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IN THE STUDY

As a discipline, Christian ethics is alive and in tolerable health. To this three recent studies[1] from the United States testify. They also indicate that familiar feature of an age of pluralism: a mass of important questions and unresolved problems accompanied by a paucity of agreed solutions.

LeRoy Long has provided an updating of his 1967 'Survey'. 1965-1980 is the period of attention. For a substantial part of his work he can follow the scheme of his earlier presentation. He begins with ways of understanding and formulating ethical norms. There are those who continue to accord moral reasoning a significant place, though the trend is away from the attribution to reason of sovereignty and autonomy and towards the according to it of a more modest functional role with due recognition of the effect upon it of contextual rooting. There are those who place the emphasis on laws and rules, who urge recognition of a prescriptive as well as a deliberative dimension, who judge prescriptive specificity to be a necessary aspect of normative morality. There are those who adhere to some form of 'relational' approach, whether in terms of a subdued situationalism or in terms of an ethic of the divine command. What is blindingly obvious throughout this parade of positions and thinkers is the measure of cross-fertilisation that has marked recent decades. The ethical map can no longer be filled with insulated and exclusive compartments. Pure deontologists or pure teleologists, or pure anything, come to that, are hardly thick upon the ground.

From the preoccupation with norms we are moved to a concern with implementation. Here again various modes and models are detected. There is institutionalism with its concentration on structures for justice and order, and its understanding of institutional structures both as the necessary matrix of the humanising process and as the realities that enable us to tap the funded resources of human social experience. There is operationalism, which majors on political models of ethical operation, spawns theologies of politics and political theologies, and deals in critical reflection on historical praxis and the transfiguration of revolution. There is that more directly Christian mode of ethical implementation which rejects the Augustinian foundations of its rivals, gives priority to the revolutionary stance of the New Testament, views the church as the leaven and servant of society, and prompts the exercise of relational rather than unilateral power. What is most obvious through this summary of stances and catalogue of practitioners is that the passing years have witnessed a relative sharpening of divergent perspectives.

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1 *A Survey of Recent Christian Ethics* by E. LeRoy Long Jnr. O.U.P. £13.50. 1983.
The Use of the Bible in Christian Ethics by T. W. Ogletree. Fortress. £8.95. 1983.
The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics by S. Hauerwas. S.C.M. £5.95. 1984.

At this point, LeRoy Long finds it necessary to introduce fresh developments in order to do justice to the story of the last two decades. He offers a discussion of moral agency, and notes three determinative features. There is a keener attention to virtue and character, basing itself on the recognition that a person's fundamental dispositions and personal frames of reference control his decision-making, and offering an ethical *via media* between principled and situational approaches. There is an acute concern with the functioning of conscience understood as the response of the self within the nexus of the Christian fellowship to the humanising action of God. There is a heightened emphasis on the realities of moral development and moral choice, undergirded by discernment of the social and other factors that form the moral agent. Finally, under the heading of 'new frameworks', there is tabled a mass of descriptive if inconclusive discussion on such issues as vocational ethics (medical, business, legal...), the ethics of liberation theology (oppressed/black/women), and that comparative religious ethics that is powered by Study of Religion.

And so to bed? Well, not quite. Ogletree and Hauerwas are still waiting to make an entrance. The former is concerned to find common ground between the Bible and current ethical enquiry. That seems a fair agenda, given the yawning gulf that commonly stretches between biblical study and the professional exploration of Christian ethics. The key question is how to proceed if a more than superficial or artificial relationship between the two is to be established. Ogletree has his own answer. He will begin by plotting fundamental ethical perspectives which show some promise of engagement with scripture. He will proceed to a reconstruction of the pivotal ethical themes of biblical faith. He will conclude with an interpretation of the two that may provide a skeletal framework for a genuinely contemporary Christian ethic.

But how do you begin? In what is probably the most closely argued section of his study, Ogletree tells us. He turns away from the conventional ground rules of the post-Enlightenment era in so far as these rest on the dogma of the autonomy of reason. Nonetheless he takes seriously three dominant Western conceptualisations of the moral life, all of which can lay claim to be rooted in the basic structures of human existence. He employs phenomenological method to uncover these structures and to display the way in which these key accounts of morality rest in structures that provide the conditions for our experiences. We might perhaps have expected at this point the ushering on to the stage of our old friends deontology and teleology. The three ethical perspectives that are in fact set forward are the consequentialist, the deontological, and the perfectionist. This move presages a sharper delineation.

