

Moral Theology: Dodo or Phoenix?

VI

The Rise of the Phoenix or the End of the Dodo?

A.

As I begin this last address, I think it only fair to say that I am well aware that I have raised a question that in fact lies beyond my ability to answer. Will Christian Ethics and Moral Theology go the way of the Dodo, or will they rise like the Phoenix from the ashes of a culture that once could fairly be called Christian, but can no longer be so called? I am not Nostradamus. I have no purchase on the future. I can only sketch the conditions that might lead to a rebirth of these important theological, or as I would prefer to say pastoral, disciplines.

Initially, the first of these conditions must be described negatively. Christians cannot continue to argue the great issues of our time univocally in the moral vocabulary that provides the common language of our culture. If we continue to argue among ourselves and with our enviring culture in the *lingua franca* of our time; namely, the language of autonomous individualism, we will simply become our environment. The distinctive moral witness we have to make as Christians will not be made, and Christian Moral Theology will go the way of the Dodo.

Having said this, I do not believe that we must eschew this language altogether. I believe only that we must incorporate the vocabulary of moral autonomy into a Christian account of human life and history. This is the positive task; and, in this sense, the job before us resembles the challenge that confronted St Augustine and other fathers of the church who both preceded and succeeded him. As he had to incorporate the moral vocabulary of Neo-Platonism into a Christian account of creation, reconciliation, and redemption; so we must do a similar thing with the moral vocabulary entrusted to us by the Enlightenment.

If this judgment is correct, the first step in reconstituting Christian Ethics and Moral Theology is not ethical but theological. It is my belief that the primary responsibility for such a reconstitution falls upon those of us in Holy Orders. But more of that later! No matter who carries the major responsibility, it is utterly necessary to

identify the task that lies before us all. I have come to define it in this way. If the proper focus of Christian Ethics and Moral Theology is the common life of the church, it is very unlikely that these disciplines will be rightly understood if the nature and calling of the church are not adequately imbedded in Christian conscience. Emil Brunner once wrote a very bad book with a very good title—The Misunderstanding of the Church. The simple fact is that all the churches in this country are confronted with a massive misunderstanding of the church, both on the part of their congregants and their clergy. Ask yourselves why most people come to church. Ask yourselves, how do most clergy understand their job. Ask yourselves, how do most vestries understand the purpose of the parish for whose good order and health they are in part responsible.

I am not a parish priest, but my wife is. I listen to her carefully. I also listen carefully to her parishioners. What I hear is, “I have chosen this particular congregation as my parish family because it ministers well to certain religious, social, and moral needs that I feel are important to my family’s happiness and well being.” The parish or congregation exists to provide religious and moral services to people who shop for a congregation in a way not dissimilar to the way in which they shop for any other item of consumption.

Again, what expectations do we as clergy meet as Rectors or Assistants in a Parish? Again, my observation is that what people expect, in addition to sufficient numbers and a program that meets their needs, is a sympathetic and helpful presence on the part of their Priest. Clergy are expected to provide religious goods and services on terms determined in no small measure by the demands of religious shoppers. If one extends these observations to the denominational scene in this U.S., it appears that our various denominations project themselves in ways designed to meet the stated desires of particular segments of a religious population. The denominational system in this country can be compared not unfairly to the competition between brands for market share.

I am, I know, being more than a little unfair. The situation is far more complex than I have portrayed. Nevertheless, what I have said is too close to the truth for comfort; and becomes particularly uncomfortable if compared with the view of the church presented in the *Epistle to the Ephrsians*. In this letter the church is presented, not as a cooperative of religious seekers and consumers but as a people or political assembly set

apart and called into being by God for a particular purpose. That purpose is to make known, through their message and common life, the purpose of God to unite all things in Christ. I have suggested that distortions of this purpose crept into the life of the church at an early age, and that these distortions have continued throughout the church's history. Nevertheless a heresy that is venerable is nonetheless a heresy.

B.

So the first challenge to be met if Christian Ethics and Moral Theology are to survive as recognizably Christian undertakings is a change in the very idea most people in America have of the nature and purpose of the churches. It is impossible to overstate the magnitude of this task. It will require of the churches a moral and spiritual effort that at the moment lies beyond their capacity. To turn the focus of ecclesial attention from the desires and purposes of religious consumers to a divine agenda that places personal desire in a subordinate position to the purposes of God and the common purpose of a people can only be compared to turning the Queen Mary (under a full head of steam) around on a dime. I say this not only because our conception of the church is so very different from any that can be found in Holy Scripture, but also because a rediscovery of the nature and purpose of the church will require also a rediscovery of the meaning of the most basic mysteries of Christian belief and practice—the person and work of Christ and the doctrine of the blessed Trinity.

