CHAPTER I

Christian ethics or moral theology?

The intellectual position of Christianity in the modern world, by which I mean Western Christendom at the turn of the twenty-first century, is largely one of retreat. As it seems to me, theologians, and believers more generally, have lost confidence in the relevance of Christian theology to the explanatory endeavours of intellectual inquiry. This is evidenced by the fact that in physics, biology, history, law, social theory and psychology, less and less (almost nothing indeed) is heard of the role of theological conceptions, conceptions which at one time dominated all these disciplines to the point where theology could be described as 'the queen of the sciences'. So far have we moved away from that condition, that hardly anyone confidently deploys theology in the discussion of intellectual problems in cosmology, evolutionary biology, historiography, jurisprudence or metaphysics. It is true that there are exceptions, but for the most part it is so. Even human health, both physical and mental, is held to be the province of physiology, microbiology, neurology and psychiatry, and social well being is the subject of political and economic science. The generalised behaviour of people is investigated by sociology and anthropology, that of individuals by psychology. In short, furthering our understanding of the world in which we find ourselves is thought to lie with something called 'science', both natural and social, while theology is widely regarded as 'unscientific'. Indeed, 'theological' is used by the media (in political commentary for example) as a label for the doctrinaire and the irrelevant, or worse the obscurantist. Consequently, anyone who, in almost any context, appeals to divine activity or religious experience is dismissed by

the experts and, in so far as they receive public attention, are regarded with embarrassment by many, perhaps most, of their co-religionists.

This is not to say that natural theology – theology based on scientific and historical knowledge rather than on revelation – has itself been in retreat. On the contrary, natural theology has undergone a remarkable revival in recent years, notably at the hands of Richard Swinburne, and, in a different way, Alvin Plantinga. As a result, especially of Plantinga's robust deployment of what has come to be known as 'reformed epistemology', there are considerable numbers of philosophers, especially in the United States, who manage to combine their philosophical expertise and their Christianity in a way that has won for their religious beliefs a significant measure of contemporary intellectual relevance. The membership of the Society of Christian Philosophers has grown to thousands.

But this is atypical. Although a glance at publishers' catalogues will reveal that systematic theology, biblical scholarship and popular religious reflection continue to appear in quantities probably larger than ever before, such work is written very largely in intellectual isolation from the currents of thought characteristic of the academy. The important point to stress, moreover, is that this academic isolation is one way. Modern theology and biblical scholarship generally think themselves under an obligation to attend and respond to the methods of science and history, to take account of and adapt themselves to the latest innovations in cosmology, biology, anthropology, philosophy, literary theory, or whatever. By contrast, neither contemporary science, whether natural and social, nor modern historiography feels in anyway constrained by the investigations of natural or systematic theology. Still less do they await their 'results'. Secular historians, for example, do not scruple to write about the history of religion, believing, more likely, that their indifference to religious and theological questions works to their advantage.

In short, Laplace's view that God is an hypothesis of which the scientist has no need is endorsed by nearly everyone. This includes most Christian theologians. For many theologians, in

fact, the study of theology has become primarily the study of its history, albeit its very recent history. Those who wish to engage in something more contemporary and creative generally pin their hopes on replacing metaphysical theology with an apologetic which turns to literary study of the 'metaphorical' or 'figurative' function of religious language, and thus converts it into an interpretative 'slant' on the world that is not, in the end, in conflict with, but accommodated to, modern secularised ways of thinking. Or else (sometimes, as well) they focus upon 'the Christian ethic', and thereby construe Christianity not as an explanatory understanding at all, but a code by which to live, with, perhaps, 'radical' implications for social criticism as well as for the behaviour of individuals. Such is the self-conception, and distinguishing mark, of what is called 'liberation theology'.

I shall have more to say about the 'figurative', but for the moment it is this second response to modern secularism with which I am concerned. It is a response to be found at work well beyond the confines of academic theology. In accordance with it, preachers are regularly heard to assert that Christianity is not a 'theory', but a way of life, and in so saying they unconsciously reflect an important feature of Western Christianity's history in the course of the twentieth century, its move away from 'dogmatics' to 'ethics', a change tellingly recorded by Phillip Gosse in *Father and Son*. In short, most latter-day Christian exponents believe that, whatever historical interest there may be in traditional theological debates, if Christianity is to speak to the contemporary world it is in its ethic that a meaningful message is to be found, and not in any theological-cum-metaphysical explanation of existence and experience that Christian theology has hitherto been thought uniquely to supply.

