# EVIL AND CHRISTIAN ETHICS

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# *Contents*

# *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. Co-habitation, 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 contra-ception – has also undergone significant change, with corre-sponding 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.

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[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.

The general demise of sexual ethics, it can be argued, arose not so much from a positive view that greater sexual freedom was good (though this was a view expressed by some) as from a sense that the old restrictions had proved groundless, that they rested on nothing better than a shared but merely conventional *feeling* of disapproval. (A similar point might be made about racial or gender discrimination.) Inspected by the cold light of reason, it was not that traditional arguments were opposed by alternative sets of values, but that there appeared to be no justifying arguments at all. (This is the strategy adopted by John Stuart Mill in his pioneering attack on *The Subjection of Women*, for instance.) In short, the change in beliefs about sexual morality brought with it a sense of the *groundlessness* of the moral censure hitherto applied.

This growing sense about the morality of sex, as it seems to me, both re-awakened and made credible a very ancient view, one to be found in the Sophists with whom Plato argued, and to be found at issue between David Hume and his critics in the eighteenth century, that quite generally 'morality is more felt than reasoned of' (Hume 1967: 416), and that accordingly moral beliefs are matters of personal 'opinion'. The belief in moral pluralism, if all that I have been saying is correct, does not rest upon the empirical observation of widespread moral disagreement. It could not do so, since there is in fact no such disagreement. The reality, more closely considered, is that in fact there is relatively little disagreement, and such disagreement as does exist does not run either very wide or very deep. The truth, rather, is that moral pluralism is an *inference*, an inference drawn from the contingently related belief that there is no firm foundation for moral values and principles; that they are not rooted in anything more secure than personal choice and subjective opinion. Hume, of course, who also believed this, did not draw the same inference. He did not subscribe to the idea of widespread moral pluralism because he thought that, as a matter of fact, most people's moral feelings tend to coincide, and that this coincidence is part of that human nature which his *Treatise* set out to describe. Thus while ' 'tis not contrary to reason for me to prefer my total ruin, to prevent the

least uneasiness of an *Indian* or person wholly unknown to me'
(Hume 1967: 416), no normal person would actually have such a
preference. Or so Hume thought. Modern Humeans, by con-
trast, though they do not explicitly contend that moral feelings
differ widely, are inclined to hold that there is nothing stopping
them doing so; they do not have the same conception of a
'fixed' human nature that Hume had. As a result, they generally
expect that the differences we see in sexual *mores*, where things
that shock some people fail to shock others, will spread ever
wider into other areas of human conduct. But, if we view the
matter without the neo-Humeans' philosophical prejudice, we
have no good reason to share their expectation. What we
actually find in the modern world is an increasingly liberal
attitude to sex combined with near uniform attitudes (of con-
demnation) to rape, racism and so on. Only this explains the
possibility, and the prevalence, of the moral conformity known
as political correctness.

<div align="center">II</div>

The modern world, then, is marked both by a fairly widespread
moral consensus, and at the same time an accompanying belief
in moral pluralism. The second of these is not, and obviously
cannot be, grounded on the first. If there are in fact few deep
moral disagreements, there can be no good empirical reason to
hold that morality is fragmented. The belief in pluralism arises,
rather, from a certain widespread assumption about the nature
of morality, an implication of philosophical theory not a result
of empirical social study. This is an observation of considerable
interest in its own right with several important consequences for
the understanding of contemporary culture. But my principal
purpose in drawing attention to it, and thus to a peculiarity of
modern society, is not to refute the ill-founded assumption of
moral pluralism which has coloured and shaped contemporary
thinking on so many levels (however much this may be worth
doing), but to focus on one product of it – the identification of
Christianity as just one among a number of 'ways of life', an
identification that is usually taken to imply a distinctive *moral*

component. It is against the background I have been describing (while rejecting) that it becomes plausible to think of and to represent Christianity as primarily one moral code among many, a moral code which both conflicts with and competes alongside several other 'secular' moralities in a highly pluralistic context. And, importantly, it is this component that is held to be the subject of what is called 'Christian ethics'.

As a conceptual model of the relation between moral principles and being a Christian – to be a Christian is to subscribe to certain dos and don'ts – the simplicity of this way of thinking is attractive, but at the same time deceptive. To promote Christian belief as chiefly a matter of adherence to a distinctive ethical code, rather than subscription to a set of theological doctrines, relies in large part upon the belief in moral pluralism which, I have argued, is an erroneous description of the modern condition. But odd though it may sound, an even greater challenge to this evangelising strategy lies in the fact that it presupposes that there is indeed such a thing as Christian ethics.

