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THE BIBLICAL CRITIC AND THE MORAL THEOLOGIAN

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Introduction

The significance of the Bible for both theology and the Christian life is taken for granted within all mainstream Christian traditions on one level which is not controversial. Furthermore, many of the assumptions at that level flow over into the area of moral life and moral theology since these are seen to form part of a wider whole. Protestant Christian ethics has thus always seen the Bible as formative in some sense. Roman Catholic theologians have also given scripture a higher profile since the Second Vatican Council, although in theory it has always been important. Indeed, amongst the schoolmen, Aquinas himself gave scripture a defined role under the heading of "divine law" within his wider moral theological schema. It is, however, at the next level of discussion that problems begin to make themselves known. Having accepted the commonplace, that moral theology cannot ignore scripture, how precisely is the moral theologian to make the link? In the foreword to a recent reader[1] on this subject, Charles Curran and Richard McCormick analyse the difficulties inherent here and separate out four stages in discussing the link. These four stages or aspects can be described in the following manner.

First of all, there is the process of determining the meaning of the scriptural text as it stands within its original context, both that is within the corpus of biblical literature and in the early Christian community from which the literature came. At this point, the skills and specialisms of the biblical critic remain paramount. The second stage is that of ascertaining the meaning of the text in our contemporary world, a world underpinned by at least some very different assumptions and cultural factors from that of the Old and New Testaments. It is at this level that the study of hermeneutics becomes important. The third aspect of the discussion relates to the different levels, or even different approaches, found within moral theology itself. Is scripture to be the means of formation of character or the source of authority for moral decision making? Does the Bible press the Christian to develop a distinctive ethic or does it rather inform a common moral theory which may be shared by society at large? The final question raised by this area of discussion is hinted at in the previous sentence. Assuming the significance of scripture for the moral theologian, how does it relate to other moral authorities, other sources of moral knowledge? Here we stand foursquare within the province of the moral theologian, and presumably also that inhabited by the moral philosopher, within the Christian tradition.

Our intention in this paper is to concentrate largely on the first two aspects of this debate. The first reason for this is that the background of the present writer was originally within the realm of New Testament studies and thus he may have something specific to contribute from that world. The second reason for focusing on this area is that with the increasing specialisation within theology it is an acute danger that separate disciplines will develop on parallel lines with few transverse connections or intersections being made across the gap between these lines. The most minimal resultant danger here will be distortion within each specialism. The most serious danger is an ignoring of the research and requirements of the sister discipline, which can undermine the credibility of the moral theological enterprise, and indeed that of critical biblical study. There will be reference to the second two aspects of the entire discussion, but in only a brief compass, and as the starter for debate.

I

The prevailing perceptions of the debate over the place of the Bible within theology is that the debate traces its roots to the Enlightenment. Enlightenment is in this case generally used as a shorthand term for the past 150 years of intellectual/cultural history. Certainly, as has been noted earlier, this is not true in the case of the Bible and moral theology. One of the points of divergence at the Reformation was in just this area. Aquinas' natural law theory was criticised by a number of reformers, both for assuming too optimistic a view of human nature and for giving too little space to the Bible. Imperfect humanity thus requires the supplementary wisdom offered through the Bible. Fallen human nature tarnishes our reason and our ability to discern God through his creation. To allow for this God provides a more direct means of discerning his will through revelation, that is Holy Scripture. Paradoxically it has been primarily from within this reformed tradition that have evolved the instruments/tools which have made more difficult the appeal to revealed truth. Largely these difficulties issue from the growth in historical consciousness. A brief survey will demonstrate this point. Rather than sketch a detailed history from Lessing to the present day, we shall pick out some of the more significant developments in the critical approach.

