CHAPTER I

Turning the world upside down – and some other tasks for dogmatic Christian ethics

I

When Barth once likened the entrance of Christianity into human life to that of the Commendatore in his beloved Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, it is plain what motivated the comparison.[1] What Barth wanted to stress with this imagery was a theme which lay close to his heart from the beginning of his revolutionary commentary *The Epistle to the Romans* to the final pages of the last volume of the monumental *Church Dogmatics*; it is that the Word of God, Jesus Christ, comes upon history, as it is humanly conceived, as an abrupt and unanticipated word, giving to this history an ending which could not be anticipated or expected, humanly speaking. No inference or induction, be it grounded in philosophy or psychology, in the natural sciences or in historical knowledge, could lead us to anticipate this conclusion to the story of human life. If it is anticipated, it is anticipated only prophetically – which is to say, that it is anticipated as 'unanticipatable' – as by the prophet Isaiah when

[1] When a version of this chapter was given as an inaugural lecture at King's College, London, I was able to take the opportunity to acknowledge an intellectual debt to Professor Basil Mitchell who supervised my doctoral studies and since then has provided unstinting support and encouragement. It is characteristic of his intellectual generosity and integrity that he should continue this support even when his erstwhile pupil has since taken a path somewhat different from the one he has himself mapped out and followed. It is also characteristic of him that he should have taken the trouble to offer a patient critique of this chapter, to which I shall hope to reply with the care it deserves in the further elaboration and defence of this chapter's thesis I shall hope, on another occassion, to provide. I am also grateful to Colin Gunton, Alan Torrance and Francis Watson for comments on an earlier draft and to an audience in the Faculty of Religious Studies at McGill University for questions and discussion.

he declares: 'Thus saith the Lord . . . Remember ye not the former things, neither consider the things of old. Behold, I will do a new thing.' (Isaiah 43: 16 and 18–19 and see 65: 17f.)

It was the newness of this new thing which Barth was seeking to represent when he likened the entrance of Christ into history to the entrance of the Commendatore, and yet it was a far from happy comparison; indeed we might put it more strongly and say that it was a singularly unhappy one, since the Commendatore, with his icy grip, drags the sinful and unrepentant Don Giovanni down to the flames of hell. But God's decisive intervention, his doing a new thing, is not the intervention of an icy hand. 'And he that sat upon the throne' according to John the Divine, 'said, Behold, I make all things new' (Revelation 22: 5). The new thing which God intends and accomplishes is not to be understood, that is to say, without qualification, as a sweeping away of the old, but as its renewal and re-creation. Specifically, God's new deed is not finally directed at human condemnation, but at human liberation, and in the very particular sense that God's action seeks to evoke and evince a newness in the life and action of those who are its object. God does a new thing that humankind may do a new thing. So it is that in the Book of Acts, those who are the first and privileged objects of God's original action, of his doing of a 'new thing', those Christians whose lives have been shaped by the gift of the Spirit at Pentecost, are themselves the doers of new things – a fact which is not concealed even from the rabble who denounce the Christians as 'these that have turned the world upside down', who 'do contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, one Jesus' (Acts 17: 6–7).

Though Barth's comparison of Christianity with the entrance of the Commendatore is thus in certain respects somewhat unfortunate, we can hardly suppose that we should set ourselves to teach Barth wisdom on this point. For, in spite of the false note struck on this occasion, Barth's pre-eminence as the most significant of modern moral theologians (and we should give an extremely generous construal to that word 'modern') lies in the very fact that he sought to understand ethics as determined by the relationship between divine and human action of which we

have been speaking.[2] There is, so Barth claimed, a form of life – a turning 'the world upside down' – which corresponds to, and is established by, the action of God. This correspondence of divine and human action is neatly expressed in a formula which was consistently to govern his thought on these matters: 'Dogmatics itself is ethics; and ethics is also dogmatics.'[3] With this slogan, with the insistence that dogmatics is ethics and ethics dogmatics, Barth asserts at one and the same time the essentially ethical significance of the subject matter of dogmatics, and the essentially dogmatic character of the presuppositions of a genuine ethics; he asserts, that is to say, that an account of the action of God is an account of an action to which certain human action properly and necessarily corresponds and by which it is evinced; and, conversely, that an account of good human action properly and necessarily makes reference to the action of God by which it is both evoked and warranted.