The assumption, often (as I have suggested) one welcomed by Christians, that the heart of Christianity lies not in its metaphysics but in its ethics, is common but not universal. Some very recent writers on these topics have denied that this separation is possible. Chilton and McDonald, for example, begin their study of *Jesus and the Ethics of the Kingdom* with the claim that 'Jesus of Nazareth is probably most famous, among believers and non-believers, as a teacher of morality.' Although they concede that this is a 'fully justifiable reputation' they also think that 'caution must be exercised in order to avoid drawing an overly generalized portrait of Jesus as teacher of human love' (Chilton and McDonald 1987: 1). In defence of that caution they go on to draw attention, correctly in my view, to the fact that what the Gospels record Jesus as having said has far more to do with eschatology than with ethics, and they infer from this that 'a consideration of Jesus' sayings in the Synoptic Gospels therefore raises the issue of how his ethical teaching is to be reconciled with his preaching of the Kingdom' (5).

Now I too shall be concerned with eschatological themes of

the New Testament and with their relation to morality, but I want to start from a more radical position than that of Chilton and McDonald. The most interesting task we can engage upon in this area is not that of relating two elements of Jesus' teaching – his eschatology and his ethics – but rather that of placing moral endeavour in general within the explanatory context of Christian eschatological theology. I describe this as a more radical position because, as I shall argue, there is in the first place good reason to think that Jesus was not primarily a teacher at all – about ethics, eschatology or anything else – and in the second, that there is no such thing as Christian ethics. I propose, however, to defend these claims in reverse order. The remainder of this chapter will be concerned with the existence/non-existence of Christian ethics, and the next with what we should think about Jesus.

My contention about Christian ethics will strike many as absurd because so common and so widespread are references to 'Christian ethics' that only a monumental effort could displace the idea. Yet, somewhat surprisingly perhaps, this is not so; no major effort is required. Even if my previous doubts about pluralism in general were to be discounted, it would remain relatively easy to cast doubt on the idea of a Christian ethic. Consider this simple question. If there is such a thing as a distinctively Christian 'code of conduct', what is it? According to Chilton and McDonald it lies in the pre-eminence Jesus gave to the commandment 'You shall love your neighbour as your-self.' But what exactly makes this *Christian*? This is a question to be considered at greater length in the next chapter. For the moment, we need to ask what exactly such a command implies. There needs to be a translation of this general rubric into specifics before we can speak of an ethic or a code – Christian dos and don'ts, we might say. What are they?

One point with which to begin is this: the moral world has not stood still in the last two thousand years. In the ancient world, when Christianity first made its appearance, there were differences between Christians and pagans about what ought and ought not to be done, that were probably quite striking; the Christians' austerity with respect to marriage and sexual moral-

ity, for instance, was then unusual and in marked contrast to the more relaxed attitudes of the world around them. Early Christians also tended to be pacifists. It is not quite clear why this was so,[2] but at any rate it was an attitude that the ancient world would have found very strange. They also had an aversion to oaths of loyalty to the emperor; they made a song and dance about state religion and civic requirements which pagan people regarded as an insignificant part of the ordinary run of things. It was these features, among others, that allowed St Paul to call new Christians 'out' from the world and the same features that made 'the Christian way' peculiarly different. And precisely for this reason, there is evidence to think, it was regarded by many as troublesomely perverse. There were many causes of Christian persecution no doubt, but one of them was certainly the fact that the Christian code of conduct was anti-social, that is to say, incompatible with ordinary ways of life and conduct in the world of the first two centuries AD. In short, the early Christians made awkward and untrustworthy citizens.

But in the contemporary world, two thousand years on, the position is quite different. It is an ascertainable fact of almost everyone's experience that on most ethical issues Christians can be found on opposing sides. This needs no special sociological research; it is confirmed daily in the newspapers. Moreover, the views they espouse or denounce are shared and rejected by significant numbers of non-Christians. To return for a moment to the much quoted example of abortion: Christians can be found to be ranged on both sides in almost equal numbers. It is true even of Roman Catholics, despite the pronouncements of Rome, that there is no single view common to all. In the United States there is even an organisation entitled 'Nuns for Abortion'. The same point can be made about birth control, sex outside marriage, homosexuality, euthanasia, suicide and capital punishment. Who could plausibly claim that there is 'a' Christian view on these issues, if by that we mean a view that all thinking Christians conscientiously hold? The fact is that con-

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[2]  On this see Bainton (1964), ch. 5 entitled 'The Pacifism of the Early Church'.

temporary Christians disagree with each other over these issues just as much as they disagree with the secularists around them.