The work of Reimarus and others on the synoptic gospels, alongside the later work of Julius Wellhausen on the Pentateuch inaugurated that family of approaches now designated source criticism. The broad outlines of the theories they enunciated are now widely accepted. The Pentateuch is seen to be the product of a long and complex editing process, drawing on at least four sources. The prophecy of Isaiah is now thought to be the conflation of at least three major prophetic sources from different periods in Israelite history. The three synoptic gospels are believed by many to have been formed from separate or discrete sources. Alongside the clarity gained for us through this process, there are also some warnings which sound in our ears. We cannot assume any longer a uniform theology necessarily within these texts, and we cannot assume that they recount history in the sense in which we might now understand the meaning of that term. These realisations are often seen as even more alarming in their implications for the New Testament than for the Old. What does this mean with regard to the life and teaching of Jesus? How does it affect the reliability of scripture? This source critical method continued well into this century and indeed continues to remain the foundation of much later scholarship. Overlapping with this method, however, stands the development of form criticism.

Form criticism traces its roots to the work of Hermann Gunkel in the last century. Gunkel identified a number of "Gattungen" or types of psalm. By analysing these types, Gunkel believed that it would be possible to trace the origins of the particular psalm being studied to its place within Israelite worship. Such analysis has proved to be notoriously difficult in terms of conclusive results. Nevertheless, the general point of being able to classify the psalms is now almost universally accepted. It was upon this pioneer work that Rudolf Bultmann and Martin Dibelius were able to build in the development of what became "classical" form criticism. By searching out the "seams" or "joints" within the gospel narratives, Bultmann was able to separate out numerous pericopae. These brief self-contained passages could then be classified into different "forms", including parable, conflict narratives, apophthegms, etc. These were largely, he argued, sermon type material issuing from the early church, focusing on a story about Jesus. This highly atomistic approach to biblical study had two significant effects. First of all by its very nature it led to difficulties in gaining a broad perspective of teaching within the biblical material. Secondly, since it was seen to be hortatory or homilectic in origin it once again cast doubts upon the historical reliability of the material. To some extent in reaction to this, but also by building upon it, grew up the so-called "biblical theology" movement. This included the work of Joachim Jeremias in Germany and Alan Richardson in this country and many others working in the 1950s. It attempted to wrest from the Bible, utilising critical insights, broad elements of teaching, a "biblical view" of creation, redemption, etc. This movement had its effect upon the study of Christian, particularly biblical ethics, and probably the most famous outflow from it was T. W. Manson's book on New Testament Ethics.[2] Manson believed once again that broad ethical themes could be derived from the biblical material, which held good across the diverse writings found in the Bible.

The death knell to this approach came with the advent of redaction criticism which developed in Germany in the 1950s with the work of Willi Marxsen, Hans Conzelmann and others. The insight here, which once again built upon the work of the earlier critics, is the positive affirmation of the creative contribution of the writers of particular books. This is often reflected in the titles of the monographs, e.g. *Mark the Evangelist*,[3] *Mark – Evangelist and Theologian*,[4] etc. Instead of simply stitching together disparate material, the various biblical writers are taken to be theologians in their own right, writing for a particular community with its own needs and assumptions. There are points in the synoptic gospels where this process can be viewed fairly vividly. It may be useful to look briefly at one such case, relating to an ethical issue. In Mark 10.2, Jesus is asked by the Pharisees about the lawfulness of divorce. He replies by asking what Moses taught. The reply is that Moses allowed for divorce and presumably the reference here is to Deuteronomy 24.1-4. Jesus responds to this by quoting Genesis 1.27 and 5.2, reaffirming the unity of man and wife. He goes on to rule divorce out in an absolute manner, but then goes on to suggest that the same is true for a wife as for a husband; she must not divorce her husband. The parallel passage in Matthew 19.3-9 illustrates some interesting developments. Matthew has