The consequentialist account of the moral life rests on the intentional structure of human action. It is characteristic of high technology societies. It pivots ethically on 'values'.

It deals in goal-oriented actions. It involves the calculation of the likely results of actions and the assessment of their relative goodness for human well-being. The deontological account of the moral life rests on the intersubjective structure of human action. It is native to courts of law and administrative agencies. It pivots ethically on 'obligations'. It treats other people as ends in themselves. It involves the establishment of regulative principles which provide the ground rules of action. The perfectionist account of the moral life strikes deep into the personhood of the moral actor. It finds its congenial rooting in families, schools, voluntary societies. It pivots ethically on 'virtues'. It attends to what is involved in the formation of persons. It highlights moral discernment. It seeks the cultivation of human excellencies for judgment and action.

Ogletree is not inclined to put all his ethical eggs in one basket. Partly this is due to negative recognition of the specific weaknesses inherent in each of the ethical options. Partly it stems from positive recognition that each perspective and account is rooted in the structures of experience. To take seriously a phenomenology of the human is to be pressed towards a comprehensive stance. In any event, common features are to be discerned. Temporality marks each of the three structures. We cannot get away from historical contextualism. We cannot deny the concrete historicity of our moral notions. And if all our ethical accounts are inevitably framed by brackets that give preeminence to human historicity, they equally point beyond themselves to the question of the meaning of being, to that wider matrix of meaning within which the total moral life is situated.

Thus far we have been engaged in a search for a promising 'preunderstanding' with which to question the biblical material. Armed withthe bunch of keys thus amassed, we can now go forward towards scriptural engagement. Old Testament understandings of the moral life are unveiled by way of attention to Pentateuch and classical prophets. Covenant and commandment provide the controlling rubrics. An historical frame which ties moral obligation into the ongoing particularity of the covenant history of the people of God, an emerging eschatological orientation which powers both a provisional ethic of survival and an enduring vision of future perfection, and a pervasive sense of social solidarity and social concern, together constitute the heart of the Old Testament's distinctive ethical legacy. Deontological motifs are dominant. Perfectionist emphases emerge in the minor key, particularly after the catastrophe of the Exile. Consequentialist thinking is nowhere.

On then to the New Testament, where discussion is concentrated on the Synoptic Gospels and the Pauline letters. Eschatology and community provide the controlling rubrics.

The heroic demands of discipleship, the concern for the social and communal life of faith, the primacy of promise as the basis of personal and social existence, and the eschatological dialectic that runs through the heart of Christian living, are among the ingredients of the New Testament's enduring ethical legacy. A community-framed perfectionism dominates. Deontological strains, centred in promise and ordered by grace, provide a subordinate refrain. Consequentialism is nowhere.

So can the interpretation of the moral preunderstanding and the scriptural material produce that fruitful 'fusion of horizons' so beloved by Hans Georg Gadamer? Ogletree at least believes that he emerges with some pointers towards contemporary formulations. Among the crucial strands are judged to be the necessary eschatological horizon of moral understanding, and the rooting of Christian ethics in a faith community which, while selectively participating in the institutions of society, bears authentic alternatives to society's norms. How far that really takes us must be a matter of continuing debate.

Will Hauerwas lead us a further step along the road? At least he drives a singleminded furrow, as he tries to plot constructive and coherent proposals about how Christian ethics should be understood. If I can venture a summarising bluntness at which Hauerwas might well wince, I would put it something like this. Christian ethics has a particularist base, a narrative character, a Jesus/Kingdom centre, a community dimension, and a spirituality face. Clearly, a little unpacking of such gnomic shorthand may be required.

Today we hunger for a universal ethics, for some absolutes to give us leverage in our precarious and fragmented situation. So we try to detour round historical contingencies and read morality off the universal *humanum*. In vain. Ethics always requires a particularist qualifier. The road to universal ethics is innately via particularist convictions - in our case, Christian ones. Such convictions do not constitute some privatised subjective moral gloss on a prior ethical position. In a real sense, our convictions *are* our morality.