I could spend a time equal to that I have spent introducing the task of Christian Ethics on an explanation of why these basic mysteries must be recovered and re-plumbed; but I clearly cannot. I can only say at this point that our mess over ethics has come upon us because we have failed to grasp adequately the central mysteries of our faith. We have in fact made a God in our own image—one that supports and affirms us as unique individuals who are persons with rights and selves in search of satisfying life. So our reigning theology is neither liberation theology, nor evangelical theology, nor catholic theology. It is rather “Maiden Form Theology”—theology that “surrounds, affirms, and lifts up” individuals in their attempt to escape an “unhappy disquiet” and so find a personal peace.

If Christian Ethics and Moral Theology are to arise phoenix like, a theological challenge of enormous proportions must be met. That theological task will, however,

carry in its train an equally challenging pastoral one. Put directly, pastoral care will have to become a far more common and far more moral task than now generally conceived. I do not mean to say that we should be insensitive to the hurts and perplexities of individuals in distress. I mean only that such sensitivity will have to be taken up within a conception of pastoral ministry that is both broader and deeper. Pastors, in particular, will have to learn that the key pastoral issue is not escape from “unhappy disquiet,” but the creation and maintenance of a form of community life that fosters the virtues and practices that make for reconciliation, unity, and peace. These virtues imitate those of Christ and bear faithful witness to the overriding purpose of God for the Church and for all creation.

To return to a point I made at the beginning of these talks, if Christian Ethics and Moral Theology are to arise like the Phoenix rather than disappear like the Dodo, they will have to become before anything else a form of communal and individual witness to what God has accomplished in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ and to the completion of this grand purpose in Christ’s second advent. This point carries with it what I believe to be an important corollary. The role of Priest and Pastor will have to undergo a shift in emphasis. This shift will require clergy to assume what for many will prove an utterly new role. That is, we Priests (and our congregations) will have to understand the role of a priest not only as counselor and friend, not only as ecclesiastical ECO, and not only as sacramental presence; but as Rabbi—the person with chief responsibility for passing on common belief and practice, and for maintaining the good order and integrity of the community.

I think I need not, at this point, labor the point that what I say of ordinary clergy like ourselves applies doubly to our bishops. Christian Ethics and Moral Theology cannot arise Phoenix like unless their role in the community is redefined and their responsibility for communal health re-established. The rebirth of Christian Ethics and Moral Theology cannot occur apart from the re-establishment of the church as a polity. Authority and political order within the church are moral issues every bit as important as sexual behavior—perhaps even more so. If the church through its common life is to make a witness to a truth beyond itself, its common life must reflect that reality.

This brings me to the intersection of pastoral ministry and Christian Ethics. If the common life of the church is to reflect the truth to which it is called to bear witness, then the address of human need must take place within the larger context of the sanctification of the lives of its individual members. However, I have said enough already to indicate that the sort of focus on individual sanctification we find in John Cassian and in many aspects of the monastic tradition represents a distortion of basic Christian truth. Nevertheless, *pace* the suspicion hyper Lutherans have of sanctification, I, as a good Anglican, believe that we are indeed called upon to grow in holiness of life. This concern for personal holiness, however, can escape becoming “curved in upon itself” only if located within a communal context. One seeks to become patient, kind, long suffering, sympathetic, truthful, generous, and forgiving not in the first instance as a way to escape “unhappy disquiet” and achieve perfection and personal well-being: rather, one seeks to learn these virtues and practices because they are seen to be necessary for faithful communal life. Thus, spiritual direction, our modern substitute for the individual quest for holiness, can be faithful spiritual direction only to the extent that one helps another form a life that coheres with the common calling of the church. Christian Ethics and Moral Theology will manifest the qualities of the Phoenix only to the extent that they become pastoral disciplines directed to the formation of a faithful common life. Personal holiness will come as the rich reward of what Bonhoeffer called “life together” rather than as a primary goal for personal existence.

It is a common place, that “the Anglican Divines” wrote moral rather than systematic theology. What is less commonly said is that this pastoral concern was in no small degree subordinate to their desire to build a holy commonwealth. I for one find the nationalistic tone of their project unfortunate; but, having said that, I believe their desire to build a holy commonwealth was closer to the witness of Holy Scripture than is our relentless focus upon ourselves and our particular needs.

C.

Mention of the relation between Ethics, Moral Theology, and commonwealth brings me to another concern shared by all the great “Anglican Divines.” You may be worried that my defense of the common life of the church as the primary focus of Christian Ethics and Moral Theology pushes in a sectarian direction—one that makes a

sharp separation between ecclesial and individual life on the one hand and the larger social and political life of the society in which Christians may find themselves on the other. Such is not my intent. I would count myself a Moral Theologian in the line of Cranmer and Hooker, though with a major difference that I will get to in a moment.