Jesus reversing the order in which the Old Testament passages are quoted. The law of creation in Genesis now comes first and the Mosaic allowance of divorce now reads as an unfortunate but realistic relaxation of that law of creation. This paves the way for Matthew to allow an exception to the absolute prohibition of divorce. If the wife is guilty of unchastity, divorce is allowable. Matthew thus has Jesus following the same discipline as that followed by the stricter Shammaite rabbinic teachers of his time, which does allow divorce but only on this ground of unchastity. Matthew is also careful not to include any reference to the rights of a woman on divorce; such rights did not exist under the contemporary Jewish Law. The passage is then followed in Matthew by a brief discussion between Jesus and his disciples on whether or not it is expedient to marry. Again, there is a feeling of flexibility about the treatment here, which is absent in Mark's account. Having illustrated the redaction critical approach from one brief pericope in Mark and Matthew, we should point out that such critics would not be happy to leave matters in this way. The entire thrust of the redaction critical approach is to suggest that we must look at the writer's work as a whole and see how this sets the context for the passage being studied. If taken seriously this avoids the easy bandying of proof-texts. The best example of a redaction critical approach which investigates the total work of each writer on ethics in the New Testament is Leslie Houlden's essay on *Ethics and the New Testament*.[5] It is true to say that the insights of redaction critics remain seminal in New Testament studies and that more recent developments issue from this method and build upon it.

In very recent years, Old and New Testament studies have taken slightly different roads, in their attempt to build upon the work of earlier critics. In Old Testament studies, Brevard Childs has attempted to supplement the historical-critical approach with what he has described as "canonical criticism".[6] In this method, we are encouraged to read the Old Testament as part of scripture. We should be asking, he argues, what the text in its canonical form has to say to the modern Christian. What is the meaning of the text when it is read as part of the canon? How should it be understood from within the Christian community? Ostensibly, this method would seem to alleviate the "user of the Bible" from a number of difficulties. The moral theologian along with others ought to be able to read off from the text implications for our contemporary world. Canonical criticism has received, however, far from universal acclaim. James Barr, in a detailed monograph, has argued against this method.[7] Also in more than one place, John Barton, another biblical scholar, has presented careful arguments which he believes discredit the canonical approach. One of the main points he makes is that canonical criticism cannot return us to the manner in which the biblical books were read in either the synagogue or the early Church. Canonical critical readings are as anachronistic, if not more so, as any other critical reading of a text.[8]

New Testament studies have taken a rather different turn but they too, building this time on the insights of the redaction critics, have focused their gaze upon the Christian community, but this time upon the community from which the documents sprang. The result of this has been a growth in "sociological analysis" of the New

Testament communities, particularly in the work of Howard Kee, Gerd Theissen, and Wayne Meeks. Meeks, for example, has studied the Pauline communities, their growth and background in his book *The First Urban Christians*.[9] In a recent sequel to this book, Meeks has used similar sociological methods to investigate the growth and development of ethical thought in the early Christian communities.[10] He looks particularly at the New Testament, the sub-apostolic and the early Patristic periods. If this method gives comfort to some by by-passing the classical historical-critical method, it does not make our task any easier if we are seeking the precise teaching of Jesus or indeed seeking only what was distinctive or innovative in the teaching of the early Christians. He notes:

> I do not have a chapter on "the ethics of Jesus". Interesting as that topic might be, it is both elusive – we probably do not have enough firm information to write anything like a rounded account of either Jesus' moral behaviour or his moral teachings – and beside the point. This book is interested in Jesus, to put it baldly, only to the extent and in the ways that he is part of the moral world of the first Christians. Naturally, that role is by no means small.[11]

Furthermore, in conclusion, he notes:

> In order to understand the first Christians, it is not enough to abstract their novelties or to add up the "parallels" and "influences" from their environment. It is the patterns of the whole that we have been trying to discern.[12]

Both the broadly negative reception of canonical criticism and the flourishing of the sociological approach to the New Testament suggest that focusing upon the original Judaeo-Christian communities from which the documents sprang and their moral perceptions may be one way in which scripture can illuminate our own methodologies, but this is to pre-empt the hermeneutical process which belongs more properly to the second stage of the discussion of the Bible and moral theology.