I

This focus on 'Christian ethics' is often motivated by an apologetic retreat to the 'relevant'. But it is a retreat that receives confirmation from a supposition about the modern

world widely endorsed by both secularists and the religious, namely the belief in its moral pluralism. It is a commonplace, held on nearly every side, that Western societies of today are marked by extensive moral variety in belief and lifestyle. Contemporary societies, so this common supposition holds, are to be contrasted with the much more monoglot societies of the past. While once upon a time (not so very long ago perhaps) there was general consensus about the values which make for a good human life, now there is competition between a host of alternatives. This is true, it is held, regardless of whether by 'good' we mean objectively worthwhile or subjectively satisfying.

It is upon the assumption of pluralism that the dominant political philosophy of the twentieth century – Rawlsian liberalism – has been built. This is a political philosophy that gives priority to 'the right' over 'the good', separates law and morality, strives to provide a rational foundation for a shared political neutrality, and aims to formulate social principles which are not intended to adjudicate between competing 'conceptions of the good' but whose purpose is to find an 'overlapping consensus' between them. In particular, it expressly leaves metaphysical and theological commitments behind.

Rawlsian liberalism is not without its critics. The alternative position generally goes by the name of communitarianism. But 'communitarianism' is not in fact a single view, except negatively. Indeed it can only be characterised in terms of the rejection of liberal individualism; the grounds of this rejection are many and varied – feminism, environmentalism, MacIntyrean traditionalism and so on. If there is more common ground than this it lies in alternative communitarian attacks on the political neutralism that underlies the modern liberal conception, rather than the value pluralism it seeks to address.

Now there are issues in the liberalism/communitarianism debate with which Christian writers concerned with ethics may engage directly. This is evidenced, in fact, by at least two of the volumes that appeared earlier in this series, Ian S. Markham's *Plurality and Christian Ethics* and David Fergusson's *Community, Liberalism and Christian Ethics*. The point to be emphasised for present purposes, however, is not so much that there is a

connection between the liberal/communitarian debate and specific issues in Christian ethics – there undoubtedly is – but that the general picture of moral pluralism as 'the way we live now' is a background assumption of most of those engaged in this debate, Christian or non-Christian. The *general* impact this has had on Christian thinking is a retreat from the metaphysical to the ethical. Its principal effect is to provide a cultural and intellectual context which allows Christians to claim an identity that is precisely independent of their theology, and for that very reason one that can claim the same status as every other participant to the pluralist debate. If to be 'a Christian' is a matter of endorsing a particular 'way of life', one which stands alongside, but also out from, many others, this can readily come to be seen as having a certain integrity and validity regardless of any suspect theological trappings it may have inherited.

The thesis of moral pluralism does not logically imply moral relativism, though it is frequently thought to do so, and the two are often to be found in each other's company, so to speak. By moral relativism I mean the idea that there is no ultimate moral 'truth', no demonstrably 'right' way of living, no provable set of ethical principles, no 'absolute' values. Moral relativism (surprisingly to me), has its Christian sympathisers. This is largely, I think, because it fits in well with the modern existentialist idea that human existence is characterised by the need to make fundamental choices, choices with respect to which the individual chooser is radically free. Though the atheist Sartre is the name most immediately associated with existentialism, it is a philosophy with Protestant roots. These are to be found in the writings of the modernistically fashionable Christian thinker, Søren Kierkegaard, whose most famous slogan unambiguously declares that 'Subjectivity is truth' and the title of whose best known book is *Either/Or.* My concern here is not with moral relativism, however. I believe it to be false, but this is not such a novel view since relativism is commonly, if not widely, still regarded as philosophically controversial. More interesting as a target, then, is the fashionable belief in moral pluralism, a far less controversial view, but one which I also think, and hope to show, to be false.

