



Ethicists should have been consulted for 'Prisons and the Pulpit' article: reader opinion

Reader opinion By **Reader opinion**

on July 09, 2014 at 1:05 PM, updated July 09, 2014 at 1:08 PM

By Matt King

In "Prisons and the Pulpit", from the opinion section of the June 29th edition of *The Birmingham News*, the Alabama Media Group sought to tackle the question: "What is the moral imperative for addressing the problems in Alabama's prisons?"

This is surely an important question to ask. But the paper's process for answering the question bears comment. The paper sought answers from religious leaders of various stripes, who dove into their Bibles to cite passages to guide our thinking.

[Read responses from **northern**, **central** and **coastal** ministers here]

My objection here isn't with their reasoning, though it leaves much to be desired. Rather, my principal objection is the presumption that the only people who could possibly guide our moral thinking are religious leaders. This is especially notable when there is a vast resource that was not even consulted for answering this question: ethicists. Professional philosophers, of which many excellent examples can be found amongst the universities of our state, devote a substantial part of their lives to thinking through tough questions. Ethicists are trained to investigate just the sort of question that the paper poses: what are our ethical duties to others? Applying answers to that question to particular problems, like the treatment of prisoners, is what we call "applied ethics."

To some, the very notion of "secular ethics" is an oxymoron. Though they're mistaken, I don't have the space here to convince them otherwise. But the smaller point that remains is that there is a host of professionals who think carefully about questions just like this one, and it would be well worth our time to consider their answers.

Matt King is the Assistant Professor of Philosophy at UAB. His email is mail.mattking@gmail.com.

© 2014 AL.com. All rights reserved.