The final critical method which should be mentioned before we conclude this brief survey is the contemporary "literary" approach. This requires of the reader two prerequisites. They are literary competence and the willingness to treat the text as a given. Literary competence can be seen as a prerequisite of any of the forms of critical study previously described. It is the ability to recognise the nature of the text which lays before us and to read it accordingly. This means that we need first to decide on the genre with which we are faced. Barton makes the point vividly in relation to apocalyptic:

> Because of our competence, our "feel" for apocalyptic, we know that a text which began, "The stars will fall from heaven, and the sun will cease its shining; the moon will be turned to blood, and fire mingled with hail will fall from the heavens" would not be likely to continue, "the rest of the country will have sunny intervals and scattered showers".[13]

The point is simple, we need to be clear about the nature of the text with which we are confronted. This raises a number of issues for the moralist and the Christian community. Can all texts be similarly used by the moral theologian? How do we better inform the Christian community in order that they may appreciate the variety of material with which they are faced in Holy Scripture? The second point raised by the literary critical method is that of the givenness of the text. As with poetry or the visual arts it is vital to avoid the question of intentionality. Rather the text is to be reflected upon as it is. In this respect there are parallels with the canonical approach which could be seen as a sub-set of literary criticism. To employ the literary method alone could face us with two contrasting difficulties. The first is a collision with the historical assumptions of the historical-critical approach, the theological assumptions of the redaction critics and the community assumptions of the sociological method. Avoidance of intentionality is opposed to each of these. Secondly to remove intentionality may have implicit effects upon any ethical reference point within the text. This suggests that the literary method is best used alongside the other methods, and that it may have more to offer us in the analysis of certain genres than in others.

In this rapid survey we have only been able to raise some points fleetingly. Nevertheless, the very vastness of the canvas suggests that biblical scholarship faces the moral theologian with an unenviable task. If we believe scripture to have a significant part to play in the making of moral theology, then it is vital that there be a dialogue between biblical and moral theologians. Without such a dialogue, a pre-critical use of scripture is always a danger to which the moral theologian may be prone. In addition to this, such dialogue may assist the biblical scholar in sharpening his/her own tools and perceptions. Alongside this general comment, some other more specific reflections are apposite. The variety of tools developed by the biblical scholars suggests that it is no longer possible to refer to the "biblical" or indeed the "Old or New Testament" view of a matter. Different genres, theologies, and cultural contexts demand that we use scripture more sensitively; there may be a number of scriptural insights upon one moral issue, be it a dilemma, a principle or a virtue. There is a diversity in the biblical witness. Then also, as we might expect, the results of biblical scholarship require that we make reference to books, to writers or to sources rather than to isolated texts. To understand Mark's teaching on divorce it must stand within his wider theological framework. To appreciate Isaiah of Jerusalem's condemnation of those who oppress the poor requires of us an understanding of both his theology and if possible the needs and background of the community out of which he writes. Finally, and this will be raised again in our second section, we need to develop a consistent approach to our use of scripture in moral theology. It is not sufficient to use texts where we have them on a specific issue, and then to go by a quite different route when no text is available. But this is to move us on to the questions of meaning of scripture within our own cultural context.

II

It is perhaps on this question of hermeneutics, of interpreting texts for a community, that most discussion has centred in recent years. There are at least four aspects

that provoke discussion in this area. The first is that which is generally termed cultural relativism, the second the issue of the canon of scripture, the third that of other ethical issues not covered in the biblical texts, and the final issue is that of the autonomy of ethics both then and now.

On one analysis, the final three issues noted above could be subsumed into a wider discussion of cultural relativism. For the sake of clarity, however, it is desirable to look briefly at the basic question of cultural relativism, as it has been discussed in the past 15 years and then to look at each of the other questions individually. One of the most extreme proponents of the relativist case in the realm of biblical study is Dennis Nineham, the most complete argument being set out in his monograph, *The Use and Abuse of the Bible*.[14] The burden of his argument is well summarised in his quotation from the poet Louis MacNeice, who was writing about the Ancient Greeks, from his experience as a classical scholar:

These dead are dead
. . .
And how one can imagine oneself among them
    I do not know;
It was all so unimaginably different
    And all so long ago.

