

COMMUNITY, LIBERALISM AND CHRISTIAN ETHICS

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

THE SOCIAL CONTEXT

This study explores some recent communitarian contributions to Christian ethics by way of comparison with current trends in moral philosophy. It is preoccupied with questions concerning Christian ethical distinctiveness and overlap with other theories, communities, and convictions. Christian communitarianism draws strength from the increasing dissociation of church and civil society in the western world. The emergence of pluralism and secularism in the late-twentieth century have led to the breakdown of any clear Christian consensus undergirding the standards, assumptions, and policies of multiracial and multi-religious societies. This social predicament has led to calls for greater Christian authenticity. We can no longer assume that Christian ethics simply endorses what everyone recognises to be good for human beings *qua* human beings. There is neither consensus as to what being truly human entails, nor universally available criteria for establishing this. The time has therefore come, it is argued, to bear witness to the specific virtues of the Christian life, through reference to its setting within the church under the guidance of Holy Scripture and the lordship of Jesus Christ. Christian moral formation is not to be seen as the pursuit of moral principles which are knowable by people in all times and places. It is not the promotion of an ethical viewpoint which can be set out apart from and independently of the particular assumptions which sustain the existence of the church. Christian witness in this social context bears the character not of seeking common ground with those who dwell *extra*

muros ecclesiae, but of articulating a vision that is distinctive and sometimes counter to the prevailing culture. Parallels can be drawn here with the early church which contested and provided an alternative moral vision to that regnant in the Graeco-Roman world. This was achieved not through mapping out common moral ground, but through speaking decisively of a new way that had been disclosed and enacted in Jesus Christ and his followers. I shall be concerned largely to defend this position while holding simultaneously that greater recognition needs to be accorded to the presence of genuine moral insight and practice outside the church. While there is no common moral theory, there is none the less some common moral ground which needs to be identified. I shall argue that this requires a theological explanation which can be presented in terms that are broadly Barthian. For Barth, it is not the uniqueness of the church that is decisive, but the uniqueness of God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ. Accordingly, he maintains the possibility of witness to the Word of God outside the church, albeit witness the validity of which must be tested by reference to Scripture, the theological traditions of the church, and its impact for the life of the Christian community in the world.

Some writers often identified as 'communitarian' do not admit the label. While I shall explore the reasons for this, I shall argue also that the expression has some legitimate application in terms of the epistemological significance assigned to the church, claims for Christian distinctiveness, the criticism of liberal ideology, and the recognition that moral codes can only be understood *vis-à-vis* forms of social life and inherited traditions. Although it may be the church rather than any generic notion of community that is morally significant, one must understand this approach in light of its more general criticisms of liberal philosophy and society.

Theological variants of communitarianism have become significant for sociological and philosophical reasons, as well as theological ones. For this reason, philosophical parallels will be pursued at some length in this study. In an age of increasing cultural and religious diversity, the particular shape of a religious community is important for the way in which its members

understand themselves and the world. In both the UK and the USA, there is not only a greater diversity within Christianity, but a burgeoning of options in ancient and new age religion.¹ This growing diversity is part of a wider social situation in which traditional patterns of communal life are breaking down. Much philosophical reflection has now been devoted to this phenomenon.

In the mid-nineteenth century, Alexis de Tocqueville drew attention to the way in which voluntary association in American civic life was vital to the working of a democratic society. This was particularly true in the absence of aristocratic forms of life which, in European societies, had contributed to civic cohesion through the definition of social roles. De Tocqueville, in work which showed remarkable prescience, argued that the voluntary associations formed by citizens contributed significantly to the creation of trust, a sense of collective responsibility, and a concept of the common good. In a polity which emphasises the equality of individuals, the common good can only be articulated through voluntary association. De Tocqueville sensed that this was part of the explanation for the economic success and vitality of American society.