Cranmer and Hooker both envisioned a Christian Commonwealth in which there was a permeable membrane between the life of the soul, the domestic life of the family, the wider life of the community and the even wider life of the nation. Moral Theology was to give shape to this commonwealth in all its dimensions. They assumed that one ought to be able to move from the life of the soul, the life of the family, the life of the church, the life of the community, and the life of the nation without encountering any basic difference in belief and practice. It is this assumption that we can no longer make. What Christians experience everyday are major disjunctions in forms of belief and behavior. They feel this particularly in respect to raising their children. Our children each day encounter world after world that has been untouched by Christian belief and practice and, even more importantly, seems to be formed by a shadow land of reverse beliefs and practices—ones we sense to be both corrupt and corrupting.

These disjunctions within our social existence present enormous challenges to the life of congregations. I have indicated how great the challenge they pose is. They also, however, raise enormous questions about the manner of our participation in the political and economic life of the society of which we are a part. If the primary focus of Christian ethics is indeed the common life of the church; and if that common life manifests marked differences with that of its host society; how then are Christians to relate to that society? If the primary focus of Christians is indeed the common life of the church, what form might a faithful “social ethic” take?

D.

I want to eliminate two options at the outset. A faithful Christian social ethics cannot rest content simply with the formation of a faithful community of believers. Neither can it, in our circumstances, assume a permeable membrane between its common life and the common life of the larger society. We cannot assume a social mission like that made possible by what is now called “the Constantinian Settlement.” In short, neither Meno Simons nor Richard Hooker can be our guide through the terrain we now

face. How then might a social ethic be articulated in a way that maintains the proper focus of Christian Ethics, and yet speak in a meaningful way to society as a whole?

I have, I think, made it clear by this time that it is not my purpose to articulate a sectarian ethic. I am not asking Episcopalians to become Hutterites. I believe for two reasons that Christians have a positive calling to participate in the larger life of the society of which they are a part—even if this participation requires them to support the use of force. My first reason stems from the Christian doctrine of creation. Creation is good, and creation places human beings within a social world. That social world would require social order even if the fall had never occurred. As St. Thomas clearly saw, social life is a positive good, and social life requires the presence of authority even in paradisiacal circumstances. Apart from social order, we cannot enjoy social life and so be fully human.

As Augustine saw, however, we now live in a fallen world wherein God employs the authority of government to create peace within the feud that now characterizes human society. Government provides the order necessary for life to be preserved, and so provides a space in time for God to return his creation to a faithful and obedient state wherein all things are united in Christ. If you will, the social order may be understood as a form of common grace that provides time for the purposes of God to be fulfilled. So, as both the fathers and the Reformers saw, “the magistrate,” and the soldier can rightly be said to have a divine calling. So also can the citizen who supports (and criticizes) them in their exercise of their office.

There are fundamental theological truths that tell against the sectarian position. Christians cannot withdraw from general social life and yet remain faithful to their beliefs about divine providence. Nevertheless, we now face a challenge that renders un-usable the tradition of social ethics we Anglicans have received from Cranmer, Hooker, Coleridge, Maurice, and Temple. All assumed a “Christian Society,” and we can make no such assumption. As a result, we cannot enter the social arena of our time on the terms that now govern that arena. We must enter, but we must do so as contrarians rather than arbiters of public opinion and practice. What, in a practical sense, is implied by the contrarian position I contend Christians must adopt if they are to make a Christian

witness rather than echo one or another opinion that now seeks dominance in the public square?

Provision of an adequate answer to this question constitutes the work of several generations of Christians. I can do no more now than hint at what will be involved if the future of Christian ethics proves to be that of the Phoenix rather than the Dodo. To borrow a phrase from my friend Stanley Hauerwas, the first step toward a Christian presence in the public square is the formation of a “community of character.” At present, a genuinely Christian witness within the social arena lies beyond reach because it is difficult to distinguish the lives of Christians, both individually and collectively, for those among whom they live. It is difficult to escape the conclusion that Christians in our country are driven by the same acquisitive individualism that drives the vast majority of the population.

What would happen, however, if congregations throughout this land became communities of character wherein both young and old learned to be different sorts of people—people whose lives are shaped by patience, kindness, sympathy, long suffering, truthfulness, forgiveness, and the other graces mentioned in the letters of Paul? My own view is that our society would be presented with a genuine alternative to the virtues (perhaps better vices) of acquisitive individualism, and that this alternative would have profoundly beneficial effects. It is, I believe, impossible to overstate the importance of a virtuous populace for a healthy commonwealth. All the great political philosophers from Plato to John Locke understood that even the best civil constitution and even the most just system of laws would be corrupted if the citizenry becomes corrupt. It is simply a fallacy to believe that one can legislate virtue. Virtue is bred in the communities that form us.