Nineham's argument is that human nature does not remain static, and that it is impossible for us to reclaim the original meaning of the biblical texts, since we cannot climb back into the skins of the first century Jews and Christians. His warning is timely and acurate. Certainly from within the Church of England there has been a tendency, almost uncritically, to make straight for the Bible fairly early on when preparing a report on an ethical issue.[16] If scripture is to be used it is not clear that this is an appropriate manner for its use. Nineham goes on to argue, supporting himself with the thought of Ernst Troeltsch, that individual cultures exist as "totalities". Each totality includes a wide range of cultural assumptions and even empirical data that are comprehensible and assimilable only from within that culture. Of course, to some extent this is true. To borrow an analogy from music, however hard we seek after the original text of a Bach cantata, however far we seek after producing authentic instruments as of his time, we cannot recapture either the interpretation of the original performance, or indeed the ears of Bach and those who heard.

To press this argument, however, to the extreme could lead to trivial conclusions. It appears to assume that each culture, each totality and ultimately each community is isolated and hermetically sealed. Critics of Nineham's position have accepted his reflections on the non-static view of human nature. They have not accepted the "sealed-off" picture of cultures and totalities.[17] The nineteenth century or the Victorian age, for example, are difficult to delimit in cultural terms. Thomas Hardy may be described as a nineteenth century novelist, when D. H. Lawrence is placed in the twentieth century, even though both novelists' dates overlapped both centuries. To seal off periods in this manner is to deny our ability to speak with a past age at all. Ultimately this could drive us in the direction of a total relativism and possibly even a solipsistic view of the world.[18]

The task of the interpreter (and this may be the moral theologian or the moral theologian in dialogue with the biblical scholar) is to understand the text as best he can in its original context. It may then be possible for those understandings and reflections to lend light to the problems that we face in our contemporary community. It will be at this point that reason and other sources of moral wisdom may conjoin in the process. The result may be a criticism of our present moral stance, a realisation that we can no longer live in that alien world, or perhaps more likely still a third possibility. This possibility is of receiving theological insight from our encounter with the text, which may at a fairly profound level alter our moral perception. This is particularly likely remembering how difficult it often is to separate out moral and theological reflections within Holy Scripture. Within the canonical books there are relatively few places where ethics stands alone and independent of theological reflection or conviction.

Talk of the canon moves us on to our second point of departure in this section of our argument. What exactly do we mean by a canon of scripture and how did we arrive at it? Answers to these questions are now more readily available, again due to historical research and to our more developed historical consciousness. We are now able to "see behind the scenes" and understand something of the process of the formation of the Christian Bible.[19] This process now appears more haphazard than it appeared in previous centuries. Issues of heresy and the need to defend the Catholic Church from perversions of the gospel are seen to set the agenda. The canon was not received complete in its present form, direct from heaven. It was the result of a historical process. In retrospect the process of the formation of a canon of scripture may now seem to us to have been unavoidable. What is less certain is that the attitudes and methodology which later evolved and hardened the canon into a dogmatic basis of scriptural authority was a necessary development. For the moral theologian it has often presented a fixed and immovable set of texts which are not only to be dealt with differently from all other texts, but which also appear to preserve almost a power of veto over all other arguments and authorities.

Once again, John Barton has some important reflections here, which have issued from his discussion of the post-exilic use of ancient prophecy. He shows at one point that canonicity drives an artificial wedge between some books that are now part of holy scripture and others which now find themselves outside that corpus. The point at issue in arriving at a canon, in at least some cases, was rather pivoting on the distinction between books that were for the generality of people and those which were for the few who could cope with the secrets included therein.[20] Even more significant for our own purposes here is his argument that it was antiquity that gave books their authority in New Testament times and not canon or quality. He comments: "For the modern Christian the question is often posed 'How can such old writings possibly be relevant to today's concerns?' . . . Thus for many today, the antiquity of the Bible is a considerable problem. But for the people of New Testament times the antiquity of the Holy writings was their strongest appeal."[21] The point that Barton goes on to make in a subtle and complex argument is that the notion of canon has been misunderstood over the centuries and that it has too easily been confused with the wider issue of