The first time I heard in the United States that a hundred thousand men had bound themselves publicly to abstain from spirituous liquors, it appeared to me more like a joke than a serious engagement, and I did not at once perceive why these temperate citizens could not content themselves with drinking water by their own firesides. I at last understood that these hundred thousand Americans, alarmed by the progress of drunkenness around them, had made up their minds to patronize temperance. They act in just the same way as a man of high rank who should dress very plainly in order to inspire the humbler orders with a contempt of luxury. It is probable that if these hundred thousand men had lived in France, each of them would singly have memorialized the government to watch the public houses all over the kingdom.²

Within this analysis there lurks a warning. If there is a decline within the network of voluntary associations which regulate society, the burden of individual expectations that are subsequently placed upon central government will prove too great.

According to various social commentators today, this negative prophecy is being fulfilled. In 1985, Robert Bellah and the four co-authors of *Habits of the Heart* (the title itself is an expression of de Tocqueville) explored sociologically the way in which the network of associations that make up civic life is being eroded in the lives of modern American citizens. By reflecting on religious and political affiliations, and the changing patterns of family life and leisure pursuits in the responses of their subjects, they reach the conclusion that the quality of human life is deteriorating with the slow collapse of commitments to common goods.

[I]f we owe the meaning of our lives to biblical and republican traditions of which we seldom consciously think, is there not the danger that the erosion of these traditions may eventually deprive us of that meaning altogether? Are we not caught between the upper millstone of a fragmented intellectual culture and the nether millstone of a fragmented popular culture? The erosion of meaning and coherence in our lives is not something Americans desire. Indeed, the profound yearning for the idealized small town that we found among most of the people we talked to is a yearning for just such meaning and coherence.³

These social trends together contribute to a situation in which civic associational ties are diminished. Here, the individual selects his or her own goods as opposed to owning social goods which are defined by traditions, stories, and communities of memory. The increasing absence of a notion of the common weal which commands the loyalty of the members of a society is widely lamented. Although it is doubtful whether we can or would genuinely desire to return to the past, this none the less creates a situation in which institutions like the church, which offer to create a common identity and a morally coherent world of meaning, appear highly attractive. It is against this social background that we need to understand the appeal of communitarian themes in Christian ethics.

Recent work in philosophy provides a related intellectual context within which the recent ecclesiological emphasis in theology must also be understood. So-called communitarians such as MacIntyre, Taylor, and Sandel have raised searching questions of the adequacy of post-Enlightenment liberalism to

provide an adequate account of the moral life and a basis for modern pluralist societies. Of these philosophers, it is MacIntyre whose work has received the closest attention in theology. His writings form the basis of chapter 5 and contribute significantly to the position advocated throughout the entire discussion. The central and consistent thesis of his work is that, despite three centuries of moral philosophy and one of sociology, there is no adequate account of liberal individualism. By contrast, the approach of Aristotle can, upon suitable revision (in MacIntyre's latest work this is a Thomist revision), restore intelligibility to the moral life.⁴

THE CHURCH AS A MORAL COMMUNITY

The closest theological analogue of MacIntyre's philosophy is found in the writings of Stanley Hauerwas. He does not wish to be too closely identified with broader intellectual trends, since his project is to speak of what it is that makes the church distinctive, rather than to outline a moral theory, a social analysis, a narrative hermeneutic, or a defence of a generic notion of community. None the less, his frequent borrowing from philosophy and social theory makes it possible to view his work and its reception in this wider context.

For Hauerwas, our current situation is one in which the idea of Christendom needs to be abandoned. Attempts at correlating the moral ethos of the church and civil society must lead inevitably to a loss of ecclesial identity and a failure of Christian witness. The church's task is to be representative of the kind of people God has made possible in Jesus Christ; a people committed to forgiveness, to the service of God, to loving one another, and to making peace. References to the ethical significance of the celebration of the Eucharist abound in Hauerwas' writings. Perhaps this is surprising in a Methodist theologian. Yet his theology of the Eucharist is a powerful sign of the dependence of the church upon Christ crucified and risen, its unity through his lordship, and its fundamental calling to be the same body of Christ before the world. How this works out we shall discuss in chapter 3. It is clear, however, that Christian

existence takes its bearing from the church founded upon Jesus Christ. It is here that we are taught how to live and die as Christians. This ecclesiological orientation of Hauerwas' ethics makes for a distinctive Christian witness in the world, and enables him to launch a full-scale attack on the nostrums of modern liberalism.

