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Kenneth Einar Himma

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CHRISTIAN FAITH WITHOUT BELIEF THAT GOD EXISTS: A DEFENSE OF POJMAN'S CONCEPTION OF FAITH

Kenneth Einar Himma

In a recent essay, Alexander R. Pruss argues that most Pojmanian Christians fall short of being fully Christian because they are morally committed to acts that are inconsistent with what they believe is required by Christian ethics. I argue that Pruss's argument falls short in a couple of important respects. First, I argue that Pruss significantly overstates the likelihood in a Pojmanian Christian of a conflict between her ethical precepts and what she thinks are Christian ethical precepts. Second, I argue that the argument relies on an implausible statement of a putative moral principle.

In his important article "Faith without Belief," Louis Pojman argues that propositional belief that God exists is not a necessary condition for faith/belief in God. On this view, authentic Christian faith can be grounded in a "profound hope" that Christianity is true together with a passionate commitment to act as if Christianity is true:

If belief-in, or trusting, can be analyzed in terms of commitment to a course of action or a disposition to act, then it seems that we do not need to believe-that *x* exists in order to believe-in or deeply hope in the existence of *x*. We can live in profound hope, trusting in the object of hope. In ordinary hope we may not act according to the proposition in question, but may hedge our bet. . . . But in profound hope . . . the desire for the object is so great that the subject is ready to act even in the light of very little evidence or subjective probability that the object in question will be realized. In such hope enormous risk is warranted by the strength of the desire and the felt need. The person lives *as if* the proposition were true or becomes so.¹

Thus, according to Pojman, someone who assigns an epistemic probability of less than .50 to the central tenets of Christianity can nonetheless instantiate an authentic Christian faith and thereby receive all "essential benefits of religion," including eternal salvation.

In a recent essay appearing in this journal, Alexander R. Pruss argues that what I will call Pojmanian faith is rarely, if ever, sufficient for being fully Christian.² On Pruss's view, a Pojmanian Christian is very likely to find herself morally committed to acting in ways inconsistent with what she believes is required by Christian ethics. Since one cannot be fully



Christian without being committed to always doing what one believes is required by Christian ethics, Pojmanian Christians are unlikely to be fully Christian. If it is also true that being fully Christian is necessary for salvation, then it also follows that Pojmanian faith rarely achieves salvation.³

In this essay, I argue that Pruss's argument falls short in a couple of important respects. First, I argue that Pruss significantly overstates the likelihood in a Pojmanian Christian of a conflict between her ethical precepts and what she thinks are Christian ethical precepts. Second, I argue that the argument relies on an implausible statement of a putative moral principle.

I. Pruss's Criticism of the Pojmanian Conception

Pruss's argument begins with what I will call the "Fully Christian Thesis" or FCT for short. According to FCT, one cannot be fully Christian without being committed "to do[ing] everything that Christianity says is obligatory and to refrain[ing] from everything that Christianity says is wrong" (CFB 292). This, of course, does not mean that one cannot be fully Christian if one continues to sin; no merely human being, according to mainstream Christian theology, is capable of living a sinless life. What it does mean is that genuine Christian faith requires a committed disposition to satisfy the Christian ideal: "To be a Christian," Pruss concludes, "involves being *committed* to being a morally perfect Christian" (CFB 302).

Pruss argues that, in cases where two moral claims conflict,⁴ we have a moral obligation to do what we believe is required by the claim with the higher epistemic probability. As Pruss describes the Moral Conflict Principle:

(MCP) If after sufficiently thorough investigation (i) one believes that one body, A, of moral claims implies that an action ϕ is impermissible and another body, B, implies that it is obligatory, and (ii) one believes that the moral weight assigned by A to the impermissibility of ϕ is at least as great as that which B assigns to the obligatoriness of ϕ , while (iii) no other body of moral claims is a serious contender in one's epistemic predicament and (iv) one takes A to be more probable than B, then (v) one is morally prohibited from ϕ ing (CFB 294–95).

MCP is not just an epistemic principle that purports to identify the moral claim that is most likely to be true; on Pruss's conception, MCP is a moral principle that defines a "real, albeit subjective, moral obligation" to do what is required by what one believes is the most epistemically likely moral claim when two moral claims conflict.

MCP poses a problem for Pojman's analysis of faith, on Pruss's view, because it is likely to bring many persons with Pojmanian faith into conflict with FCT. Given the depth and subtlety of the argument, I will let Pruss speak for himself here:

I claim that for a very large number, perhaps a majority of reasonable Christians, there is moral conflict between Christian ethics and non-Christian ethics, where by "Christian ethics" I mean the body of those normative beliefs that the reasonable Christian thinks are very

likely true *if* Christianity is true, and by "non-Christian ethics" the body of those normative beliefs that our reasonable Christian thinks are very likely *if* Christianity is false. . . .