authority. The intention of this discussion is not to argue for the rejection of a canon of scripture. Even if that were felt to be desirable, it is impossible in the context of some 16-18 centuries of living with a fixed and authoritative body of scripture. Instead, the argument is for greater clarity in bringing together or distinguishing between concepts of canon and authority. This in turn should free the moral theologian from the straitjacket which requires the Bible to be the first court of appeal in any ethical discussion.

That the Bible is not obviously the first court of appeal in ethical discussion is manifest in the next stage of this particular argument. This relates to issues not dealt with specifically in the pages of the Old and New Testaments. There is a tendency to turn fairly swiftly to the Bible when the subject under discussion is marriage and divorce, homosexuality, the individual and the state, or the right treatment of the poor. In all of these cases there are texts which raise at least some of the issues, even if interpretation is often fraught with ambiguity. There is a great variety of issues where there is no direct reference whatsoever to the subject in hand. These range from "the peaceful uses of nuclear power" to "should airline pilots strike on Good Friday?". The approach to such issues beginning from a biblical perspective is bound to be more oblique. In the days of biblical theology there would be an attempt to adduce some general New Testament or biblical principle. We have seen that this general approach has been discredited.

Instead different starting points have been mooted. One such starting point is the attempt to define some general thrusts from the life and teaching of Jesus. These are arrived at through a critical appraisal of the gospel material, allowing for the specific theological themes within each gospel. These thrusts may be supplemented using insights from Pauline theology. Another approach is more self-consciously redaction critical. Each writer is allowed to contribute his own theological/moral reflections. Other insights are available too, using the methods of criticism outlined earlier. Whichever method is adopted, or indeed if a number of different methods is used, the overall methodology is similar. The recourse is first to general principles and reflections, then the individual texts (where they exist) are studied in the broader context of these principles. Ultimately this is likely to make for a more theological treatment of the themes due to the non-autonomy of ethics in much biblical material. Of equal importance to our argument here is that a more consistent approach to scripture will be the result. There will not be one rule operating where we apparently have specific teaching on texts relating to an issue, and another quite different rule being used where the issue was unknown to the various cultures of biblical times. In each case general reflection will precede the analysis of specific texts.

This tendency too easily to read off ethical maxims from biblical texts, or indeed to employ inconsistent approaches to scripture brings us to our final theme in this section on hermeneutics. This theme is that of the autonomy of ethics. At the present time a prevalent supposition is that morality stands independent of religious thought or conviction. This would be true of a number of Christian moralists as well as secular philosophers. Certainly most would wish to distinguish sharply between the witness of scripture and the philosophical basis of moral thought. This distinction, however, was one which would not have entered the minds of the various biblical writers. In the prophetic tradition of the Old Testament, for example, moral imperatives issue directly from an understanding of the individuals, or more often still the Israelite nation's relationship with Yahweh has elected the Jewish people to occupy a chosen place in the scheme of salvation. Their moral life should issue directly from this. Similar reflections could be made about the attitudes of the Deuteronomic historian. Admittedly there are places in the wisdom literature, where an independent ethic appears to take pride of place. A commonsense code replaces the more high-sounding reflections of the prophets. So in Proverbs and, in a more sceptical framework within Ecclesiastes, commonsense maxims for ordering daily life predominate. Even in wisdom literature, however, theological ethics can pierce through to the foreground. The moral implications of the book of Job, a profoundly theological work, are perhaps the most obvious example.

