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Eric Osborn

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ETHICAL PATTERNS IN EARLY CHRISTIAN THOUGHT

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ETHICAL PATTERNS IN
EARLY CHRISTIAN
THOUGHT

ERIC OSBORN

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EARLY CHRISTIANITY
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TO
WILLIAM ELLIS
AND
IN MEMORY OF
WILLIAM J. HUNKIN

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PREFACE

At the end of *'Christian Ethics and Contemporary Philosophy'*, the editor, I. T. Ramsey, stressed the urgent need for 'such a thorough biblical and patristic study, including a study of Christian moral theology down the ages, as enables us both to formulate the most reliable Christian principles and the moral obligations they express, relating this understanding to some key-phrase in terms of which the full Christian commitment is given'. This book springs from a sense of the same need. It begins with an account of the function of ethical patterns. After the historical background and New Testament beginnings, the ethics of Clement of Alexandria, Basil, John Chrysostom and Augustine are examined. The four patterns of righteousness, discipleship, faith and love are seen in the distinctive thought of each writer. Exposition is tied to text because ethical terms are either ambiguous or meaningless when lifted out of context. Two necessary features of any Christian ethic emerge – a respect for the contingent and a challenge to perfection.

The obstacles to a work of this scope are considerable; there is too much material. The New Testament possesses an ethical complexity which has been carefully explored. Clement's writings are oriented to ethics and intricate in content. Basil poses questions to which there are no answers. Suidas said that it was for God, not man, to know all that John Chrysostom had written; Isidore of Seville confidently asserted that anyone who claimed to have read all of Augustine was a liar.

The wider one's bounds are set, the greater is the need for discussion and criticism. It would be impossible to name all who have helped in this way. In scholarship as in all things, 'Wir sind Bettler' and no man can list his creditors. Some debts stand out. The late A. Boyce Gibson helped me to see the issues, while Ernst Käsemann and C. F. D. Moule pointed the way through the New Testament. Maurice Wiles read and commented on an earlier draft. Study leave in Cambridge provided the opportunity to complete the work in conversation with G. W. H. Lampe and other scholars. In the checking of references and manuscript, William Ellis, Andrew Lenox-Conyngham and Robin Wood have been

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PREFACE

of great assistance. To all these and others I am deeply grateful for the friendship Augustine prized as 'cocta fervore parilium studiorum'. Finally, I wish to thank the University Press who have once again showed me a competence and a care which are beyond praise.

Queen's College
University of Melbourne
30 September 1974

ERIC OSBORN

ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|--------------|---|
| <i>ABR</i> | <i>Australian Biblical Review</i> |
| <i>ATR</i> | <i>Anglican Theological Review</i> |
| <i>BHT</i> | <i>Beiträge zur historischen Theologie</i> |
| <i>CQ</i> | <i>Classical Quarterly</i> |
| <i>CR</i> | <i>The Classical Review</i> |
| <i>CSEL</i> | <i>Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum</i> |
| <i>DCB</i> | <i>Dictionary of Christian Biography</i> |
| <i>DR</i> | <i>Downside Review</i> |
| <i>GCS</i> | <i>Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller</i> |
| <i>JBL</i> | <i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i> |
| <i>JR</i> | <i>The Journal of Religion</i> |
| <i>JTS</i> | <i>Journal of Theological Studies</i> |
| <i>MSR</i> | <i>Mélanges de Science Religieuse</i> |
| <i>NTS</i> | <i>New Testament Studies</i> |
| <i>POC</i> | <i>Le Proche-Orient Chrétien</i> |
| <i>RA</i> | <i>Recherches augustiniennes</i> |
| <i>RAC</i> | <i>Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum</i> |
| <i>RAM</i> | <i>Revue d'Ascétique et Mystique</i> |
| <i>RB</i> | <i>Revue Biblique</i> |
| <i>REA</i> | <i>Revue des Études Augustiniennes</i> |
| <i>REG</i> | <i>Revue des Études Grecques</i> |
| <i>RHPR</i> | <i>Revue d'Histoire et Philosophie Religieuses</i> |
| <i>RP</i> | <i>Historia Philosophiae Graecae</i> , H. Ritter et L. Preller (8th edition, 1898) |
| <i>RSR</i> | <i>Recherches de Science Religieuse</i> |
| <i>ReuSR</i> | <i>Revue des Sciences Religieuses</i> |
| <i>SA</i> | <i>Studia Anselmiana</i> |
| <i>SC</i> | <i>Sources Chrétiennes</i> |
| <i>SVF</i> | <i>Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta</i> , von Arnim |
| <i>TU</i> | <i>Texte und Untersuchungen</i> |
| <i>TWNT</i> | <i>Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament</i> , Kittel |
| <i>VC</i> | <i>Vigiliae Christianae</i> |
| <i>ZAM</i> | <i>Zeitschrift für Ascese und Mystik</i> |
| <i>ZNW</i> | <i>Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft</i> |