According to this way of thinking, the task of Christian ethics lies in the description of human action called forth by the reality of the action of God to which dogmatics bears witness. In understanding itself thus, Christian ethics takes on a form which can be differentiated from that accorded to it in a number of alternative accounts. In section two of this chapter, we follow Barth in making this differentiation. In section three we shall attempt to illustrate the form of dogmatic ethics, as we may term it, not by reference to its theory, but by reference to its practice in relation to a quite specific area of debate. And then in the fourth and fifth sections we shall face and reply to certain objections which may be put to dogmatic ethics, and which can be indicated sufficiently for the moment by wondering what

[2] The centrality of ethics in Barth's understanding of Christian doctrine is rightly stressed in two recent and significant treatments of Barth's thought: John Webster's *Barth's Ethics of Reconciliation* (Cambridge, 1995) and Bruce McCormack's *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology* (Oxford, 1995), especially 274–80. According to Webster, for example, 'the *Church Dogmatics* is a work of moral theology as well as a systematics' (1); more particularly, Barth maintains that 'a Christianly successful moral ontology must be a depiction of the world of human action as it is enclosed and governed by the creative, redemptive, and sanctifying work of God in Christ, present in the power of the Holy Spirit' (2).

[3] K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I: 2, trans. G. Thomson and H. Knight (Edinburgh, 1956), 793.

account we might give of the tasks of dogmatic ethics, and whether that account will make reference to any tasks other than the one which the critic accusingly reckons to be its sole form of engagement with the world: preaching.

II

Section 36 of the *Church Dogmatics*, 'Ethics as a Task of the Doctrine of God', is the *locus classicus* for Barth's understanding of the nature of Christian ethics (at least on its interpretative side[4]) – or, as the critic would doubtless prefer to say, borrowing Macaulay's description of Castle Howard, 'The most perfect specimen of the most vicious style'.

Barth's account begins from the assertion that it is only in the concept of 'covenant that the concept of God can itself find completion'.[5] Why? Because 'God is not known and is not knowable except in Jesus Christ.'[6] Hence 'The Christian doctrine of God cannot have "only" God for its content, but since its object is *this* God it must also have man, to the extent that in Jesus Christ man is made a partner in the covenant decreed and founded by God.'[7]

This covenant or partnership has, however, for the human partner, two aspects, both the election of humankind and its claiming; or, in this order, grace and law.[8] As Barth puts it:

[4] I mean to avert to the contrast indicated by Webster when he notes that 'the relation to itself which the Word of God establishes for its human recipient is not simply noetic, a matter of interpretation, but ethical, a matter of action' (*Barth's Ethics of Reconciliation*, 33), and to note that I mean to deal here chiefly with the noetic aspect of the relationship.

[5] K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II: 2, trans. G. Bromiley et al. (Edinburgh, 1957), 509.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid. As Webster puts it, 'Because – and only because – it is an exposition of the statement "God is", the *Church Dogmatics* is also all along the line an anthropology. For the form of God's aseity, the chosen path of the divine being, is specified in the history of Jesus Christ; God's freedom is freedom for fellowship' (3). As he puts it again, Barth's work is governed by the 'inherent twofoldness of the reality with which Christian theology is concerned' (32). The presence of this theme at the heart of the *Church Dogmatics* gives the lie to the notion that Barth's lecture of 1956, 'The Humanity of God', somehow represents a radical shift in his thinking.

[8] In Webster's words, 'On Barth's reading, election is a teleological act on the part of God, having as its end the life-act of the creature whom God elects into covenant with himself'; *Barth's Ethics of Reconciliation*, 49.