The attractions of this position should not be underrated by world-weary academics. The call for greater authenticity and distinctiveness reminds a younger generation that the Christian life is an adventure. Many of the prevailing assumptions and trends in our society are to be contested. We are challenged to live out new patterns of community in a world which shows a bias towards individualism and the reduction of religion to the private and recreational spheres of our existence.⁵ Moreover, this way of thinking about moral practice seems to make better sense of how we come by our standards than earlier types of ethical theory. We learn to act morally, not so much by the intuition of general moral principles, but through particular examples and communal instruction in how to comport ourselves. The communitarian perspective can make better sense of the roles of parents and teachers. It reveals why stories and historical examples are so important to our moral upbringing. As I write in Princeton, it is Martin Luther King day, a day marked by school holidays, public lectures, and McDonalds' TV advertisements in honour of the civil rights leader. Here, the particular takes precedence over the general. The recital and memorising of great stories shapes the moral progress of our little ones.⁶ This is how we learn to think, react, and live in ways that are morally significant.

None the less, in seeking to expound recent communitarian trends in Christian thought, one is conscious of a range of problems that can be readily identified in the literature. These are explored throughout this study, and have led to a modified version of communitarian themes.

One problem concerns the spectre of relativism. If Christian moral standards are defined by reference to the polity of the church and to its distinctive beliefs, practices, and narratives, does this imply that the truth of these standards is constituted

merely by their faithfulness to one way of seeing the world? By implication, it might be held that other moral positions are true by virtue of their consistency with the frameworks of belief and patterns of community which support them. Truth in morals is thus constituted by reference to the beliefs and practices of whichever community and tradition one owes allegiance to. The possibility of a rational discrimination between rival communities is thus ruled out of court. There is no Archimedean position from which such comparison can take place. There is no transcommunitarian fact at stake into which one can reasonably inquire.

As far as I am aware, such an unashamedly relativist position is not avowed in any textbook on Christian ethics, even in a post-modernist age. The exponents of communitarian ethics typically argue that there is truth to be discovered and practised which is not exhausted by reference to the rules of discourse and behaviour governing the life of a community. The truth is what God wills for us and all people, although this may only be known through divine revelation in history and the patterns that this establishes in the traditions of Israel and the church. Truth is thus not relative to a particular framework, although knowledge thereof is available only to those who inhabit the framework. The position may be described as ontologically realist but epistemologically relative.

This still leaves the problem of how moral perception outwith the Christian community is to be assessed. I shall argue that it must be assessed positively though critically, and shall defend the arguments in recent philosophical literature for moral realism. I am deeply sceptical about strategies which enthusiastically deconstruct all other forms of moral consciousness, while making the strongest realist claims possible for moral perception within the church. Apart from the intrinsic implausibility of this position – can one subscribe to arguments which seek to undermine all forms of moral realism while claiming immunity for one's own particular form? – it is at odds with much of what Christian theology has historically tried to articulate in terms of natural law, common grace, and the orders of creation.

A further problem posed by the communitarian turn in Christian ethics concerns the way in which the church has often adopted the concepts and precepts of secular theories. The image of Christian discourse as a language game with its own grammar and forms of life has to be squared with the borrowing and appropriation of materials from other sources. This is a problem for Christians who are deeply conscious of inhabiting and being committed to more than one community. How should they comport themselves? Has the Christian community anything to learn from alternatives or should it pay exclusive heed to its own Scriptures and traditions? Stated thus starkly, this is a difficult if impossible position to defend in mainstream Christianity given the manner in which feminism, ecology, and an increased awareness of other faiths shape our understanding of the modern world and condition our reading of Scripture. A related issue concerns the criteria by which a community is determined. Where does one community begin and another end? What are the limits of a community? The concept of a community is not univocal and has probably not been subjected to sufficiently rigorous analysis.⁷