Like it or not, this is how it is in the modern world, but even looking back to the past will not make much difference. The indiscernability of an exclusively 'Christian' ethic is confirmed, not eroded, as we extend the picture across time. The extent to which present and past Christians disagree with each other and agree with non-Christians in almost equal proportions on ethical issues is, if anything, even more striking than the degree to which modern Christians disagree. For instance, contemporary Christians believe that slavery is utterly wrong. This is a belief contemporary secularists share no less firmly; there is nothing distinctively Christian (in the modern world) about anti-slavery. But just as importantly, on this point both they and the secularists disagree fundamentally with Christians of most earlier periods (up to the nineteenth century) for whom slavery was not an obvious evil (a view Christians shared with non-Christians of course). The same is true of attitudes to war. Early Christians may have been largely pacifist, but subsequently there have been Christian militarists and Christian theorists of the just war. There have also been non-Christian militants, pacifists and just war theorists, however, and today, I speculate, while there are hardly any Christian militarists, there are also hardly any secular militarists either.

Consider another example. The Roman Catholic catechism (at one time) declared the four sins that 'cry out to heaven for vengeance' to be wilful murder, sodomy, failing to help the poor, and depriving the worker of a just wage. The first of these identifies an act *every* human ethical and legal system has condemned, the second (homosexuality) an act that many contemporary Christians (including Roman Catholics) no longer believe to be wrong, and the third and fourth identify actions which are in conflict with the values of large numbers of non-Christians just as much as they may be with Catholicism. Where then is the distinctively *Christian* 'way of life' to be found?

There are answers to this question which need to be explored before it can be said confidently that the idea of a Christian

ethic has been undermined. One such answer invokes the conception of Christian *character* rather than Christian *principles*. Such a view focuses not on the classes of action which Christianity uniquely forbids or enjoins, but on the virtues of character which Christianity commends. That there are such virtues seems incontestable. What is more contestable is that they are distinctively Christian. Let us agree that charitableness and generosity are among the Christian virtues. But can it seriously be suggested that they are exclusively Christian, not in the sense that only Christians possess them, but in the sense that only Christians believe in them?

Perhaps these are not the principle contenders. What then are? There is no fiercer critic of Christian morality than Nietzsche, and he provides a good focus on this point, precisely because he wants to contrast (to its detriment) Christian 'morality' with the 'aristocratic' virtues that preceded it. A good deal of his wrath is centred on Christian humility which lies at the heart of what he most hates – 'the morality of the herd'. Now humility, it seems to me, is the strongest case for a distinctively Christian virtue, and certainly one that is absent from the list of Aristotelian virtues by which, apparently, Nietzsche is impressed. Yet it is not one that all Christians have espoused, for, despite Christ's fairly explicit remarks about meekness and turning the other cheek, there is a decidedly 'muscular' Christianity to be found at regular periods in the Church's history; a belief in humility and loving one's enemies hardly marks the aspiration (or conduct) of the Crusades, for example. Even if we were to grant that this exception is an aberration, and may reasonably be discounted in any plausible description of 'the Christian way', it has to be remarked that the single virtue of humility cannot provide a sufficiently broad basis on which to construct an entire, and distinctive, Christian 'ethic'. Humility has no very obvious connection, for instance, with the elements that are most frequently cited as parts of that idea – charitable works, integrity, chastity, truthfulness and faithfulness. It does not require humility to engage in charitable works, and integrity, chastity and faithfulness are all compatible with a strong sense of self-esteem. They could all be readily endorsed, indeed,

by the ancient alternative to Christian humility – the Aris-
totelian '*megalopsychos*' or 'great-souled man'.

   In short, whatever may have been true of Christians at the
foundation of the Church, what is true *now* is that they agree
and disagree in pretty much equal measure with non-Christians
on which actions are morally permissible and which are not.
And in the light of the last few paragraphs, we may add to this
that their estimation of what counts as a morally praiseworthy
character, even where it reveals a greater degree of consensus, is
too thin to constitute a distinctively different ideal.