This tendency towards theological ethics persists within the New Testament writings, although once again, there is a good deal of variety. Mark illustrates the principle of theology totally governing the moral life. Mark's primary concern is with the sovereignty of God[22] and this overrides all else in the places in his gospel where moral issues are raised. Our reference to the divorce narrative in Chapter 10, earlier on, made this clear. It was the principle of God's creative design and intentions that governed right behaviour within marriage. Male and female are created for eternal union within the matrimonial relationship. Similar reflections could be made about Paul's theological/moral stance, particularly in Romans 1-8 and Galatians 1-3, although there are points (notably in I Corinthians) where standard judgements (which may relate as much to contemporary practice as to anything else), prevail. These judgements may or may not derive obviously from Paul's theological reflection at that point. Matthew, writing later, allows moral teaching to stand more clearly on its own, as in the three great chapters of teaching material which constitute the Sermon on the Mount. Nevertheless, here there are still theological reflections woven into the texture of these chapters. Mk. 5.48, for example, echoes the teaching of the pentateuchal, Levitical holiness code: "You shall be perfect, as your father in heaven is perfect". John's gospel, on the other hand, seems to be uninterested in moral teaching in the sense in which we would understand it; he is primarily theological in his thrust. In the later New Testament material, there is a movement towards tabulated codes of semi-autonomous moral pronouncements. This is most obvious in the secondary Pauline teaching of the Pastoral Epistles. The reasons for this change in atmosphere most likely relate to the shifts in eschatological teaching which can be traced throughout the pages of the New Testament. The end now appears to be farther off, the community has settled down to live a more mundane daily life. House rules and ethical maxims are now necessary to govern the extended time before God consummates all in the return of his Christ.

Of course, in comparison with twentieth century secular moral thought, the autonomy of ethics in these books is relative. Even so, these substantial differences in approach represent problems to those who would turn to scripture to inform their moral judgements and Christian life. The methodologies implied in these different texts are very varied and reinforce our need to take seriously the individual theological backgrounds of the various authors. This also means that if we are to take a consistent line in our use of scripture, that very consistency must now be modified by a sensitivity to the very different air breathed by the numerous writers in the Old and New Testaments. What is the theology that underpins the incipient moral codes of Matthew or of the writers of the Pastoral Epistles? How might that relate to the more thorough-going theological ethics issuing from the writings of Paul or Mark? The issues raised here are complex. In this section, then, we have been exploring some of the hermeneutical problems raised in the use of scripture within moral theology. How are we to understand the meaning of these texts within the context of our contemporary culture? A number of complex issues have been raised with regard to the relationship between the culture of the various communities within which the biblical writings were produced and our contemporary culture. Many of these reflections have pressed us once again, however, to examine the basic theological teaching of the different writers and to ask how such teaching can inform contemporary moral theory. That is to say, moral authority cannot be read off directly from the texts. Instead that which will inform will be the theological presuppositions of the writer. Whether this destines us irretrievably to a theological ethics is the substance of the next two sections. Our argument is that the relationship between scripture and Christian ethical thought is subtle. This may require of us a different mode of reflection on specific moral problems to that implied in at least some recent Anglican reports, as we hinted earlier.

III

In this section we intend to outline the two main areas of concern rather than attempt to legislate for how the Bible should be used. We shall distinguish between character and community, and moral justification or decision-making. Some moral theologians might argue for an extreme position on either of these approaches to Christian ethics. In other words, some would argue that Christian ethics is very largely, if not entirely, about the formation of character within a community, rather than about the informing of the mind to prepare it for specific moral decisions in areas of moral debate. Others would argue strongly in the other direction. There is an enormous variety of approaches even within these two main thrusts. In the case of character, they would include theories rooted in an Aristotelian emphasis on virtues, eudaemonistic approaches to Christian morality orientated towards the vision of God, or even the Christian intuitionism of Paul Lehmann's contextual ethics.