This popular search for a universal ethics is matched by a modern fascination with universal rules and objective obligations. This in turn betrays a distorting preoccupation with moral quandaries and difficult decisions rather than with undergirding ethical perspectives. It also severs actions from agents and their intentions, and so abstracts them from their historical context and their personal and communal rooting. Such deontological or teleological approaches cannot abide the idea of irresolvable moral conflict. What is needed is a counterbalancing stress on an ethic of 'virtues'. This must stem from a community's narrative account of the good; for narrative is a basic moral category that does justice to the historical character of our convictions and our living. Christian convictions in fact take the form of stories constituting a tradition that forms a community. We locate our stories within God's story. By grace we participate morally in God's life. Christian ethics is thus formed by a specific God-given story. If it helps us to 'decide' and to 'act', it

helps us first and foremost to 'see' - and that as transformed selves. It is concerned with who we are rather than what we do, with forming character and portraying virtues.

Can we give this more content precision? Certainly we must say that the Jesus of the Gospels (understood as the recapitulation of God's way with Israel) is the controlling starting point of Christian ethics, requiring us to locate our lives in relation to his life and so in relation to God and that Kingdom the nature of which Jesus unveils and embodies. In the life and death of Jesus all this is contained. In the Resurrection of Jesus we see God's peace as present reality. But to be like Jesus requires becoming part of a community practising virtues. Since the content of Christian ethics involves claims about God's Kingdom, it is inevitably about life together. The church is the essential locus for Christian ethical reflection; for it is in the church that the Christian story is told and remembered. Social ethics is not primarily about ensuring social justice in the world but about being the church. Yet church and world are not two compartmentalised orders of reality. God's Kingdom is also present in the world. The world is in us, when we live untruthfully. Nonetheless, in so far as the church is truly the church, it is a community of virtues (notably patience and hope) that helps the world understand what it means to be the world. So, in moral decision-making, we engage in an adventure. We do not assume that all those involved and affected are preprogrammed. Rather are we freed to project new possibilities. We check our rendering of God's story against that of the Christian community. In turn, the community is and must be constantly engaged in testing whether its practices are consistent with its basic convictions. The resultant ethic will be shaped by a spirituality of peaceableness, marked at its heart by non-violence, embodied in a community that can absorb the tragedies involved in peaceable action or inaction while living by the joy that the planting of God's redemption in present life and experience empowers.

By now the patient reader will be morally replete, if not prey to acute ethical indigestion. What does it all amount to? The three studies reviewed all come from the United States and reflect the ethical landscape the other side of the Atlantic. That limitation must be recognised. A representation of the British scene might have been marked by subtly different hues. Nonetheless, it is a fascinating experience to read these writers cheek by jowl and allow their writings to interpenetrate one another. Overlap and agreement are considerable - not least in the pervasively brooding presence of the Mennonite, John Howard Yoder. The LeRoy Long Survey on the whole provides a helpful and comprehensive map of the terrain, though the ragbag effect of its final effort to plot the most recent major highways leaves the traveller with the disorientated feeling of being trapped on Spaghetti Junction. The Ogletree Interdisciplinary Dialogue guides to some promising approach roads but, with its biblical selectivity, its unabashed preference for Paul and pre-exilic Israel, and its sleight-of-hand reintroduction of consequentialism, seems to have been guilty of evading tolls that really must be paid.

The Hauerwas Primer offers the smoothest drive down unbroken motorway, with never a traffic light in sight, but does leave the uneasy feeling that chunks of the real world have been bypassed en route. Yet we shall be wise to live with the travail and not put these mortal cars in the garage too quickly. At least they should remind us that ethical issues (abortion, nuclear weapons,...) currently prove so divisive precisely because judgments reflect fundamentally divergent moral presuppositions and perspectives. To get that far might clear some very murky air.

After a daunting dose of what might seem to be rather churchy ethics, there may be relief in breathing a more comprehensive - if still broadly ethical - air. To advance a Christian judgment as to the elements proper to British patriotism[2] is to touch a sensitive contemporary nerve. When the discussion is sub-titled 'Dialogue with Dietrich Bonhoeffer', an element of ambiguity threatens to intrude. Is this dominantly a book about Bonhoeffer or about Britain? The short answer may be that a title takes - or perhaps should take - precedence over a sub-title. Bonhoeffer's understanding of patriotism and its demands, and his consequential actions and decisions, are presented at valuable length and in significant detail. To that extent this book makes a fascinating and not insignificant contribution to Bonhoeffer studies. Yet there is a real struggle to make this subserve the other more central theme. Bonhoeffer is looked to as a 'stimulus', as an illuminating searchlight, as a sort of paradigmatic springboard from which to move.

