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Morality, Old and New

I APPROACH this subject as a Christian and a Christian theologian who believes that, in addition to bearing witness to the reality of God, Christian faith must show itself to be reasonable. Faith has a double thrust. It has a thrust towards obedience, or, to put it in other language, towards the expression and the fulfilment of the idea in action. Paul spoke of "faith active in love" (Gal. 5:6). But faith has also a thrust towards understanding. Belief is not blind although it has an element of trust in it. To believe is not to cease to think: it is to think in a new context and with a sharpened awareness. If there is a great deal of doubt at the moment, within the Church and beyond it, both about religion and ethics, this may in some measure be due to the fact that people want to understand and are not satisfied with traditional formulations. Nothing is more to be commended than the search for an intelligent faith.

There are certain things I therefore take for granted, although I hope I could defend them if the need arose. For one thing I am assuming that the world is not the true ultimate. God is. In his book *Experience and God*, Professor John E. Smith, of Yale claims that if there is a religious dimension to human existence "this dimension is unintelligible without reference to God or transcendent Being" (p.11.). I make this rather obvious point partly because there is a bizarre phenomenon called "the death of God theology" and partly because one widely-read thinker, Paul van Buren, has sought to show that the concept of God being without meaning the most we can hope to have is a philosophy of life which finds its inspiration in Jesus of Nazareth. He was the freest man who ever lived and if we somehow can latch on to Him, something of His freedom may rub off on us. The question which van Buren contrives to avoid is whether it is possible to take Jesus seriously without taking seriously what He had to say about God and His own very obvious relation to God. Against such positions Christians have to make it plain that Christianity is not humanism: there is not only the horizontal line between man and man but the vertical line that joins man to God.

This raises the very large issue whether morality as the acknowledgment of responsibility and duty and the desire to seek the good life is inseparable from religion and, more specifically, whether the highest form of morality depends upon the Christian religion. Helen Oppenheimer tells us in her book *The Character of Christian*

Morality, that we must "recognise frankly that not all sceptics are ignorant heathen in a moral wilderness" (p.14). We must acknowledge that the sense of obligation can and does exist without belief in a Supreme Being. This does not prevent believers and non-believers from working together. They may have certain values in common and join in their hatred of evils that call for concerted action. The modern world affords many instances of this kind of collaboration. Christians unite with atheists and agnostics to combat racialism, to care for the mentally disturbed and the physically handicapped, to bring more humane laws to the statute book. But divergence in belief remains and comes to the surface on particular issues, such as that of the teaching of religion in schools or on medico-moral questions such as abortion or the transplanting of vital organs. It is necessary to add that on many ethical problems the line of division is not only between Christian and humanist but between Christian and Christian, humanist and humanist. The sheer diversity of moral insight among human beings is puzzling and at times exasperating. It ought to warn us against dogmatism and encourage the spirit of tolerance, which is not to be identified with moral indifference.

How can the Christian explain the fact that morality, the sense of obligation, the pursuit of the good life can exist without belief in God? We cannot get out of the difficulty by saying with John Baillie that a man may deny God with the top of his mind, yet believe in Him in the bottom of his heart. That now-famous saying certainly indicates a possibility but it is open to serious criticism. For one thing, we cannot split the human personality quite so neatly. Human nature is a unity, whatever divisions may be distinguished within that unity. Moreover, an unbeliever or a non-believer, if one may make a distinction, is not a believer who is unaware of the fact that he believes. The fact and problem of genuine unbelief must be taken quite seriously.

It is important to notice that unbelief is a possibility because God has so constructed the world that He himself is not immediately obvious. Even if it is true that "in Him we live and move and have our being", He has to be sought. Paul made that plain in the Areopagus speech from which these words are taken. Blaise Pascal who recognised that God is both revealed in and hidden by the world tells us in his *Pensées* that there are only two kinds of people who can be described as reasonable—"those who serve God wholeheartedly because they know Him, and those who seek Him wholeheartedly because they know Him not". Now it is possible not to seek God at all, and it is possible to seek Him without finding Him. God's problem, if you like, is how to reach those who do not believe in Him while at the same time communicating with those who do. It makes sense to me to say that God strives to reach all men through what may be called the moral order, through the sense of obligation. Although moral attitudes and customs vary

from country to country and from age to age, the sense of being bound, the awareness, of duty or obligation continues and seems to be necessary for human life along its entire range of activities. May we not think of God as giving Himself in and with this acknowledgment of obligation? I recall a talk I once had at a conference with the late Professor Emil Brunner of Zürich. I was a student at the time and was trying to help a man who was on the quest for God but could find no trace of Him anywhere. "Ask him", Brunner said, "whether he feels so bound to others, let us say his wife and his children, that the thought of failing them or deserting them is intolerable. If his obligation to them is real, then God is present in his sense of that obligation". God reaches out to man through the moral order but it is open to the individual either to recognise His presence there or to deny it.