Certainly in the last two of these categories, scriptural formation has played a key part. In the eudaemonistic tradition, Kenneth Kirk traced a continuing tradition, beginning with Ancient Greece, following a pathway

through Holy Scripture, and finally sweeping up into later Christian tradition.[23] Kirk was keen to set his approach with scripture and to suggest that this context would form the Christian mind and character. Lehmann, coming from a Protestant tradition, saw the Christian community, where the scriptural word is proclaimed, as the focus of this formation and a similar approach can be identified in the more recent works of other writers, including Stanley Hauerwas.[24]

Perhaps the essential comment to make here, issuing from the argument in the earlier sections, is that the biblical texts issued themselves from community contexts. This might lend weight to arguments which seek to use the theology underlying biblical moral teaching to contribute to the formation of the contemporary Christian community. The corollary of this is that it will always be easy for such an approach o slide into sectarianism, an accusation not infrequently aimed at Hauerwas himself.[25] Contrariwise, it is difficult to see how this approach could be applied to the increasingly diverse society in which the Christian Church finds itself set in western liberal countries. It is hard to see how scripture can now in any broad sense "form" the wider community.

The contrasting approach of looking first toward moral decision-making, however, has seen a continuing tradition within Britain of the Christian Churches contributing their reflections to wider debates within society. Government commissions on specific moral questions, ranging from divorce law to in vitro fertilisation, have included both representatives and evidence from the mainstream churches and religious groups. This is not to argue that scripture has directly influenced the reports of such commissions. Rather it is to suggest that the biblical material may have coloured the evidence offered from the various churches. The difficulties and issues to be considered in using scripture in this manner have been rehearsed both implicitly and explicitly in the earlier sections. If the Bible is to inform such debates and such decision-making, then the hermeneutical problems must first be faced. The question remains as to whether scripture can or should be used in both approaches to moral theory and indeed whether it is possible for both approaches to stand alongside each other within a broader context. This, however, is a broader question within moral theology itself.

IV

Finally we are faced with the broadest question of all. How should the place of the Bible be seen in relation to other sources of moral wisdom? Where does it stand with regard to the rest of Christian tradition? For much of Christian history a particular view of canonicity has elevated the biblical witness to a higher level. Even though we now accept that the scriptural writings are the product of the earliest Christian communities (in much the same way as later tradition), still the status of canon marks off the Bible in a particular way. The work of Barton, Barr, von Campenhausen and others now raises questions about this particular understanding of canonicity. This does not imply that the canon should be ignored, nor does it deny the fact of existence of a canon.

The Bible crystallises within its pages a "classical" focusing of the Christian gospel and, of course, the earliest records of the Christian community. Instead these reflections upon the canon raise questions about how canonicity ought to be used. Ought the Bible always to be the "court of final appeal", or indeed in some circles the "court of initial appeal"? Some of our earlier reflections have suggested that it might instead be part of the means whereby the primary theological vision is established, and not a veto standing over against other authorities.

More broadly is raised the question of other sources of wisdom. These will include both human experience and the philosophical and cultural traditions of which we are the inheritors. These need to be discussed within the wider debate about our use of reason. Reason is not in itself another authority but rather the means by which these other sources are weighed, interpreted and evaluated. It may often be the case that moral debate and reflection will need to begin in this, the broadest of contexts, particularly in the light of the specialised empirical knowledge required to inform many moral decisions. As we saw earlier on, this empirical knowledge is simply not available in the biblical witness, nor was it available to the communities out of which scripture evolved.

The task of the moral theologian in relation to the Bible is more difficult now than ever before. These difficulties are the result of the increasing secularisation of western society, the growing sophistication of biblical scholarship (and thus the unavoidable growth in specialisation) and also the diversity of views on how we ought to engage upon the moral enterprise. This dilemma is exacerbated by the knowledge that the Bible is a seminal part of the Christian tradition and heritage. We know that it must not be taken in hand lightly or wantonly, but soberly and discreetly and in the fear of God. Having established the seminal part scripture has to play, then almost certainly the most urgent issue raised from these reflections is the need for increased dialogue between the biblical scholar and the moral theologian. Perhaps this will be most effectively achieved through the midwifery skills of the interpreters, the theological "go-betweens". I refer, of course, to those latter-day descendants of the god Hermes, the increasing band of hermeneutic philosophers and theologians.

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