                                 iii


Enough has been said, I hope, to cast doubt *both* on the idea
that Christianity can plausibly be identified as one 'ethic'
competing amongst others in a pluralistic moral sea, *and* that it
has its own peculiar and distinguishing features. There are
points about these claims that will be returned to, but the more
important question for the purpose of this book is this. Suppose
it is true that there is not in fact any distinctive Christian ethic.
Do Christians have any reason to worry about this? The answer
is 'yes' for Christians who have retreated from the role of
theological theorists to ethicists. Having confined themselves to
advancing the cause of Christianity in terms of its ethic, it
cannot but be a blow to this enterprise if there is no special
'ethic' to advance. Somewhat ironically, given their aspiration,
they have put themselves in the position of having nothing to
say relevant to morality in the modern world. But the answer is
'yes' more generally, *only* if it is the case that the Christian
approach to morality must lie in a distinctive account of its
*content*. That is to say, the interest and relevance of Christianity
to morality is threatened only if we suppose (as 'ethical' Chris-
tianity has generally done) that interest and relevance reside in
the identification of actions and attitudes that Christians, in
contradistinction to non-Christians, commend and condemn.
What remains unscathed by the contention that there is no such
thing as a Christian ethic, is another, quite different interpret-
ation of the way in which Christianity provides a distinctive

approach to morality. This interpretation points to the explanation Christianity gives, not of the *content* but the *meaning* of morality.

To offer an alternative explanation of the meaning of morality, however, is to depart from contemporary trends because it means reintroducing and taking seriously several of those very theological conceptions from which a focus on Christian 'conduct' has generally sought to retreat. In other words (to draw a somewhat factitious distinction) the emptiness of Christian *ethics* does not imply the otioseness of Christian *moral theology*, and to hold that there is no such thing as a Christian ethic (as I have been arguing) is quite consistent with holding that the best explanation of the meaning of morality is to be found in Christian theology.

This distinction – between Christian ethics and moral theology – is factitious because it does not accord with everyone's usage, or even with a common one. For instance, in the second chapter of a book already referred to, *Liberalism, Community and Christian Ethics*, David Fergusson expounds Karl Barth's account of 'Christian Ethical Distinctiveness'. But on examination, it turns out that what he means by ethical distinctiveness does not have to do primarily with the content of morality but with its meaning. 'The fundamental setting determines the moral universe of the Christian. As Webster remarks [in *Barth's Ethics of Reconciliation*] "For Christian ethics, the world is a different place, and part of the Christian theory of morality, is a careful delineation of that difference"'' (Fergusson 1998: 27). To speak in this way is to use the terms 'Christian ethics' and 'the Christian theory of morality' interchangeably. Since there is no philosophical objection to anyone's doing so, it follows that the value of the contrast I have drawn between Christian ethics and Christian moral theology rests entirely on the cogency of the argument of subsequent chapters. I am not recommending any stipulations in this respect. It is for the sake of the present analysis that I shall mark an important conceptual difference by drawing a contrasting terminological distinction between 'Christian ethics' and 'Christian moral theology'.

To appreciate the importance of the conceptual difference

this distinction is meant to reflect, it is helpful to return to my earlier contentions about moral pluralism. Can it really be that this very widespread belief is to be undermined, refuted even, in a few brief paragraphs? It is natural to wonder whether such a firmly entrenched opinion can be so easily overthrown. Yet I stand by my contention that the moral variety in the modern world is hugely exaggerated, and repeat the point that even a fairly casual inspection of contemporary evidence, if it is not deflected by philosophical preconceptions, will confirm this. Moreover, as I suggested, in such vexed issues as abortion, we can readily observe far more agreement than disagreement, not at the level of prescription perhaps, but at the level on which such prescriptions are based. Modern morality consists in a set of values and principles that, despite the allegations of the pluralists, are broadly endorsed by almost all humankind, Christian and non-Christian. That is to say, every modern culture deplores child sacrifice and female circumcision, decries dishonesty and disloyalty, outlaws slavery, forbids murder and theft, deplores racial discrimination, condemns corruption, praises generosity and human kindness, appeals to rights, accepts the prevention of harm to others as proper grounds for legal proscription, seeks to promote health, happiness, freedom and democracy, and hopes to extend the benefits of education. Say, if you like, that these are the outworking of the Christian 'law of love', but if they are, no one seriously doubts that law any more, and consequently, no one can claim it as their peculiar 'teaching'. It may well be true that many of these values have Christian origins, but once they have been appropriated by the world at large, this is of historical interest only.

Of course, there are a few marked differences in codes of acceptable conduct even yet, particularly between (some) Muslims and most non-Muslims. Western attitudes to animals, for instance, are simply not shared in many parts of the world, and the horror with which Europeans and Americans regard punishment by mutilation just is not felt in those countries (mostly Islamic) where it is practised. Nevertheless, such differences of opinion and practice, however striking, are greatly outnumbered by points of commonality.