’” avers Wogaman — in explaining why Clinton should not be removed from office.)

5. *That the fact that we have Clinton as President is evidence of systemic flaws in our political process, flaws which reward those who can deceive the public and punish honesty.* This is a point on which critics of a variety of political stripes might reasonably agree. In the Fackre collection, Hauerwas expresses the point, writing that “our elections are meant to ensure that anyone we elect to public office has lost his or her hold on the truth. It is all a matter of ‘spin.’” Hauerwas apparently believes that this is simply an immutable fact of American democracy, but the truism that in politics (as in war) truth is the first casualty is in fact intimately related to historically-specific institutional arrangements. Consider that the prominence of money and the compulsion to raise it in political life

forces those with ambition to become political entrepreneurs and eliminates from politics' highest echelons capable and competent citizens lacking access to large amounts of money; that our electoral process lacks any explicitly deliberative mechanisms; that the "political class" holds ordinary citizens in corrosive contempt; and that in a country of 260 million people spread over thousands of square miles television will usually trump more traditional democratic virtues such as face-to-face political organizing, door-to-door canvassing, etc. Given these structural features of our politics, it can effectively be argued that Clinton should be seen as much a creature of as contributor to a flawed political system that gives incentives to the wrong virtues. The extent to which, in the long haul, these structural features can be altered or ameliorated remains an important open question for those who yearn for a healthier politics and a more appealing brand of politician.

6. *That the larger problem behind the Clinton scandal rests in American culture itself, particularly insofar as it has distorted the proper role of sexuality in human life.* In an odd way, both Wogaman and harsh conservative critics of the President such as William Bennett place the ultimate source of the presidential crisis in shortcomings in American culture. For Bennett, the blame lies with the majority of Americans who, inexplicably in his view, did not wish the President to be expelled from office. According to Bennett, this response represents a dulling of our collective moral sense. Wogaman also believes something has gone deeply awry in the culture in terms of sexuality: The commercial media have found profit in helping to create an over-stimulated culture and in promulgating the idea of sex as a "form of self-centeredness or selfish exploitation of others." But where Wogaman would take direct issue with the general approach of a Bennett or a Starr is in doubting that the best way to deal with the problem is "by exposing and condemning the excesses, meanwhile titillating the onlookers...." Since the real problem is the absence of love in our understanding of sexuality, Wogaman suggests, any corrective action must be taken in a spirit of love and with full acknowledgement of human weakness.

Wogaman's refusal to combat sin with self-righteousness appears to be on solid theological and ethical ground, particularly if we recall Bonhoeffer's warnings about over-zealous, self-appointed exposers of "truth." Yet one may also wonder whether Wogaman has any substantive ideas for seriously challenging the society's (mis)understanding of sexuality and the media through by which it is created and through which it is filtered. (None are in evidence in this book.) To the extent

that Wogaman and other ethicists believe that there is a serious cultural dysfunction that needs to be addressed, it is incumbent upon them to provide substantive suggestions about how to reweave the needed moral fabric. Otherwise, critics of Starr-style exposés may themselves be accused of simply citing a sociological fact (this culture's distorted understanding of sexuality) that they have no real intention of seriously trying to alter in order to deflect attention from the tangible failings of an individual human being.

Restating the Ethical Agenda

What then are we to make of these claims? This preliminary analysis suggests that, beyond the President's legal liability, there is little ground for persons external to Mr. Clinton's marriage or his community of faith to pass judgment or demand forgiveness with regard to the first two claims. With regard to the third and fourth claims, pertaining to Clinton's betrayal of his constituency and the public at large, critics of the President are on stronger ground. There is good reason to believe that history will not be kind to the President for squandering his opportunity to serve the public because of a lack of personal discipline, and, ultimately, a lack of commitment to his avowed public agenda. The fifth and sixth claims ultimately require that citizens stop pointing the finger at one man but instead scrutinize the larger political system as a whole — and perhaps take a long look in the mirror. Apart from one rather bland sentence in the Declaration itself, it is unfortunate that most of the essays in *Judgment Day at the White House* tend to downplay or ignore this dimension — the responsibility of citizens who do not like the current state of the nation's political or cultural life to act in common to improve the situation, rather than cast blame on one obviously flawed man.

Indeed, perhaps the most disturbing question to be raised about these books is why it took this event and not some other to stir so many ethicists into public speech. With few exceptions (such as Hauerwas), the Declaration and its signers seem more bent on protecting American constitutionalism and political culture from perceived moral threats than in acknowledging that this very political culture is itself morally problematic and all too frequently complicit in the execution or perpetuation of radical evil. Neither Wogaman's emphasis on forgiveness and caring, nor his defense of the President's record in office, impress when placed beside the fact that this President, like many others before him, continues to call for billions of dollars in increased arms spending —

and lacks the imagination or courage even to consider implementing the global anti-poverty agenda of the United Nations Development Program, which could eliminate child hunger and provide basic social services worldwide for roughly \$40 billion a year. Meanwhile, several hundred thousand Iraqi children have died during Clinton's presidency because of an embargo of dubious effectiveness that has earned the outrage and condemnation of international observers. These moral evils do not much exercise the minds or occasion the writings of many of the academic ethicists who have been eager to spill ink on the Clinton scandal.

Biblical ethics at its best calls us to see the world fresh through the eyes of the Bible, and to let biblical notions of justice set the agenda. Such a worldview requires not only that one be reactive to the events of the day, no matter how traumatic or diverting, but also carry forward a positive agenda for the achievement of social justice and human reconciliation. While the volumes at hand do raise the major issues presented by the Clinton crisis and offer considerable wisdom, their confusion, shortcomings, and especially their hyperbole reflect the fact that with few exceptions these ethicists too closely echo the information and opinions of the mainstream media outlets.

What is missing is the reminder that of all the evils in the world, President Clinton's behavior in the Monica Lewinsky affair, deplorable as it is, is hardly the most serious. Its impact on our national life has too often been exaggerated. Long before the scandal broke, Americans were losing faith in their government, the capacity of ordinary citizens to influence public life was weakening, institutions responsible for moral formation were under attack, and children were going hungry — to name just a few of the very real problems of American life that religious ethicists need to be confronting directly. The real question is not whether religious ethicists can respond effectively in "real time" to these traumatic episodes in the national life, taking their seats at the punditry table to contribute soundbites to an agenda set by the nation's media complex, but whether ethicists can find ways to call effective attention to the deeper, persistent problems of American society and its relationship with the world.