> The concept of the covenant between God and man concluded in Jesus Christ is not exhausted in the doctrine of the divine election of grace. The election itself and as such demands that it be understood as God's command directed to man; as the sanctification or claiming which comes to elected man from the electing God in the fact that when God turns to Him and gives Himself to him He becomes his Commander.[9]

In other words, 'The truth of the evangelical indicative means that the full stop with which it concludes becomes an exclamation mark. It becomes itself an imperative.'[10] Hence – recalling one side of the slogan we have already cited – 'The doctrine of God must be expressly defined and developed and interpreted as that which it also is at every point, that is to say, *ethics*.'[11] To use another formula, 'The one Word of God which is the revelation and work of His grace is also Law';[12] more specifically, 'The summons of the divine predecision, the sanctification which comes on man from all eternity and therefore once and for all in the election of Jesus Christ, is that in all its human questionableness and frailty the life of the elect should becomes its image and repetition and attestation and acknowledgement.'[13]

If, however, Christian ethics understands itself in this highly particular way, how is it to understand its relationship to, and indeed the very existence of, a general definition or conception of ethics? Writing around the time of the publication of volume II: 1 of the *Church Dogmatics* Bonhoeffer gave the following answer to such a question:

> The knowledge of good and evil seems to be the aim of all ethical reflection. The first task of Christian ethics is to invalidate this knowledge. In launching this attack on the underlying assumption of all other ethics, Christian ethics stands so completely alone that it becomes questionable whether there is any purpose in speaking of Christian ethics at all. But if one does so notwithstanding, that can only mean that Christian ethics claims to discuss the origin of the whole problem of ethics, and thus professes to be a critique of all ethics simply as ethics.[14]

[9] Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II: 2, 512.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II: 2, 513.
[12] Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II: 2, 511.
[13] Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II: 2, 512.
[14] D. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, ed. E. Bethge, trans. N. H. Smith (London, 1955), 3.

Barth's answer has the same contours. The existence of a general conception of ethics confirms, says Barth, the 'truth of the grace of God which as it is addressed to man puts the question of the good with such priority over all others that man cannot evade it and no other question can completely hide or replace it'.[15] And yet as that general conception invites humankind to attempt to answer that question for themselves, 'the general conception of ethics coincides exactly with the conception of sin'.[16] Theological ethics issues no such invitation: 'If dogmatics, if the doctrine of God, is ethics, this means necessarily and decisively that it is the attestation of that *divine* ethics, the attestation of the good of the command issued to Jesus Christ and fulfilled by Him.'[17] Hence, dogmatic ethics can relate to the general conception of ethics only in a way which, 'From the point of view of the general history of ethics',

> means an annexation of the kind that took place on the entry of the children of Israel into Palestine. Other peoples had for a long time maintained that they had a very old, if not the oldest, right of domicile in this country. But, according to Josh. 9: 27, they could now at best exist only as hewers of wood and drawers of water. On no account had the Israelites to adopt or take part in their cultus or culture.[18]

Why must it relate thus? Just because:

> Ethics in the sense of that general conception is something entirely different from what alone the Christian doctrine of God can be as a doctrine of God's command. Whatever form the relationship between the two may take, there can be no question either of a positive recognition of Christian ethics by that conception or of an attachment of Christian ethics to it. Christian ethics cannot be its continuation, development and enrichment. It is not one disputant in debate with others. It is the final word of the original chairman – only discussed, of course, in Christian ethics – which puts an end to the discussion and involves necessarily a choice and separation.[19]

Thus when Christian moralists 'enter the field of ethical reflection and interpretation they must not be surprised at the contradiction of the so-called (but only so-called) original inhabitants of this land. They cannot regard them as an authority

[15] Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II: 2, 518. [16] Ibid. [17] Ibid.
[18] Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II: 2, 518–19.
[19] Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II: 2, 519.

before which they have to exculpate themselves, and to whose arrangements they must in some way conform. The temptation to behave as if they were required or even permitted to do this is one which must be recognised for what it is and avoided.'[20]

What ought to be resisted and avoided is, however, embraced, says Barth, in two common Christian approaches to the question of the relationship between Christian ethics and general ethics. The one approach attempts a synthesis of the two spheres through apologetics, the other opposes a synthesis by seeking to establish a diastasis. Both are to be rejected.