This second cluster of issues gives rise to a third which is perhaps the most fiercely contested. Many mainstream churches in western societies feel a strong sense of responsibility for their civil polities. This is reflected partly through a commitment to some of its institutions, e.g. parliamentary democracy, the forces of law and order, welfare provision, etc., but also through a desire to speak critically of the status quo and to call for change. This stake in the political and social order is conditioned by the way in which the church has historically shaped the societies in which it has existed. Yet, with the increasing dissociation noted above, problems arise as to the stake the church has in identifying and seeking to promote a social consensus. Is there a moral basis to the civil order which the church can support or supply? If so, in what language should that be couched, given that many of our contemporaries espouse another or no faith? The response that one makes to this problem will tend to be determined by the relative weight one attaches to the priorities of witnessing to what is distinctive

on the basis of Scripture and tradition, or seeking common cause with other groups and agencies. Closely related to this dispute is a fundamental question about the theological propriety of the discourse of human rights. The language of rights is the only current candidate for a universal moral discourse. Should this be welcomed throughout the *oikumene*, or should it be viewed with suspicion as lacking any genuine basis and as frequently hijacked for a plethora of incompatible claims which are corrosive of community and informed moral choices? This question will be revisited in the closing stages of the discussion.

Beneath these contested issues there lies a controversy about the doctrine of the church. Recent communitarian approaches to Christian ethics suggest a revival of a radical Reformation ecclesiology.⁸ The church is a distinctive community set apart from the world. It does not speak for society at large, but develops its own moral ecology. The idea of a Christian society has now been discredited, or so it is argued, and it is no coincidence that the traditional practice of infant baptism is increasingly being called into question within Protestant theology. Thus the co-ordination of church and civil society that one finds in Roman Catholic, Lutheran, and Calvinist ecclesiologies is regularly queried.

In order to assess this approach to Christian ethics, I shall look backwards and sideways: backwards, by assessing its recent theological ancestry; sideways, by comparing it with recent parallel trends in moral philosophy. In this way, communitarianism will be seen to be neither theologically nor culturally egregious. At the same time, however, these theological and philosophical evaluations will reveal some of the weaknesses of the approach and suggest ways in which it should be refined.

THE MORAL ECOLOGY OF THE EARLY CHURCHES

Any new development in theology will tend to seek support from historical examples in the Christian tradition and from Scripture itself. Recent communitarian approaches have coincided with a range of studies which draw attention to the importance of community in the moral world of the New

Testament and the early church. This is worth sketching at the outset since there are some vital resources here for communitarian approaches, as well as some pressing questions.

The New Testament, of course, does not contain any clearly worked out meta-ethical theory. It is none the worse for this. In part, this reflects its thorough integration of the languages of theology, doxology, exhortation, and witness. Ethics is not compartmentalised in the manner of a modern theological syllabus. The early Christians are urged to imitate the example of Christ, to follow his teachings, to keep the precepts of what became known as the Old Testament, to bring forth the fruits of the Holy Spirit in their living, to observe and even surpass standards already recognised in the ancient world.

The question has often been asked as to what new ethical norms the church introduced into the ancient world.

What can this Gospel of Jesus be?
 What Life & Immortality
 What was it that he brought to Light
 That Plato & Cicero did not write?
 The Heathen Deities wrote them all,
 These Moral Virtues, great and small.⁹

To discover the moral significance of the early church for the ancient world, it is not sufficient merely to list its ethical precepts and exhortations. One will find strong similarities both with Judaism and pagan culture. Parallels can be drawn with many ethical precepts in the New Testament. Yet the particular social context and configuration of ecclesial forms, symbols, and beliefs provide a new framework for moral practice. The description of early Christian ‘socioecology’ has been undertaken in several recent studies by Wayne Meeks.¹⁰ His project is to approach early Christian morality not by asking at the outset what the church taught about marriage, war, or slavery, but by delineating the new ecclesial setting within which ethical deliberation and guidance took place. In converting to the faith, Christians described their new life with the most radical of metaphors. They are chosen (1 Thess. 1:4) and called (1 Thess. 2:12) by God. They have turned from idols to God (1 Thess. 1:9). Their new life is a source of estrangement but also the means of

their solidarity with others who share the same faith even though they be scattered throughout the world (1 Thess. 2:14). This dual sense of estrangement and solidarity is emphasised throughout early Christian literature. Christians are described by Paul as a new creation in Christ in which the old person has passed away and a new life begun (2 Cor. 5:17). Those who were once no people have now become a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy people, whose real home is in heaven (1 Pet. 2:9–10). One of the distinctive features of this new community of faith is that it has a strong moral cast by comparison with other religious cults. In this regard, it is more reminiscent of a philosophical school than a religious sect.¹¹