It is worth emphasising that the pluralistic thesis, which underlies so much contemporary thinking, both Christian and non-Christian, is essentially an empirical one. It holds that, as a matter of fact, the state of contemporary culture is this way rather than that. Yet there is good reason easily arrived at to question the truth of this familiar assumption. We should begin, though, by citing some of the evidence which seems to support it. It is true that there are a variety of 'lifestyles' evident in the modern Western world; in contrast to most other times and places, the natural family is no longer the standard household. It is also true that some of these lifestyles may be said to express (somewhat) different 'value systems' – gay alternatives, for instance. There are also different religions, as there always have been, but these are now to be found side by side in a way that they were not in previous centuries. In part this is a result of post-colonialism, but it is also true that the United States has, over a century or more, developed into a multicultural society which in turn has become a pattern for other parts of the world.

These are the chief observable differences that sustain the belief in pluralism, yet their significance can be, and is, exaggerated. For one thing, those who point to value pluralism will just as often point to the phenomenon of 'globalisation'. In particular, if the US has set a pattern for elsewhere, it is a surprisingly homogeneous one. The rapid spread of American consumerism – the way in which we shop, travel, eat and entertain ourselves – is if anything even more obviously standardising values than varying them, right across the world, and the emergence of the Internet shows every sign of intensifying this. Even the multiplicity of religions may not be what it seems. Possibly because religion as such, and not just Christianity, is somewhat threatened by materialism, there is increasing emphasis on 'inter-faith dialogue'. This, certainly, is something for which modern pluralists generally show enthusiasm, but it is far from clear that they can do so consistently. Inter-faith dialogue in the face of a common secular enemy makes most sense if it is based on the idea that the evident differences between religious traditions are largely a matter of surface appearance, an appearance that disguises the underlying unity of different

paths to the same spiritual goal. I do not myself say that this is correct. In fact, I am inclined to believe that it is not, or at least that the underlying unity is exaggerated. But my point here is only that it is a belief which, if true, throws doubt on the significance of perceptible religious differences in multicultural societies.

However, interesting though they are, these are not matters I propose to investigate further. My target is not the hypothesis of value pluralism writ large, but the rather narrower, if scarcely less important claim, that modern Western societies are *morally* pluralistic. Now when this claim is pressed, it turns out that the points of difference that are supposed to illustrate this moral pluralism are rather few in number. Of course, there is a question about what is to count as a *moral* difference, in contradistinction to differences of some other sort. This is an issue to which I will return at length in a later chapter, but for the moment, we can rest content with trading on intuition – moral differences are differences about such issues as abortion, euthanasia, capital punishment, suicide, homosexuality, the treatment of animals, respect for the environment, and so on.

The commonest example which the proponents of moral pluralism cite is abortion, a topic around which, they allege, there are deep and irreconcilable differences. Now it is sufficient for my purposes simply to register a doubt about this, though a doubt of a reasonably sophisticated sort. Arguments about abortion turn almost exclusively, in my experience, on the relative importance of the right to life on the one hand and the right to moral freedom of choice on the other (Pro-life *versus* Pro-choice), and on how these two, when they come into competition, are to be prioritised. What is *not* (or rarely) in dispute, is that *both* rights have a proper claim to our attention, that they both have moral weight. No one denies that the life of the potential child is of *some* importance; no one (or hardly anyone) thinks that abortion is on the same level as removing a tooth or an appendix. And no one asserts that the mother's desire in the matter is *wholly* irrelevant; her connection with the pregnancy clearly gives her a special interest, and her choice to persist to term, everyone acknowledges, should be respected.

But precisely because this is so, it is plausible to claim that the dispute between the pro-life and pro-choice positions is not really about fundamental values at all, but about their application. Individual freedom of choice and the preservation of life *both* matter; differences only arise when they come into conflict. In short, it is not the case that the values of one party are held to be of no account by the other, but that they are ordered differently. In the midst of disagreement, in fact, we have, at a minimum, mutual understanding.