If the churches in this country are to have a credible voice in the public square, and if that voice is to be authentically Christian, they will have to learn once more to become communities of character. For Episcopalians, this will prove a formidable task, because we have relied throughout our history on the support of our surrounding society to provide moral formation. We are not used to forming our children to be different. We are not used to asking our congregations to live in a different way from that of our host

society. We are in fact used to asking people to live up to the highest ideals of society as a whole

The fact is that even to ask people to think in the contrarian manner I have described is contrary to all our sensibilities. Nevertheless, if we do not learn to do this, we will simply become our environment; and Christian ethics, at least among Episcopalians, will go the way of the Dodo. So the first aspect of a Christian social ethic suitable for our time and place is a form of common life that forms people with certain marks of character. The second aspect of a social ethic that is recognizably Christian is the articulation of a range of common social practices that reflect what we hold to be true about God's relation to the world. These social practices include everything from the way we treat the very young and the elderly to the way in which we conduct that barely human enterprise we call war.

A genuine social ethic includes both the sort of people we are and the sorts of practices that define our common life. In respect to the second of these, the practices that define common life, during the 1960's our churches gave up an attempt to educate their membership in a way that made people aware of the rich tradition of Christian social and political thought. In place of this educational project the leadership of our churches substituted advocacy of particular social causes; and, in so doing, sought to convert the churches into pressure groups supporting or opposing one or another social practice or cause. The result of this change has been a steady decline in the ability of the churches to form political and social conscience among their members. What can one expect if many (sometimes most) are not offered convincing reasons for adopting the position of their church leaders? They are simply presented instead with a resolution stating that X is the Christian thing to do or Y is the Christian policy to follow.

A helpful example of the sort of thing I have in mind is provided by the way in which the British House of Bishops addressed the prospect of the recent invasion of Iraq. In a communication to the Select Committee of the House of Commons, the bishops made six points, with most of which I personally agree. Oliver O'Donovan has noted that the six conclusions the paper reaches are these:

That the policy of disarming Iraq of weapons of mass destruction is right; that the chief issue internationally is the authority of the U.N; that this authority must be able to call upon military action in a last resort; but that a 'preventive war against Iraq' would be

unacceptable 'at this juncture'; that 'immense suffering' and 'unpredictable environmental, economic and political consequences' of war must be central to planning; and that the Middle East peace process must be revitalized.

After noting these points, O'Donovan goes on to ask, "So, what is amiss?" He answers his own question by saying, "Simply, that they (the six points) are not supported by any noticeable moral argument, instruction, or guidance." With what result? Christian conscience is uninstructed. One is left only with policy decisions directed to elected officials, but no reason has been given for Christians to support these decisions. What is missing? In this case the Bishops apparently did not think it necessary to counsel the faithful in respect to their common responsibilities. Granted, Bishops may speak for the church to the state or they may speak as pastors to the church. In either case, as O'Donovan noted, "the priority must be to communicate the *moral posture* of those who recognize their responsibilities for Iraq in Christ Jesus, rather than to dictate concrete policy conclusions, which, a month later, are already beginning to look out of date."

E.

It is here that I must draw my remarks to a close. To say that the focus of Christian ethics is properly the common life of the church precludes neither attention of personal holiness nor to the common life of society as a whole. In respect to each and every one of these concerns, the churches in our land are confronted with a staggering challenge. To take but one example, how might the educational task of forging common thought and practice in respect to such matters as war, birth, death, marriage, sexual relations, and a host of other social issues be undertaken? My observation is that we are at present trying to deal with these issues as we would any other matter of consumer taste. That is, we hold dialogues where everyone expresses their point of view, but with the proviso that we remain open and charitable toward those with whom we disagree. This practice constitutes an adjustment to democratic pluralism; and so, in my view, almost guarantees the disappearance of anything like a Christian ethic. One is left with nothing but a demand to be loving and accepting. The problem is that love has no content beyond acceptance.

Do not get me wrong! I believe the civic virtue of tolerance represents a positive development of enormous proportions in the social history of the peoples of the earth. I

believe also that the nurture of tolerance in vast areas of the globe constitutes the primary political task of our time. Tolerance, however, stops short of a question Christians must ask; namely, what is God's will for the practices that govern our common life. A question of this sort is a question about truth. As Christians we cannot avoid the question of truth. Consequently, we cannot simply agree to disagree on the answers we give to these questions. If we take this route, Christian Ethics and Moral Theology will indeed go the way of the Dodo for the simple reason that the ethics of Christians will no longer be recognizable as Christian ethics.

The remaining question—the question with which I began and the question with which I end—is how the churches become communities whose common life mirrors the truth to which they are called to bear witness, whose members have lives that mirror these same beliefs, and whose practices speak more loudly than words to the truth with which they have been entrusted? It is this question, I believe, that God now poses to us; and it is a question to which no answer can be found apart from repentance, prayer and fasting.

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