The sense of being set apart, of entering a new life, and of being bound together with Christ and with one another is strengthened by the rituals of baptism and the Lord's Supper. In Romans 6, Paul uses an elaborate series of metaphors to describe the way in which baptism signifies dying and rising with Christ. The discontinuity between life before and life after baptism is stressed, as is the practical implication that Christians should walk in newness of life. Indeed, post-baptismal sin on this reading is highly anomalous. In the weekly Eucharistic meal, the memorial of the Last Supper in 1 Corinthians 11 is a reminder to Christians of the equality that arises from belonging to the body of Christ.¹² This subverts the traditional manner in which a meal reinforced social stratification. Here, guests were treated in different ways according to their social status. This practice is contested by Paul as deeply inappropriate within the church. The unity evoked and demanded by the Eucharist is given wider expression in the famous passage from the *Didache*, sometimes used in contemporary liturgies. 'As this broken bread was scattered upon the mountains, and then was gathered together and became one, so may your Church be gathered together from the ends of the earth into your kingdom.'¹³

In being called into this new community, Christians are faced with a range of practical problems about how they should dispose themselves with respect to others in the church and to those outside. Their ethical practice in these situations arises

out of the nature of their calling to the church. The moral exhortation of the apostles is integrally related to what it means to be a particular kind of people. In this respect, being takes priority over doing. The kind of people Christians are called to be results in their behaving in particular ways. A similar relationship of imperative to communal identity can be found in Jewish communities throughout the Diaspora. The keeping of the law is the way in which Jews maintain their identity as the covenant people of God. 'The first point in each form of the variety of Jewish ethics, therefore, is to be Israel.'¹⁴

Following Lohfink, Richard Hays makes the point that Jesus did not have to found a church, because there already was one: Israel.¹⁵ Prior to the church, the Hebrew notion of the covenant people already provided a model of community life. Jesus' calling of twelve disciples signals the restoration of Israel; Paul understands the Gentile communities to whom he ministers as 'Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise' (Gal. 3:29). They are the spiritual descendants of the Exodus people, all of whom drank from the one spiritual rock that was Christ (1 Cor. 10:4). The communal identity of the church, therefore, is determined by the nature of Israel as the chosen people of God under the law of God.

Although ethical practice has to be understood within the context of communal identity, it is also true that the practices of the community contribute to its character.¹⁶ There is a mutual enrichment of character and habitual activity. The importance of showing hospitality to strangers is a prominent Jewish theme which appears in the New Testament and in the literature of the post-apostolic period. This practice helps to forge links with Christians from other parts of the world. It is a way of supporting the church's itinerant ministers. It also has the symbolic function of reminding Christians of their own identity as 'resident aliens' since they have in this world no abiding city (Heb. 13:14). Similarly, the gathering of funds for Christians in other parts of the empire is an important expression and reinforcement of belonging one to another, as is the regular support of the sick and widowed within each congregation. 'Would not the very act of dropping those hard-earned coins

into a jar every Sunday have an effect on the way the participating members of the church would henceforth think about the morality of wealth and poverty?¹⁷

The new communal identity determined the character of its members and called for their highest loyalty, even when this occasioned martyrdom. The sacrifice made by Jesus was itself, in part, a model of martyrdom. Yet the polity of the church did not require Christians to abandon all previous commitments, social ties, and standards. In this respect, there is an ambivalence in Christian orientation within the wider world. The manner in which Christian groups often had their focus around a particular household reflected social patterns in the Graeco-Roman world. The members of the household were engaged in the life of society at large. This gave rise to the type of problem manifested in 1 Corinthians 8–10 where some Christians participated in dinner parties at which meat previously sacrificed to idols was consumed.