Apologetics is here understood as 'the attempt to establish and justify the theologico-ethical inquiry within the framework and on the foundation of the presuppositions and methods of non-theological, of general human thinking and language'.[21] Now, 'The only possible meaning of this apologetic is a sincere conviction that theological ethics must be measured against a general ethics.' To this Barth responds:

> [W]hat can be legitimated in this way, what can be indicated as included in the content of a general ethical enquiry and reply, is certainly not the distinctively theological enquiry and reply in which we have to do with the grace of God in the issuing and fulfilling of His command. The ethical bent of the religious self-consciousness, a 'value attitude' and the like, may be justified in this way, but not the attestation of the commandment of God as the form of his grace. This theme is automatically lost when apology succeeds. For the man who – as a philosopher, perhaps, or even as a politician – thinks that he knows a general principle which is actually superior to the origin and aim of theologico-ethical enquiry and reply, and who in the matter of the doctrine of God thinks that he can actually step forward as judge in the question of truth, a theological ethic with its Whence? and

[20] Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II: 2, 520.

[21] Ibid. I have here amended the English translation which renders 'allgemein menschlichen Denkens' as 'wholly human thinking'; 'general' or 'prevailing' is the proper reading and some pages later (534) 'general human thought' is given as the translation of the same German expression. This amendment is important since the expression 'wholly human thinking' creates a difficulty on two fronts. In the first place, though Barth will maintain that Thomism is finally apologetic, he would not describe its conception of ethics as of ethics as being based on 'wholly human thinking'. In the second place, the claim that theological ethics can often be 'comprehensive' in relation to general ethics makes sense only if general ethics itself is not 'wholly human', but, even if unwittingly, witnesses to the reality of God. The translators have made Barth's position somewhat more stark than it really is.

Whither? will necessarily be an objectionable undertaking, which he will regard either as insignificant or even perhaps as dangerous. And theological ethics on its part will cease to be what it is, if it dares to free itself from this offensiveness, if it dares to submit to a general principle, to let itself be measured by it and adjusted to it.[22]

This refusal of apologetics does not imply for Barth – and this will be important later on – a refusal to engage with general ethics. Whilst theological ethics must maintain that 'the command of God is not founded on any other command, and cannot therefore be derived from any other, or measured by any other, or have its validity tested by any other',[23] it can and must, 'Without detriment to its loyalty to its own task, indeed, in its very loyalty to it in this aspect too . . . establish a continuous relationship of its thinking and speaking with the human ethical problem as a whole.'[24] Why? Because it knows that 'finally and properly its own Whence? and Whither? are not alien to any philosophic moralist . . . but regards and addresses him unswervingly on the basis that grace, and therefore the command of God, affects him too'.[25] Just because this is so, it can even be said that theological ethics 'will be absolutely open to all that it can learn from general human ethical enquiry and reply', even while it declines to 'set up general ethics as a judge' over itself.[26]

The temptation to regard general ethics as an authority before which theological ethicists 'have to exculpate themselves, and to whose arrangements they must in some way conform' is acceded to not only in the attempt at an apologetics which would dissolve theological ethics, but also in 'the attempt . . . to show that, whatever may be the interconnexion between them, there is a twofold ethical inquiry, . . . a "theological" and a "philosophical", which touch and limit but do not abolish each other'[27] – a strategy motivated perhaps by a realisation of the redundancy which theological ethics has wished on itself by apologetics. Thus it might be reckoned that theological ethics has a special and particular source, subject, presupposition or

[22] Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II: 2, 521–2.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II: 2, 524.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Ibid.