But that immediately poses the further question. Is the introduction of Bonhoeffer ultimately helpful or unhelpful, necessary or incidental, to the discharge of the major task. It is confessed that 'care is needed when seeking to relate Bonhoeffer to situations far removed from his own context'. Does that constitute a measured defence, or an incautious blowing of the gaffe? It could be argued that many of the points scored on the basis of Bonhoeffer references emerge just as directly and powerfully from the mouth of Israel's prophets. Alternatively, it could be that Bonhoeffer is allowed to set the patriotism agenda too narrowly. Despite such menacing reefs, this craft never quite founders. All in all it is a productive and at times exciting journey.

After preliminary delineations of both Britain and Bonhoeffer, the presentation moves to a theological critique of 'country' in the reality of its glory and shame, an assessment of the British heritage and contemporary responsibility towards it, an examination of the dimensions of guilt and power, an uncovering of the communities that give more personalised face to the impersonalised concept of nation, and a summary of universalist pressures inherent in ecumenism. A final chapter seeks to outline the configurations of a British patriotism shaped by Christian understandings.

The conclusions are necessarily generalised and tentative,

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2 *A Patriotism for Today* by K. W. Clements. Bristol Baptist College. £4.95. 1984.

and by many readers may be judged relatively non-controversial. Critical solidarity, realism, modest self-image, repentance, downgrading of militarism, encouragement of diversity and participation, acceptance of international perspectives and responsibilities - such are among the ingredients of true patriotism in today's world. In many respects the problems start where the discussion finishes. *How* does a nation change course at this sort of fundamental level? Mercifully, we are not offered a blueprint. I think that the primary requirement may be discernment; not at the rational level but in terms of imagination and what is felt on the pulse. The major obstacle may be that the most powerful patriotic symbols contradict the needed vision. And if that be so, any reconciliation of vision and image may have to lean heavily on a selective and discriminating retrieval of certain strands in the British heritage; it cannot be done *de novo*. Other readers may, of course, be prompted to different reflections. They can hardly fail to be prompted to reflect. This is a mature book. It had the additional and unusual characteristic of being well-written.

Finally, a move from patriotism to pastoral care, but with ethics still trying to occupy centre stage.[3] It is salutary to remind ourselves of the shift that has taken place in the field of pastoral care over the last twenty five years. At the beginning of that period, psychotherapeutic psychology seemed still to have the dominating voice. Moralism was the great enemy to be shunned. Value judgments tended to be rated as negative intruders into the care and counselling processes, except perhaps that the unquestioned value of self-actualisation might seem to dictate their goal. Yet gradually, over the decades, talk of guilt and sin has been heard again in the land, and even the language of ethical confrontation can be found on the lips of respectable scholars. Don Browning has occupied a significant place in the ranks of those who have sought to reinstate morality in pastoral care. His present contribution to ethical reflection bears pondering. It goes something like this.

There is a deep need, especially in a pluralistic situation, to ensure that pastoral care is grounded in a religious ethic while not losing touch with dynamic psychology. We have to relate theological ethics to dynamic psychologies, and to relate them in a way that avoids moralism. If that is to be done, a better 'method' is required; and such may be found in terms of a correlation between the norms revealed in the interpretation of the Christian witness and the Christian foundations and the norms implicit in the interpretation of human experience. Such a critical correlation is effected via the four steps of experience/initial definition of a problem, attention and listening, critical analysis and comparison, decision and strategy.

It is with the development of the third step of critical analysis and comparison that Browning is centrally concerned.

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3 *Religious Ethics and Pastoral Care* by Don S. Browning. Fortress. £4.25. 1983.

He offers five levels of practical moral thinking. Those levels are the metaphorical, the obligational, the tendency-need, the contextual-predictive, and the rule-role. Certain things about this division are fairly clear. Obviously there is a narrowing down from depth-reflection to the particularities of decision. Obviously the importance of context emerges at two points: at the metaphorical level we are dealing with ultimate context; at the contextual and predictive level we are dealing with immediate context and the conditioning factors it provides. Obviously the obligational level is an ethical area related backwards to profound religious depths and forwards to areas where the human sciences, sociology and psychology, speak with a more direct and dominant voice. What is not so immediately obvious is the fact that the categorisations can be helpfully used also as a diagnostic tool, to aid in the establishment not only of what should be but of what in fact is, and of exactly where at every 'level' the person in need is in fact located.

Along the way some large conclusions attract only passing argument, not least in respect of the content afforded to the metaphorical and the obligational levels. But this kind of careful reflective work will have to be taken seriously and built upon if the Church is to become an effective community of moral discourse in our wounded world and not merely an ambulance service offering limited first-aid.

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