Now, given the MCP, [consider] the case of Christian who believes that if Christianity is true then ϕ ing in circumstances C is obligatory, but that such ϕ ing is impermissible, with at least as great moral weight, if Christianity is false. If such a Christian, moreover, assigns a less than 50% epistemic probability to Christianity, then she must think that the negation of Christianity is more likely true, and hence by the MCP she is morally prohibited from ϕ ing in circumstances C. Now, a moral person is committed to acting in accordance with morality. Hence our Christian will be committed to refraining from ϕ ing in circumstances C. But since Christianity claims that there is an obligation to ϕ in circumstances C, it follows that such a person cannot be fully a Christian. (CFB 293, 295).

Though Pruss couches the beginning of his argument in terms of what someone who assigns an epistemic probability of greater than .50 to Christianity would believe, the argument should be understood in terms of what a reasonable person who assigns an epistemic probability of less than .50 to Christianity would be. Insofar as the conclusion purports to establish—on the strength of MCP—that most Pojmanian Christians will find themselves committed to acting in ways that are inconsistent with what *they* believe Christianity requires, the relevant beliefs have to be those that a Pojmanian Christian is likely to have. As is readily evident, we can infer a claim about what Pojmanian Christians are likely committed to doing via MCP only from a claim about what Pojmanian Christians are likely to believe. Strictly speaking, what someone who assigns an epistemic probability of greater than .50 to Christianity believes is not directly relevant.

Thus construed, Pruss's argument is as follows. MCP obligates a person to obey what she thinks is the most likely moral claim in the event of a conflict. But this means that someone who believes the probability that Christianity is true is less than .50 is obligated to act in accordance with non-Christian moral principles in the event they come into conflict with Christian moral principles. Accordingly, no matter how much such a person might hope for the truth of Christianity, she is obligated to behave in a way that is inconsistent with being fully Christian. Since being fully Christian requires being committed to obeying morality and obeying morality requires acting in accordance with MCP, it follows that someone with merely Pojmanian faith cannot be fully committed to acting in accordance with Christian ethics and hence is not fully Christian under FCT.

This is a problem for Pojman's view, according to Pruss, because "many, if not most," people who believe the epistemic probability of Christianity is less than .50 are committed to accepting moral beliefs that conflict with Christian ethical precepts. Pruss identifies five likely conflicts: (1) non-Christian ethics implies it is sometimes obligatory to have an abortion, while Christian ethics implies it is always impermissible to have an abortion; (2) non-Christian utilitarian ethics implies it is sometimes obligatory to execute an innocent person, while Christian ethics implies it is always

impermissible to execute an innocent person; (3) non-Christian ethics implies it would be obligatory to offer sacrifice to Caesar if such is necessary to avoid having one's family tortured, while Christian ethics implies it is always impermissible to offer sacrifice to Caesar; (4) non-Christian ethics implies it is impermissible to go to Church when one's spouse has a mild illness, while Christian ethics implies it is obligatory in such circumstances to go to Church; and (5) non-Christian ethics implies it is sometimes obligatory to work on Sunday under circumstances of financial need that are insufficient, according to Christian ethics, to justify infringing Christianity's *prima facie* prohibition on working on Sunday. Thus, Pruss concludes that "many, if not most," Pojmanian Christians are committed by MCP to acting in ways that prevent them from being fully Christian.

II. What Christians and Non-Christians are Likely to Believe

At the outset, it is worth noting that Pruss's conclusion is consistent with what Pojman is most concerned to establish in his arguments regarding faith. As Pruss describes the conclusion of his argument, "at least for people in fairly common contemporary epistemic predicaments, being both fully a Christian and a moral person does require that one accept Christianity, or at least the existence of God, with an epistemic probability of at least 50%, thereby showing that mere Pojmanian hope, which does not require such an epistemic probability, is *insufficient*" (CFB 292; emphasis added). But Pojman never claimed that faith-as-hope is, by itself, a *sufficient* condition for efficacious religious faith. As Pojman describes his project, "I shall develop a concept of faith as hope as an alternative to the usual notion that makes propositional belief that God exists a *necessary* condition for faith" (FWB 157–58, emphasis added). And Pojman's claim that propositional belief that God exists is not necessary for authentic religious faith is, of course, consistent with Pruss's claim that Pojmanian faith is not, by itself, sufficient for authentic religious faith.

Accordingly, though Pruss takes himself to be challenging Pojman's view, the effect of the argument, if successful, is simply to articulate a new necessary constraint on Pojmanian faith. What the argument shows, at most, is that insofar as the ethical commitments of the Pojmanian Christian are at odds with what she believes are Christianity's ethical commitments, she is committed to acting in ways that are not consistent with being fully Christian. But this implies only that someone with Pojmanian faith cannot be fully Christian *unless* her pre-existing ethical commitments are consistent with what she believes are Christianity's ethical commitments; it does not imply that someone with Pojmanian faith cannot be fully Christian when her ethical commitments *are* consistent with what she believes are Christianity's ethical commitments. Thus, the argument might best be construed as showing that Pojman's view requires a significant amendment—and not as showing it is false. If this is somewhat less than Pruss has in mind, it nonetheless represents an important contribution to the dialogue.⁵

While Pruss realizes that Pojman's analysis is not intended to show that profound hope is a sufficient condition for authentic Christian faith, Pruss believes that his argument nonetheless poses a serious threat to Pojman's

view because "many, if not most," people with merely Pojmanian faith will find themselves committed to acting in ways inconsistent with Christian ethics. As Pruss observes, "[t]his argument does not prove that the requirement holds for everyone, but just that it holds for *many and probably most*" (CFB 292; emphasis added). If he is correct about this, it follows that Pojmanian faith will be insufficient for most people.