content which gives it a task in addition to, but not at odds with, philosophical ethics. This is not synthesis then, as attempted by apologetics, but diastasis, the 'friendly demarcation' of two spheres; but 'it is no less suspect' than the former.[28] 'What we have to ask in relation to this view is whether theology can seriously contemplate two things', a sphere determined by revelation, grace and so on, and another by reason, experience, and the like.[29] Or, 'to put the question differently':

> Is God's revelation revelation of the truth, or is it only the source of certain religious ideas and obligations, alongside which there are very different ones in other spheres? Outside and alongside the kingdom of Jesus Christ are there other respectable kingdoms? Can and should theology of all things be content to speak, not with universal validity, but only esoterically? Is it, or is it not, serious in its alleged knowledge of a Whence? and Whither? of all ethical enquiry and reply which are superior to all reason, experience and self-determination? If it is serious about this, how can it, even if only for a moment, take seriously and accept the validity of an ethics which necessarily lacks or even disavows this knowledge? How can it liberate this ethics, as it were, by entering into an armistice with it? How can it imagine that it can secure its own right to exist in this way? Does it really believe in its own theme if it concedes that the other ethics has its own source and subject in reason, experience and self-determination? – as if all this did not lie from the very outset in its own sphere, the sphere of theological ethics; as if it could be right to accept all these quantities as self-evident, to concede autonomy to man's knowledge of good and evil; as if Jesus Christ had not died and risen again; as if we could salute the grace of God, as it were, and then go our own way; as if it were the task of theology positively to encourage and invite people to do this by the establishment of this diastasis.[30]

Theological ethics cannot tolerate the establishment of such diastasis and, for this very reason, far from detaching itself from other ethics, it takes up 'the legitimate problems and concerns and motives and assertions of every other ethics . . . after testing them in the light of its own superior principles'.[31] Hence, 'its attitude to every other ethics is not negative but comprehensive' in so far as such ethics is aware of, or attests to,

[28] Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II: 2, 525.
[29] Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II: 2, 526.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II: 2, 527.

explicitly or implicitly, 'its origin and basis in God's command'; it is exclusive only as 'it [i.e., other ethics] tries to deny or obscure its derivation from God's command'.[32]

> On the one side, therefore, it absorbs it into itself, and on the other it opposes it . . . Either way, it necessarily accepts full responsibility for handling the whole problem of ethics – and not merely of an esoteric ethics which appeals to special sources and proceeds according to a special method, but of ethics generally and as such.[33]

The 'Roman Catholic view of the matter' can be treated, at least initially, as a 'third possible way of defining the relationship between theological ethics and other ethics' and as one which seems to avoid the pitfalls of these others: 'we certainly cannot accuse it directly of either surrender of theology to the authority and judgment of principles alien to it, or escaping into the narrow confines of a special theological task'.[34] Indeed, in its understanding of the co-ordination of moral theology and moral philosophy, it seems properly to relate the two disciplines – the two are certainly not the same, but neither can they be separated nor proceed in essentially opposed directions:

> Does it not maintain that the knowledge of God must necessarily be one and the same ultimate presupposition not only of theological but of all ethics? Is it not shown that theological ethics – deriving like every other ethics from this ultimate knowledge, but drawing incomparably much more illumination from it – cannot possibly allow this other ethics to put and answer the question of truth, as though it were an exercise set and corrected by it? Could it not give us the necessary irenic and polemic – the claiming and acknowledging of other ethics in respect of the remnants of that presupposition still to be found in them, and the rejection of all other ethics in so far as they do not know or indeed deny this presupposition? At a first glance we may even be tempted to regard this solution as ideal.[35]

And yet on reflection it cannot be so regarded, for 'within this framework the command of the grace of God as the content

[32] Ibid. For Barth's understanding of the comprehensiveness of Christian ethics, see his treatment of the doctrine of creation, and in particular the discussion of anthropology, *Church Dogmatics*, III, 2, trans. H. Knight et al. (Edinburgh, 1960), esp. section 44.
[33] Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II: 2, 527–8.
[34] Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II: 2, 528.
[35] Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II: 2, 529.