If God's presence is not recognised or if that presence is denied, we have morality without religion, what we often call today secular morality. There is at the moment a lively dialogue taking place between such secular morality and Christian morality. In that dialogue Christians are free, as we have now seen, to concede the reality of a secular morality and to be willing even to learn from it. But this is not to say that secular morality is adequate. Christians find it inadequate in at least three respects. First, and most importantly, it fails to see man in his largest context, which is the context of the divine reality. "Man without God", Berdyaev once said, "is no longer man". In the Christian understanding of man the value of human nature is established not by man but by God. In the doctrine of creation we affirm that man is made in the image of God. He has an affinity with God as a free, responsible, personal being. In the doctrine of redemption we affirm that God Himself took the initiative within a human life to save man from the power of evil and to lead him to a higher way.

In the second place, secular morality is inadequate because it fails to sound the depth of the human predicament. Pascal was one of the first on the threshold of the modern era to state the Christian estimate of man in terms which command respect. He spoke of the contradiction within man. Man is at once great and wretched. If he thinks only of his greatness he will be driven to overwhelming pride, *hubris*. If he considers only his wretchedness, he will fall a victim to despair. The Christian religion, with Jesus Christ at its centre, delivers him from both pride and despair by reminding him that he is a son of God who has lost his way in the darkness. It is this balanced perspective that enables Christianity to defend man against every effort to treat him as less than person, but also to oppose man, for his own sake, when he claims too much for himself and virtually takes the place of God.

In the eyes of Christian faith secular morality is inadequate for a third reason: by its rejection of God it forfeits that spiritual reinforcement which is needed to sustain the moral life in full

vigour. Believer and unbeliever alike are conscious of the gap between aspiration and achievement, the inner conflict that is waged between what almost seem to be two opposed principles within the self. Paul expressed it in classic words "The good which I want to do, I fail to do; but what I do is the wrong which is against my will" (Romans 7:19). The other side of the Christian coin is the affirmation of Galatians 2:20, "the life I now live is not my life, but the life which Christ lives in me", the reliance upon the dynamic of an indwelling presence. The secular moralist will say that such dependence upon a divine helper destroys human freedom, robs man of his proper responsibility, if such a divine helper exists; but if He does not exist, the dependence is an illusion, better set aside. The Christian's answer to this charge is that this dependence is simply the fulfilling of man's true relation to God. Far from leading to enslavement it is found to be the path to a fuller freedom. Moreover, it is a dependence which contains within it a strong element of demand.

Up to this point I have been discussing morality in the light of belief in God and the absence of such belief. This was necessary in order to bring out the difference between the Christian understanding of morality and the secular. Great as the difference is, we must remind ourselves that there is a vast amount of common ground, because morality is very much concerned with the relations between man and man. We are aware that when the word morality is mentioned, it tends to suggest the morality of male-to-female and female-to-male behaviour. This is hardly an accident. Our relationships make up a large part of our day-to-day existence. Of these the man-woman relationship is by general agreement the most intimate and the most delicate. But this is only one part, although a very important part, of the very wide area of interpersonal relationship. A full consideration of morality would lead us even farther, into the field where we have to deal with groups and nations, the order and laws by which they are governed, the conflicts that arise among them.

I trust I have now in a measure prepared the ground for a discussion of the theme "Morality, Old and New". There are three linked issues which I wish to raise. The background against which they are set is the present crisis—and crisis is not too strong a word —in moral belief and attitude. The first is the revolt against what may be called traditional morality, although I shall describe that revolt in slightly different terms in a moment. This revolt is being carried out by Christians and by non-Christians, although the basis from which each group acts has its own distinctive character. The second issue is indicated by the phrase now in common use "permissive morality", described by its friends as a positive morality of freedom and by its enemies as the morality of "anything goes". This leads by a natural transition to the third issue, namely whether we can make a valid distinction between private morality and

public morality or are simply concerned with morality, whether it has a private or a public aspect or both. The third issue compels us to ask whether an agreed morality, a common acceptance of moral standards, is necessary to the stability of a society.