Crucial to Pruss's reasoning here is the claim that many if not most people who believe that the epistemic probability of Christianity is less than .50 assign epistemic probability of greater than .50 to ethical precepts that conflict with what they believe are Christian ethical precepts. Pruss supports this premise by identifying five issues on which people with merely Pojmanian faith are likely to hold ethical views that would conflict with what they believe are Christian ethical precepts: (1) the issue of whether a woman is ever obligated to have an abortion; (2) the issue of whether a person is ever obligated to intentionally kill an innocent person; (3) the issue of whether a person is ever obligated to offer sacrifice to Caesar; (4) the issue of whether a person is obligated to stay at home from church with a spouse who has a mild illness; and (5) the issue of whether a person is obligated to work on Sunday when she could benefit from extra income.⁶

As an empirical matter, it seems unlikely that any of these issues would bring the ethical commitments of a person assigning less than 50 percent likelihood to Christianity into conflict with what she believes are Christian ethical commitments. For starters, there are two problems with Pruss's view on issue (1) that a Pojmanian Christian is likely to "believe that if Christianity is true, then it is very likely impermissible to have an abortion under any circumstances, and that if Christianity is false, then there very likely are circumstances in which an abortion is a duty" (CFB 293).⁷ First, it ignores the fact that many Pojmanian Christians, like many non-Christians and non-theists, oppose abortion rights because they believe that the fetus is a moral person from the moment of conception.⁸ This is problematic because every non-religious argument for the conclusion that the fetus is a person is also available to someone with merely Pojmanian faith. Indeed, insofar as one can consistently believe that God does not exist and that human beings are a composite of souls and bodies, one can consistently oppose abortion rights on the ground that ensoulment, which is sufficient for personhood, occurs at conception.

Second, it ignores the fact that many proponents of abortion rights believe that abortion *always* violates a *moral* obligation. While some abortion-rights proponents may believe that early abortions involve no moral disvalue whatsoever, that is not a mainstream position. If the philosophical literature is any indication, most abortion-rights proponents differ from abortion-rights opponents not in thinking that abortion is morally permissible, but rather in thinking that, up to a certain point P in the pregnancy, the moral wrongness of abortion does not rise to the level of murder because the fetus is not a person until P.⁹ Thus, on this reasoning, while it may be true that abortion always violates a moral obligation, it should not be *legally* prohibited prior to the occurrence of P because the fetus is not a person with a right to life until P and hence cannot be murdered.¹⁰ As an empirical matter, there is little reason to think most Pojmanian Christians are likely to think that abortion is ever morally obligatory.¹¹

Similar problems arise in connection with Pruss's analysis of issue (2). If my experience in teaching ethics is any indication, very few non-Christians, non-theists, or Pojmanian Christians would take the position that it is sometimes morally obligatory to kill an innocent person. Though Pruss is correct that "any Christian who believes in the conditional claim 'Were Christianity false, [act] utilitarianism would be true' will surely find many examples of moral conflict between Christian ethics and non-Christian ethics" (CFB 293),¹² very few skeptics about theism or Christianity would characterize themselves as act utilitarians. While my experience is admittedly anecdotal in character, I would estimate that fewer than 1 percent of my students continue to think act utilitarianism is plausible after considering the counterexamples that show that act utilitarianism implies that there are circumstances in which, say, an innocent person should be killed to harvest her organs to save the lives of more important people.¹³

There is little reason to think that most Pojmanian Christians would take the positions on issues (3), (4), and (5) that Pruss believes they would take. For example, it is unlikely that a Pojmanian Christian would think that is morally wrong, if Christianity is true, to offer sacrifice to Caesar to save innocent persons. The Pojmanian Christian assigns an epistemic probability of less than .50 to Christianity, but profoundly hopes that Christianity is true. But it is hard to imagine that a skeptic about the truth of Christianity could coherently believe that it is morally obligatory to offer sacrifice to Caesar if needed to save innocent persons from torture, but profoundly hope that such a gesture is morally wrong—as would be required if such a person were to find themselves in a position to be in conflict with what she believes is required by Christianity on Pruss's view.¹⁴

The problem is that Pruss simply assumes that the most likely views about what is required by Christianity are the traditional views. While it is true, of course, that many Christians endorse these traditional views, there are many Christians who take different positions on what Christianity requires. If Pruss is correct in thinking that people with Pojmanian faith are likely to take somewhat less restrictive views on issues like (3), (4), and (5) (and I think he is), then it is reasonable to hypothesize that they are also likely to reject the traditional views that Christianity requires that one go to Church when one's spouse has a mild illness and that one not work on Sunday if not financially necessary—views likely to be shared by many reasonable Christians.¹⁵ For this reason, Pruss's argument falls short of showing that "many, if not most," people with Pojmanian faith are likely to find their ethical views in conflict with what they believe Christianity requires.