It is likely that this last claim will be disputed, for the pictures of pro- and anti-abortionists at campaigning rallies strongly indicate to the contrary. I might observe that the fiercest moral and political disputes tend to take place between those who are close rather than those who are distant, but fortunately I neither need nor intend to explore this particular example further, nor defend my interpretation of it, because less contentious evidence against the pluralist's assumption is just as readily available. While there are normative issues over which people in the modern world divide no doubt (though in which world did they not?), there are predominantly many more about which there is virtually no dispute at all – opposition to racism, condemnation of torture, theft, fraud, child abuse, murder, rape. Social opprobrium attaches almost everywhere to lying, cheating (especially in sport), bribery, blackmail and the abuse of public office. This is not to say, of course, that such things do not go on. They do. But their common occurrence is compatible with their being *judged* bad by everyone's moral code. The evidence for this is that cheats and child abusers cannot ordinarily withstand public exposure. Where torturers (say) prevail, despite exposure, this is almost always a result of political oppression, and not a result of differing standards of moral acceptability. It is striking, and of the greatest relevance to the point at issue, that even the most despotic and violent regimes regularly deny (and perhaps more significantly feel constrained to deny) that they are despotic and violent, claiming, usually, democratic credentials and/or urgent political necessity for their actions. Real moral pluralism would lie in this, I think, not that such acts were performed by some and

not by others (which has always been the case) but that they were *condemned* by some and not by others, and this simply is not how it is. No one openly owns up to torture, racism, fraud, abuse and terror, still less do they do this with pride. On the contrary, everyone, truly or not, denies such accusations. There are countries, unfortunately, in which slavery is a reality, but no countries in which this fact will be openly admitted.

If this is true, if the extent and depth of moral difference is not as it is popularly imagined, what explains the widespread belief in moral pluralism? Can such a widespread belief be so evidently mistaken, so easily shown to be erroneous? This is an important question. The belief in moral pluralism is indeed widespread, yet if I am right, moral pluralism, which is to say wholesale competition between competing or conflicting moral values is not in fact a mark of contemporary life. The belief in moral pluralism, more closely considered, does not expressly deny this; it *assumes* it. Why so? The answer I think is twofold. First, the history of North America and Western Europe in the second half of the twentieth century was marked by a striking change in *sexual* morality. Up to 1960, say, it was widely thought that sex outside marriage was 'improper' in some sense or other. Cohabitation, fornication, and adultery, though they were known to occur widely, were frowned upon to the extent that they could rarely be admitted openly without significant personal and social cost. Similarly, while the existence of homosexuality was acknowledged, it, too, was rarely admitted to, and coming out, as a matter of 'gay pride', would have been unthinkable in the first half of the twentieth century. Subsequently all this changed. The very concept of 'fornication' has fallen into almost total obsolescence (and correspondingly the concept of chastity), and what is now called 'sexual orientation' has come to be regarded as a matter of individual choice (or genetic destiny) entitled to equal freedom and respect. Laws relating to both these issues, in part reflecting and in part contributing to the change, have been passed in almost all Western countries. Opinion on moral issues that are related to sexuality – such as abortion and contraception – has also undergone significant change, with corresponding amendments in the law.

Now part of my point about moral pluralism is that such change does not necessarily imply, and is not in fact to be interpreted as, evidence of moral plurality. Indeed, the most plausible interpretation of these important changes, it seems to me, is that people quite widely have come to believe that the censure which formerly attached to fornication and homosexuality is without foundation, that there is nothing actually wrong with these practices. In other words, the change is not indicative of moral difference at all, but of a new moral consensus, a common agreement that Victorian attitudes to sexuality were indefensibly confining, and caused in large part by the fear of unwanted pregnancies which effective birth control has eliminated to a great extent.[1]

It is not to the purpose here to ask whether this change in sexual *mores* is correct or incorrect, a product of moral enlightenment or of moral degeneration. The point rather is that it signals a widespread alteration in beliefs about moral right and wrong; it does not signal a fragmentation of moral opinion. Of course, there are some who still take a view opposed to what is now the common consensus, who still think badly of sexual promiscuity and will not acknowledge the validity of homosexual relations. But even the continuing existence of such people does not serve to undermine the point I am making. This is for two reasons. First, anything properly called 'a common consensus' will never amount to universal agreement; there will always be some differences of opinion. Second, such differences as do remain on these issues must be set within a much wider framework of moral agreement. This is the framework I earlier described in fact – the common condemnation of torture, theft, fraud, child abuse, murder, rape, lying, cheating in sport, and so on. Those in the moral minority with respect to sexual liberty, are nevertheless at one with their opponents in the condemnation of this much longer list of other things.

[1] There are intriguing and perplexing historical questions here. 'Effective birth control' cannot mean 'the pill'. What demographers know as 'the demographic transition' – a substantial drop in the number of children per family – began in Western Europe well before the pill was invented. For a recent discussion in one particular context see Devine (1999), ch. 22.