What I have called the revolt against traditional morality, in so far as it is not merely an attempt to abandon moral standards altogether but a reasoned endeavour to arrive at a new moral framework, takes different forms. The most serious Christian form of the revolt may be described as follows. Negatively, it is a protest against what has been termed "code morality", the ordering of human life by "thou shalt" and even more by "thou shalt not" in a system of rules. The Ten Commandments rather than the Sermon on the Mount gives a clue to such an ordering. Such a path, it is said, leads straight into moral legalism, a prohibitive morality which stifles the free spirit of man. Positively, the revolt points forwards to "the morality of tomorrow". the morality which springs from a new spirit, which is the spirit of love. The best known expression of this "new morality" is "situation ethics". The substance of this Christian ethical philosophy can be found in two statements made by Professor Joseph Fletcher in his book *Situation Ethics*. "Only one thing is intrinsically good", he tells us, "namely love; nothing else at all". That is the first statement. It establishes love as the sole guide to right conduct. Love is indeed the sole guide but something has to be added to bring us from the abstract to the concrete, from principle to action. It is love "in the situation". We thus come to the second statement. "The new morality, situation ethics, declares that anything or everything is right or wrong according to the situation". It is unfortunate that Professor Fletcher's argument is rather marred by what looks like a desire to shock the upholders of traditional morality and by a scarcely disguised contempt for those who disagree with him. A similar but less extreme view is put forward by Dr. John Robinson in the booklet *Christian Morals Today*. He, too, opposes the tendency to "turn the teaching of Jesus into a set of rules, a fixed code of conduct, valid for all Christians at all times". And he too can say "In Christian ethics the only pure statement is the command to love". Not law but love of the neighbour is the guide to conduct. Michael Keeling in *What is Right?* moves along much the same lines.

It is clear that we are here face to face with a genuine attempt to return to the New Testament with its ethic of what Paul Ramsey calls neighbour-centred love, although we should not forget that the New Testament and indeed the whole Bible is concerned with love to man *and* love to God in their unbreakable unity. The Christian life in its essence is a life of concern for others which is rooted in the concern of God made manifest and effective in Jesus Christ. It springs from gratitude for what God has done. Action from a new spirit, a new motivation rather than obedience to a set

of laws and rules is its chief characteristic. All this is true and the warning against the danger of moral legalism must be kept constantly in view. But this does not mean that there is no place for the notions of duty, law, principle and rule in a Christian ethic. Such words as these point to an element which is basic to religion, the element of demand. "God has told you what is good; and what is it that the Lords asks of you? Only to act justly, to love loyalty, to walk wisely before your God". (Micah 6:8). Religion contains two elements which are complementary to each other, the element of gift or offer and the element of demand: it gives and it asks. Asking, demand, requirement lends religion its backbone while the balancing element, what is gifted or grace, to use the New Testament word, supplies the motivation and the dynamic. We interpret the demand to mean that man is summoned, commanded to be what he is intended to be, to rise to his full stature as a responsible creature. Indeed even love is laid upon him as a demand, a commandment—"Thou shalt love the Lord thy God . . ." Sometimes the demand takes the apparently negative form of prohibition, "Thou shalt not"—"Thou shalt not kill", "Thou shalt not commit adultery", "Thou shalt not covet". But the prohibition has a positive purpose. It aims to lead man away from the evil to the good. God holds man to it, because he needs to be so held.

We can put our criticism in another way, beginning with love as the centre of the good life. Love alone is not a sufficient guide for conduct. Love is glad to have the help of rules and principles in order to do its work, for example the principle of justice. You could even say that love fashions such principles and rules. The 12th chapter of Paul's letter to the Romans is full of moral injunctions such as "With the joyful be joyful, and mourn with the mourners" and "Never pay back evil for evil". Some of these are direct expressions of the primacy of the principle of love. Others may be said to be the deposit of the garnered wisdom of the past. They show that rules and principles have their place in a Christian ethic. We had an instructive debate on this point when the British Council of Churches published its report *Sex and Morality* in 1967. It had generally been accepted among Christians that sexual intercourse was only right within the full and lifelong commitment we call marriage. Now, it appeared, it was possible to reject this as a binding rule on the ground that "no rule can cover all the varied and complex situations in which men and women find themselves". Eventually while recognising the difficulties involved the Council came out in favour of the binding rule, chiefly, I think, on the ground that particular moral guidance is needed. Leaving people without such guidance might be contrary to the principle of love.