It is probably true, of course, that some Pojmanian Christians will find themselves in exactly the dilemma that Pruss describes, but this weaker claim is not enough to ground anything that is plausibly characterized as a criticism of Pojman's view. As we saw, Pojman does not claim that Pojmanian faith is sufficient for authentic Christian faith; he claims only that propositional belief that God exists is not necessary for such faith and hence that it can be grounded in Pojmanian hope (if, say, other necessary conditions are satisfied). The fact that some people will experience such conflicts is simply not strong enough to raise any serious worries about Pojman's view that faith-as-profound-hope can play the same important

noetic roles that ordinary faith plays and is hence sufficient to achieve all the essential benefits of religion.

While the empirical claim that most Pojmanian Christians will experience such conflicts is not, by itself, enough to refute Pojman's conception of faith, one might think that it raises a different kind of problem for Pojman's view. There are only so many additional necessary conditions that one can add to Pojmanian faith without giving rise to a situation in which it is plausible to think that someone who satisfies those necessary conditions *really does believe* the central tenets of Christianity—though she may not actually realize this. At some point, it becomes difficult to distinguish the noetic states of someone who has faith and propositional belief from the noetic states of someone who has Pojmanian faith and satisfies all the other additional necessary conditions; after all, profound hope is also a component of ordinary faith that is grounded in propositional acceptance of the central tenets of Christianity. Pruss's argument that Pojmanian faith is insufficient in most, if not all, cases is enough to raise the worry that the bulk of what one would have to add to a Pojmanian conception to make it sufficient for authentic faith simply amounts to (possibly latent) propositional belief that the central tenets of Christianity are true.

Pruss's analysis, however, is not sufficient to justify much concern about this worry because he does not make an adequate case for thinking most Pojmanian Christians will find themselves in perceived conflict with Christian ethics at some point. Here it is crucial to realize that these are empirical claims that ultimately require empirical argument of some kind and hence cannot be settled by the sort of armchair sociology employed by Pruss (and myself). While one can avoid detailed empirical analysis if the claims are pretty obviously plausible, the analysis I have offered in this section should suffice to show, at the very least, that Pruss's empirical views are far from obvious.

In response, Pruss might argue that he doesn't need empirical argument because the mere fact that every Pojmanian Christian can conceive of finding themselves in such a dilemma is enough to show that they are not fully committed to doing what Christianity requires.¹⁶ On this line of analysis, if the Pojmanian Christian came to believe that it is likely that abortion is sometimes morally obligatory and that Christianity implies that abortion is always morally wrong, then she would be committed to acting in a way that is inconsistent with what she believes is required by Christianity. And that is enough to show that she is not fully Christian since being fully Christian being requires being committed to acting in accordance with Christian precepts in every conceivable set of circumstances she might face.¹⁷

As a first step towards seeing why this argument fails, it is helpful to note that Christians who believe the central tenets of Christianity will never find themselves in such a position. Someone who believes that the central tenets of Christianity are true cannot even conceive of herself qua Christian in such conflicts because the central tenets guarantee that what is required by Christianity is ethically correct! The only way an ordinary Christian could conceive of being in such a conflict is if she imagines that she no longer accepts those tenets. What thus explains why an ordinary Christian can't conceive of a situation in which she qua Christian finds

herself believing that it is likely that X is morally required while believing that the truth of Christianity implies that X is morally prohibited is that her beliefs that Christianity is true and that the truth of Christianity entails that X is morally prohibited logically preclude her from thinking that it is likely that X is morally required.

But it is reasonable to hypothesize that Pojmanian Christians will also have beliefs that logically preclude finding themselves in such conflicts. A strong felt desire for an afterlife that would redeem the injustice and suffering in the world will be enough to ground a profound hope that some form of *theism* is true, but it is not enough to ground a profound hope that any particular religious tradition is true. It is reasonable to hypothesize that, in ordinary cases, a Pojmanian theist must see, at the very least, ethical truth in Christianity in order to have a profound hope for the truth of Christianity.

For example, the fact that I see so much that is morally repugnant in certain fundamentalist interpretations of Islam is enough to preclude me, as a logical matter, from ever hoping that these fundamentalist interpretations are true. Indeed, while I continue to struggle with various tenets of Christianity and sometimes even with theism itself, I never doubt the ethical precept that one should love one's neighbor as oneself—which is the foundation of Christian ethics.¹⁸ Though I doubt the inferences that more conservative Christians make from this principle, it represents a fundament of my belief structure. My abiding commitment to this principle logically precludes me from ever finding myself in the conflict-situation that Pruss describes—and would do so even if my doubts about theism reached a point where all that was left in me was a profound hope that theism was true.

To the extent, then, that a Pojmanian Christian is drawn to hope for the truth of Christianity (instead of other religions) because she believes that it uniquely gets the ethics right, her ethical beliefs logically preclude that she will find herself in the conflict situation described by Pruss. Of course, what percentage of Pojmanian Christians are drawn to Christianity by such beliefs is an empirical matter that must ultimately be settled by more rigorous empirical argument than is offered by either Pruss or me. But it is certainly more plausible to hypothesize, at first blush, that most Pojmanian Christians will hope for Christianity's truth on the strength of convergent ethical commitments than that they will hope for Christianity's truth despite believing that the fundamentals of Christian ethics are likely to be false. While such a state of mind may not be logically incoherent, it would be phenomenologically very difficult to bring about.

III. The Problem with MCP

Central to Pruss's argument is the claim that MCP is a principle of morality that defines "*real*, albeit subjective, moral obligations" (CFB 295; emphasis added). According to Pruss, we do not always know what our objective obligations (i.e., obligations that are independent of what we think they are) require of us. In such circumstances, MCP requires that we act in accordance with our best judgment of what our objective moral obligations require: "if after sufficiently thorough examination one comes to believe

that something is immoral, then one has a *real*, albeit subjective, moral obligation to shun it" (CFB 295; emphasis added). It bears reiterating here that MCP does not merely define an epistemic obligation; as Pruss formulates the distinction, MCP defines a genuine moral obligation that is like any other: "One does *wrong* if one ignores this *real* subjective obligation" (CFB 295; emphasis added).

While Pruss believes that it would be "difficult to dispute" that MCP is a moral principle, MCP is the subject of considerable disagreement. For example, Kurt Baier argues that we are tempted to think MCP is a moral principle only because we are misusing language; once we accurately describe acts that are based on erroneous beliefs, the motivation for thinking that our real obligations are the subjective ones and hence that MCP expresses a moral principle disappears.¹⁹ Indeed, W. D. Ross, who is widely credited with having discovered the distinction and the underlying worry, flip-flopped on the issue. Ross took the position in *The Right and the Good* that we are always obligated to do what is objectively right,²⁰ but came to believe in *Foundations of Ethics* that we are sometimes obligated only to do what is subjectively right.²¹ Contra Pruss, the issue remains far from settled.

It is easy to see the intuitive appeal of MCP. After all, we are creatures of limited intellectual ability who inevitably, despite our best and most conscientious efforts, get our objective obligations wrong. No matter how diligent we might be in attempting to predict the consequences of our behaviors, we will sometimes make morally significant mistakes because the consequences of our behavior are not subject to our precise control and are hence difficult to predict. Because we are limited in this way, there are some cases of subjective error that are not plausibly characterized as culpable: if, for example, a seemingly innocuous act unforeseeably results in the death of an innocent person, it seems unfair to hold the agent accountable. On this line of analysis, an agent who satisfies her subjective duty under MCP has done all that morality can require of her.

The problem is that MCP is well known to be vulnerable to counterexamples. Consider, for example, the chilling reasoning of someone who believes that he has a religiously-based moral duty to save persons by killing abortion doctors.²² Such a person believes (and hence assigns epistemic probability of greater than 50 percent to) the claims that (1) he has a duty to use deadly force when necessary to save the lives of a large number of innocent persons from a morally wrongful threat; (2) this duty is owed both to God and to those persons whose lives might be endangered by such a threat; (3) the fetus is a person from the moment of conception; (4) fetuses are innocent; (5) abortion is a morally wrongful threat to the lives of fetuses; and (6) using deadly force against an abortion doctor is the only way to save the lives of innocent fetuses. Claims (1) through (6), on this line of reasoning, seem to imply that one has a moral obligation to use deadly force against an abortion provider. Thus, such a person believes that his system of religious ethics commits him to the claim that killing an abortion provider is morally obligatory.

It is hard to imagine that someone could fail to be aware that this last claim conflicts with moral judgments entailed by other systems held by people in the culture. Presumably, such a person also believes that other

systems of ethics assert that it would be morally impermissible to kill an abortion doctor because the fetus does not become a person until much later in the pregnancy. Of course, someone who kills an abortion doctor would likely deny that such systems are anything more than *putatively* ethical; indeed, he might hold that the epistemic probability of such views is so low that it is morally wrong even to hold them. Thus, the killer of an abortion provider believes, in addition to claims (1) through (6) above, the claims that: (7) his religious ethics conflicts with other systems of ethics; and (8) the epistemic probability of his religious ethics is much higher than the epistemic probability of these other systems (though he probably would not express his belief in such language).

Presumably, if he thought about it, he would also come to believe that the moral weight assigned by his religious ethics to the obligatoriness of killing an abortion provider is at least as great as the moral weight assigned by these other systems to the impermissibility of killing an abortion provider; after all, it is the right to life of innocent persons that he believes is at stake in both judgments. Moreover, he would likely reason that his religious ethics assigns a greater moral weight to the obligatoriness of killing an abortion doctor than the non-religious systems assign to the impermissibility of doing so because there are more innocent lives involved in the former (i.e., the lives of the many fetuses) than in the latter (i.e., the life of just the abortion doctor).