We must not allow ourselves, in fact, to be inveigled into holding that law and love stand in stark opposition to each other. They are no more opposed to each other than order and freedom. If I may borrow the language of Paul Tillich, the dynamic element in

human life and the element of form are necessary to each other. The dynamic element is the upsurge of the free human spirit, often expressed in love. The element of form is the order which regulates this dynamic element and prevents it from becoming wayward and wild. Today we are living through a period when the dynamic element is in protest against form and order as they are expressed in the customs, the rules, the morals of existing societies. This is one way of expressing the meaning of revolution. This brings me to the second issue which I promised to consider, the issue of "permissive" morality, in which the free, dynamic element in human nature seems to be left relatively unchecked. We are fortunate enough to have a useful analysis of this morality in the book written by Professor C. H. Whiteley and Mrs. Winifred Whiteley, *The Permissive Morality.*

The Whiteleys begin by noting the change that has come upon our moral valuations during the past fifty years, in sexual morality, in the relation between parents and children, in the matter of individual responsibility, in decorum and ceremony, in the treatment of criminals. The changes which they observe, they tell us, "express in different ways a single comprehensive modification in our attitude to human life and human morality. If the change is to be put into a few words, it can be described as a general relaxation of standards, a greater permissiveness, a raising of the demands a man may make on life and a lowering of the demands life may make on him" (p.21). They proceed to contrast what they take to be two opposed views of life and morality. In the first "life is seen as a task to be accomplished, a challenge to achievement" (p.21). In this philosophy personal responsibility for success or failure is basic. There are universal rules that ought to be obeyed. Satisfaction is not regarded as a right but only as the reward for worthy effort. In the second "life is seen in terms of the pursuit of happiness or satisfaction" (p.22). Moral rules and standards are not objective and universally binding but simply conventional constructs which enable men to get on with the business of living without excessive friction or conflict. The second is what may legitimately be called permissive morality, in which you choose your own moral standards. The Whiteleys note that despite the apparent satisfaction with the morality of permissiveness a growing dissatisfaction with it is finding expression in the best literature. The rootless and uncommitted people of our time, who figure so prominently in our novels, "want a faith to live by, a cause to serve, a star to hitch their wagons to" (p.95). Two brief quotations will illustrate the discontent the Whiteleys themselves feel. "There is in man a spirit which will not let him be content with the life of the lotus eaters" (p.96). The current ideal, they consider, lacks aspiration and devotion. Again "the permissive society treats us all as capricious children, whereas what we need for a life worth living is to be encouraged to grow into full adults" (p.137).

There is a good deal of substance in the case made out by the Whiteleys. It is too jaunty an answer to their analysis to say, as has often been said recently and by people in responsible public positions, that the trouble with society is not that it is too permissive but that it is not permissive enough because it does not give people the freedom and the responsibility which are theirs to be their truest selves, to grow into normal insight and character. This is really a play upon the meaning of the word "permissive" and need not detain us. It is being increasingly acknowledged that while the welfare state may have brought a measure of happiness to a greater number of people, it has also held out the temptation to fall victim to a philosophy of hedonism which many have been unable to resist. One of the phrases the Whiteleys use in describing the permissive morality is worth pondering—"a raising of the demands a man may make on life and a lowering of the demands life may make on him". I referred earlier to the importance of the demand made upon man by religion and especially by Christianity. I think Christian and secular moralists would agree that quite apart from religion life itself makes demands upon people, moral demands, along the line of challenge and duty and responsibility and that if these demands are scaled down the quality of life is correspondingly impoverished. True zest is diminished.