All the antecedent conditions of MCP are thus realized: the killer believes that (i) one body, A, of moral claims (i.e., his religious ethics) implies that an action ϕ (i.e., refraining from killing an abortion provider) is impermissible and another body, B (i.e., some preferred non-religious system of ethics), implies that it is obligatory; (ii) the moral weight assigned by A to the impermissibility of refraining from killing an abortion provider is at least as great as that which B assigns to the obligatoriness of refraining from killing an abortion provider; (iii) no other body of moral claims is a serious contender in one's epistemic predicament; and (iv) A is more probable than B. It follows, then, according to MCP that the killer is *morally prohibited* from refraining from killing the abortion doctor. Otherwise put, it follows, under MCP, that the killer is morally obligated to kill the abortion doctor.

Here is another all-too-unfortunate counterexample from real life. Andrea Yates drowned her five children in a bathtub on the strength of the following beliefs: (1) the only way that she could save her children from an eternity of suffering in hell was to kill them; (2) one has a moral obligation to kill innocent persons if this is the only way to save them from an eternity of suffering in hell; (3) there are other systems of presumably non-religious ethics that hold that it is always impermissible to kill innocent children; and (4) her system of ethics is more likely to be true than any other system. Moreover, I imagine that Yates would have arrived at the conclusion, had she thought about it, that the weight assigned by her religious ethics to the obligation to kill her children to save them from hell is at least as great as the weight assigned by the other systems to the impermissibility of killing her children; after all, one can reason in Pascalian fashion that the finite loss associated with the loss of earthly life is infinitesimal compared with the loss associated with an eternity of infinite suffering in hell. Once again,

the antecedent conditions of MCP are straightforwardly satisfied, which entails that Yates was morally obligated to kill her children.²³

It gets much worse for MCP. Our history includes many instances of evil acts performed under the mistaken belief that they were morally obligatory. Racists of every kind, for example, typically justify their reprehensible views and behaviors on the strength of some alleged moral principle that implies the culpable inferiority of the relevant race. Indeed, Hitler's horrific pogrom was grounded in what he took to be a moral vision of racist purity that required the extermination of Jews. As H. J. McCloskey observes, "we do not need to consider the beliefs of primitive peoples to discover examples of gravely erroneous moral views [because c]ontemporary Western society provides examples enough."²⁴ If MCP is a moral principle, then these straightforwardly reprehensible acts are all morally obligatory—an obviously unacceptable result.²⁵

The problem arises here for Pruss's argument precisely because it relies on the claim that MCP defines "real" obligations. Given that "[o]ne does *wrong* if one ignores [one's] *real* subjective obligation[s]" (CFB 295; emphasis added), our subjective obligations, if such there be, are every bit as real as our objective obligations. Indeed, on this view, MCP is quite plausibly characterized as defining an *objective* obligation to do *what we subjectively believe* is more likely to be right when faced with a conflict of principles. As the debate is traditionally framed, the issue is whether our *real* obligations in such cases is defined by what is actually right or what we believe is right.

At the very least, these examples call into question the claim that MCP states an uncontroversial moral principle. It is hard to say exactly why MCP goes wrong, but it seems plausible to think that there are moral principles that require that people form moral judgments that, other things being equal, are reasonable given the available evidence. What makes the mere acceptance of a racist view (even if one never acts on it) morally wrong has to do in part, of course, with the obvious iniquity of the view; but it also has something to do with the fact that one must deliberately overlook all sorts of clear and compelling evidence to continue to hold the position, which underlies most racist views, that members of some race instantiate some unique property that negates their having moral standing. Such willful blindness is, it is reasonable to surmise, morally problematic in any instance in which it might result in behaviors that cause substantial harm to other persons.

Something like this helps to explain why we are inclined to condemn Andrea Yates, assuming she is sufficiently rational to be held accountable for her behavior, despite the fact that we can see how someone who held her beliefs would arrive at the awful conclusion at which she arrived. The problematic claim, of course, was her view that the only way to save her children from an eternity of suffering in hell is to kill them. Not only is there nothing that remotely resembles evidence for such a claim; this claim is inconsistent with every Christian theology that is even remotely in play among mainstream Christians. Indeed, it is the claim's utter lack of connection with anything that could even be remotely characterized as evidence that leads one to suspect that she is not rational (perhaps she heard voices).

Similarly, part of what makes the behavior of someone who murders an abortion provider reprehensible is that he took a person's life on the strength of a highly contestable claim—namely, the claim that the fetus is a person from the moment of conception. The principles governing the defense of self and others usually require that it be reasonable to think that deadly force is necessary to save the lives of innocent persons. But there is considerable uncertainty among Christians and non-Christians alike about when the fetus is a person from the moment of conception; indeed, the claim that the fetus is a person from the moment of conception has achieved ascendancy among Christians only comparatively recently.²⁶ While one can reasonably apprehend that deadly force is necessary to save the lives of the fetus, it is not reasonable to apprehend that the threat is to a person given so much disagreement about when personhood begins. Thus, the principle of self-defense lacks plausible application in this case.