What contribution can Christianity make in the present climate of permissiveness, apart from producing the kind of men and women whose zest for life has nothing to do with the pursuit of pleasure? It has, I believe, a twofold role. First, it can remind us that permissiveness, if it is allowed to go very far, will sap and may eventually destroy the moral health of a nation. More importantly, it can show us that a return to responsible and mature manhood may depend on our recovering a high sense of stewardship for the life which is given to us. Such a sense of stewardship is a corollary of belief in God, the creator and sustainer of all being. It makes a profound difference to the way in which you live if you are convinced that your deepest gratitude and responsibility is owed not to yourself, nor to others, nor to society but to God.

Finally, I want to say something on the issue of private and public morality. Over the past few years we have had a lively and eminently fair debate on this and kindred issues between Lord Devlin and Professor H. L. A. Hart. This debate has been discussed fully and very judiciously by Professor Basil Mitchell in his book *Law, Morality and Religion.* In commenting on the Wolfenden Report on homosexuality Lord Devlin agreed that privacy must be respected as far as possible but maintained that no society could be indifferent to what individuals do in private. "Society", he wrote, "cannot ignore the morality of the individual any more than it can his loyalty; it flourishes on both and without either it dies" (*The Enforcement of Morals,* p.22). He was questioning the validity of the distinction between public and private morality. He suggested

that the proper distinction was between public and private *behaviour*, each of which may be good or bad, right or wrong. "Morality is a sphere in which there is a public and a private interest, often in conflct, and the problem is to reconcile the two". (p.16). We need in fact to beware of what an American writer has called the "boundless freedom of atomistic individualism". What a man does in private is indeed a matter for himself to decide but he has a moral responsibility for the kind of decision he makes. This is one of the many truths that crystallised out what we came to describe as "the Profumo affair". In that rather sad story the phrase "in private" was often used in such a way as to obscure the fact that at least one other person was very intimately involved, namely Mrs. Profumo.

The phrase "public morality" raises the question whether an agreed morality is necessary to the health of a society. Lord Devlin is quite certain that it is. "An established morality is as necessary as good government to the welfare of society" (p.13). Going further he maintains that "the loosening of moral bonds is often the first stage of disintegration" (p.13). Let me make three brief comments on this position. First, it would appear that *some* degree of common moral agreement is necessary to make a society function properly or at least tolerably well. In the second place, our notable agreements have become embodied in such institutions as marriage, the apparatus of law, Parliament. One of the disturbing features of our time is the cynicism that prevails about these institutions. Such cynicism might well speed up a process that leads to authoritarian government. If our institutions are defective, the remedy is not to destroy them but to improve them. Third, the acknowledgment of an established morality need not preclude change. Moral insight may develop and can eventually be embodied in better laws, although the battle for more enlightened laws is never easy and may often be fierce and prolonged. To quote only one example, it has taken centuries for Christianity to give woman her true worth and the process is by no means complete.

The introduction of the notion of law faces us with the question "What are the respective functions of law and religion in relation to morality?" Lord Devlin believes that they are "the two instruments without which morality cannot be maintained". We may not care for the phrase "the enforcement of morals"; but the phrase reminds us of the need for form, order, law to which I earlier referred. There is an element in the Christian tradition which sees law, order, government at many different levels as a bulwark against the flood of evil which can flow destructively from the heart of man both individually and socially. Christian thinkers have spoken of it as "the strange work of Christ" by which He uses human authorities to preserve and to enhance the framework within which a decent human life may be possible. This is part of the realism of Christianity about man. But this strange work of Christ

needs to be supplemented by His "proper work" which is to reconcile men with God, to put a new spirit in them and to give them a new concern for the neighbour wherever he may be found.

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(Principal Duthie will continue his analysis in the next number of the *Quarterly* in an article entitled "The Christian Understanding of Sexuality".—*Ed.*)

Cumulative Index

We are very glad to announce that the next volume of the Cumulative Index is now available. Once again we are indebted to the Rev. Douglas Sparkes for his services in this regard. His index to the old *Transactions* is proving an extremely useful tool for research students and the new volume, covering the first ten volumes of the *Baptist Quarterly*, introduces certain refinements to improve facility of reference.

Its main sections consist of titles of articles, illustrations, maps, contributors, persons, places, denominations, miscellaneous, publications, books reviewed, reviewers.

The index is in hard covers, the price 90s. per copy, and it is available from University Microfilms Ltd., St. John's Road, Tylers Green, Penn, Bucks. A microfilm of the *Baptist Quarterly*, volumes I—X, is also available and University Microfilms will gladly send details on request.