Indeed, the situation is considerably worse: killing an abortion doctor not only can't be justified by reference to the principle of self-defense, but also violates an obvious moral principle that justifies holding the killer accountable for murder. Given the uncertainty about when fetuses become moral persons, it is morally reprehensible to end the life of someone who is known to be a moral person in defense of something that is not known to be a moral person. And this, it is reasonable to think, is something that moral agents are morally obligated to understand. Indeed, the kind of epistemic mistake made by the killer of an abortion doctor is a moral miscalculation that is egregious enough to justify subjecting him to prosecution for murder.

In any event, while something like MCP may help us to understand why people like Yates and murderers of abortion doctor commit the terrible acts they do, it cannot justify those acts. Viewed internally, their behavior is grounded in reasoning that appears to be logically rational. MCP thus helps us to recognize their behavior as falling within the realm of rational calculation: such persons validly (but not soundly) reasoned that they were morally obligated to behave this way given their initial moral commitments. But the mere fact that one can construct a valid rational argument from normative premises to a specific recommendation for action, by itself, does not suffice to morally justify that behavior. If the foregoing analysis is correct, we have moral responsibilities to have certain moral beliefs. But even if it is not correct, the preceding counterexamples show that, as stated, MCP is clearly false as a principle of morality. Contra Pruss, MCP does not appear to define "real, albeit subjective, obligations" that would be "wrong to ignore."

One might reasonably think that Pruss does not need a principle as strong as MCP to make a case against Pojman's views on faith. On this line of analysis, Pruss could simply respond by reformulating MCP to state a principle that describes what an agent is *committed* (as opposed to morally obligated to do); according to this formulation of the principle, an agent is committed to doing what she believes is entailed by the ethical views most likely to be true. Accordingly, a Pojmanian Christian who has ethical views that conflict with the ethical views she believes are entailed by Christianity is committed, on this principle, to doing what is inconsistent

with what she believes is required by Christianity. Thus, insofar as being fully Christian requires that one be committed to doing what one believes is required by Christianity, a Pojmanian Christian with conflicting ethical views cannot be fully Christian.²⁷

There are three possible interpretations of the reformulated principle, and none are successful in establishing the desired conclusion. First, if "committed" refers to what the agent is morally committed to do (i.e., committed by morality to doing), then the revised version of the principle is vulnerable to the same counterexamples that cause problems for MCP. Second, if "committed" refers to the agent's own mental states and intentions, then it seems pretty clearly false. It seems clear, as a psychological matter, that a Pojmanian Christian can commit herself to acting in accordance with what she believes is required by Christian ethics even in instances in which her beliefs about what is right according to Christian ethics are inconsistent with her beliefs about what is right. Third, if "committed" refers to what the agent is logically committed to doing, then the principle is true but irrelevant. There is little reason to believe that being fully Christian requires that one be logically committed to doing what Christianity requires; it seems reasonable to think that it is enough that one is psychologically or personally committed to doing what Christianity requires.²⁸

In this essay, I have criticized Pruss's argument that Pojmanian faith is rarely, if ever, sufficient for authentic Christian faith. First, I have argued that Pruss significantly overstates the likelihood in a Pojmanian Christian of a conflict between her ethical precepts and what she thinks are Christian ethical precepts. Second, I have argued that MCP is not plausibly thought of as defining real moral obligations. Thus, if these arguments are sound, then both of the two central claims on which Pruss's argument relies are false.

Seattle Pacific University

NOTES

1. Louis Pojman, "Faith Without Belief?" *Faith and Philosophy*, vol. 3, no. 2 (April 1986), pp. 157–76, 167. Hereinafter FWB.

2. Alexander R. Pruss, "Christian Faith and Belief," *Faith and Philosophy*, vol. 19, no. 3 (July 2002), pp. 291–303. Hereinafter CFB.

3. Pruss does not take a position on this issue. Here it is worth noting that the claim that Pojmanian faith is insufficient for being fully Christian does not, by itself, imply that Pojmanian faith is insufficient for salvation. If Christian exclusivism is false, then Pojmanian faith might be sufficient for salvation without being sufficient for authentic Christian faith. I am indebted to one of the referees for this important point.

4. A conflict between two claims occurs in the relevant practical sense only when one cannot act without violating an obligation asserted by one of the claims. Thus, two claims conflict only when one claim asserts that A is obligatory and the other asserts that A is impermissible. As a practical matter, the claim that A is permissible and the claim that A is impermissible poses no practical conflict because one can always satisfy both claims by refraining from doing A.

5. I consider below the claim that the mere possibility of finding oneself in such a conflict is sufficient to logically preclude being fully Christian. See pp. 12–14.

6. There are undoubtedly many other possible issues of conflict, including the contentious issues of euthanasia and homosexuality. Though I do not specifically discuss these issues, I hope it is clear that much of what I have to say about the issues above applies equally to these other issues.

7. Such circumstances include “a case where both the woman’s and the fetus’s lives are all but certain to be lost” (CFB 293).

8. This, it is worth noting, is also true of more traditional positions regarding euthanasia and homosexual relations. See Note 6, above.

9. For example, I have argued for this very position. See, e.g., Kenneth Einar Himma, “What Philosophy of Mind Can Tell Us about the Morality of Abortion: Personhood, Materialism, and the Existence of Self,” *International Journal of Applied Philosophy*, vol. 17, no. 1 (Fall 2003), pp. 73–93; and Kenneth Einar Himma, “A Dualist Analysis of Abortion: Personhood and the Existence of the Self qua Subject,” *Journal of Medical Ethics* vol. 31, no. 1 (January 2005), 48–55. In these two companion pieces, I argue that having (or being) a self capable of having conscious mental experiences is a necessary condition of moral personhood and that, under either dualist or physicalist assumptions, a human being cannot have (or be) such a self until, at the very least, electrical activity has begun in the brain. Accordingly, human fetuses prior to that point are not moral persons. Thus, while abortion is morally impermissible until that point, the wrongness does not rise to the level of murder, which is something that can be done only to moral persons.

10. As most Christians would presumably agree, not every behavior that violates a moral obligation should be legally prohibited: unilateral lies are morally wrong but clearly shouldn’t be illegal. One might, of course, argue that a person should be held civilly liable for damages that proximately result from unilateral lies, but this is a different matter.

11. The situation in this regard would thus be analogous to self-defense: most people believe that it is morally permissible for a person to use deadly force when necessary to save her life from a culpable threat, but I doubt many people believe such defense of self is morally *obligatory*.

12. I insert the “act” here because it is clear that Pruss’s analysis applies only to act utilitarianism.

13. That comparatively few people would endorse act utilitarianism can be seen in another way: one rarely encounters in any popular applied-ethics text or anthology essays that defend a position in purely act utilitarian terms. Instead, arguments in applied ethics typically appeal to ordinary judgments about specific cases and general rules of morality. Christians and non-Christians alike appeal to a variety of considerations in moral reasoning, including rights (which are inconsistent with act utilitarianism), obligations, and considerations of well-being. The arguments of applied ethicists typically reflect such a pluralistic approach precisely because the arguments are intended for a general audience. Since very few people, including professional applied ethicists, take the sort of reductionist approach to moral reasoning that is required by act utilitarianism, it makes little sense to frame an argument in act utilitarian terms. While there may still be a fair number act utilitarians running around, act utilitarianism has little relevance in the views of ordinary folk or the arguments of professional applied ethicists.

14. While Pruss is undoubtedly correct in thinking that there are many mainstream Christians who would take these positions, I would imagine that there are also many mainstream Christians who would reject them. For my part, I can’t say that I know many Christians who believe that it would be

morally wrong to offer sacrifice to Caesar if necessary to save innocent people from being tortured. Of course, this is an empirical issue that ultimately would require empirical support.

15. Some of this paper, I should note, was written on Sunday by a committed Christian.

16. I am indebted to an anonymous referee for this very subtle line of objection.

17. After all, the mere fact that I get through this life without stealing anything, by itself, doesn't show that I am fully committed to the rule that prohibits stealing; it might be that what explains the fact that I never stole anything is that I never encountered anything I really coveted enough to steal. What determines whether I am fully committed to the rule is how I would respond in the range of conceivable circumstances—including circumstances in which I have an opportunity to get away with stealing something I really want but can't afford to buy.

18. Nor do I ever doubt the ethical importance of subordinating one's interests to God's will. Even on occasions where I find myself grappling with doubts about God's existence, it is clear to me that, if God exists, I have an ethical obligation to subordinate my own interests to God's will.

19. See Kurt Baier, "Doing My Duty," *Philosophy*, vol. 98 (July 1951), pp. 253–260.

20. W. D. Ross, *The Right and the Good* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1930), p. 45.

21. W. D. Ross, *Foundations of Ethics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1939), chapter 7.

22. I say "chilling" here not only because it culminates in the intentional killing of other persons, but also because the key claim that one has a duty to defend innocent lives with deadly force is not utterly beyond the pale of common intuitions.

23. Of course, there is an issue, as a matter of fact, as to whether Yates was sufficiently rational to be accountable for her behavior because she had a history of problems with severe post-partum depression. But nothing turns on this since, as before, one can simply construct a fictionalized counterexample that assumes that the subject was sufficiently rational to be held accountable for her behavior.

24. H. J. McCloskey, "Problems Arising from Erroneous Moral Judgments," *Philosophy*, vol. 39, no. 150 (October 1964), pp. 283–300, 287.

25. There is another way to see the problem with MCP. If Pruss is correct in thinking that it is wrong to violate one's obligations under MCP, then the Nazi who declines to act on his belief that Jews should be exterminated has committed a moral wrong and deserves censure.

26. For a discussion of the underlying presupposition that ensoulment takes place at conception, see Himma, "A Dualist Analysis of Abortion: Personhood and the Existence of the Self qua Subject," Note 9.

27. I am indebted to an anonymous reviewer for this line of objection.

28. I am indebted to the anonymous reviewers for very insightful comments, which helped me to improve the quality of this paper dramatically.