The ethical injunctions of Paul and other New Testament writers bear some formal similarities to the conventions of Graeco-Roman moral exhortation. 1 Thessalonians opens by dwelling on the friendly relations between writers and recipients. It reminds the readers what they already know. There is an emphasis upon imitating the example of others. More significantly, most of the virtues and vices listed can be found in pagan literature. Meeks presents an aggregate of vices found in eighteen different lists in the New Testament.¹⁸ He concludes that all can be widely found elsewhere, although there is a particular emphasis upon sexual impropriety and idolatry in the Christian lists. Much of Paul's parenthesis in 1 Thessalonians 4 would be familiar to non-Christians. Sexual purity, marital fidelity, brotherly love, leading a quiet life, and minding one's own business are all commended. What is interesting in this context is that Paul goes on to assert that others, on observing such conduct, will respect and trust those who belong to the church. Implicit in this claim, which was later to be developed by the second-century apologists, is the idea that the heathen can recognise the high moral standards set by the followers of Christ.

In the early church, we can find moral standards and practices which are not dissimilar to those acknowledged elsewhere. Yet their context in a particular socio-ecology gives them a distinctive focus and significance within the Christian life. The rationale of the moral life and the way it is practised reflect the particularity of the Christian faith. Not only moral perception, but also the motivation, commitment, and seriousness of the moral life are reconfigured by one's ecclesial belonging. The moral world of the first Christians cannot be understood except with reference to Jewish morality, the example of Jesus, the relations within and across congregations, and the symbols and rituals practised within the body of Christ.

Prior to the fourth century, the early Christians bound themselves to a minority religion which was often misunderstood and sometimes violently persecuted. The church comprised small but active groups of Christians whose commitment to their congregations was intensified by a sense of their standing out from the majority.¹⁹ The demands of following Christ together with the tensions experienced within the church produced some significant emphases. Divisions of race, class, wealth, and gender were more acutely felt within the *koinonia* of the Holy Spirit. This gave Christian ethics a stronger social dimension than one finds in the traditions of Plato and Aristotle.²⁰ In the writings of John Chrysostom in the late fourth century, there is a strong sense of a common humanity which imposes obligations upon slave-owners and the rich. It is impossible to enter the kingdom of God without the giving of alms. It is the heart of virtue. The best way to utilise wealth, he counselled the rich, was to disburse it to widows, orphans, the sick, and prisoners. Domestic slaves are to be treated with respect. They are neither to be beaten nor separated from their spouses. Friendship between master and slave, *contra* Aristotle, is to be desired.

Think not that what is done towards a servant, [Christ] will therefore forgive, because done to a servant. Heathen laws, indeed, as being the laws of men, recognise a difference between these kinds of offenses. But the law of the common Lord and Master of all, as doing good to all alike, and dispensing the same rights to all, knows no such difference.²¹

None the less, despite the high moral standards expected by Chrysostom of followers of Christ, there is a constant recognition that all are sinners and dependent upon the grace and forgiveness of God. This means that there can be no pride or unseemly claim to virtue on the part of the Christian. It also demands an attitude of humility and a readiness to forgive as God forgives. This stress is less apparent in the pagan moralists of antiquity.

The most theologically significant features of this new life are the way of Jesus and the authority of what became the Old Testament. These are underemphasised by Meeks.²² This may have something to do with a sociological approach which tends inevitably to understate the significance of theological factors. Thus Childs, while not denying the validity of the approach, wishes to accord greater emphasis to the way in which the community is addressed by Paul in the name of God who is 'the source of Paul's comfort, authority, and the norm of Christian behaviour'.²³ We know that the early church preserved the sayings of Jesus and that Paul attaches a higher authority to them than his own ethical advice (1 Cor. 7:12). Writing almost a century later, Justin sees in the example and teaching of Christ, the incarnation of that wisdom whose seeds are present in the teaching of Socrates. The nature of the Christian life as a calling by God to believe and respond to the gospel of Jesus Christ as members of his body, the church, bestows upon that life a definite orientation. We have here the principal criterion for the nature of the life to which Christians are called. Their calling is to serve the God of Israel who has been most fully revealed in Jesus Christ. This is the source and criterion of their new life. The grace of God as the origin of the church explains why the early Christians were compelled to attach such ethical significance to humility, forgiveness, and love. The Christological criterion does not provide the church with ready-made ethical solutions for every occasion. The wrestling with particular issues that Paul engages in throughout 1 Corinthians testifies to this. None the less, the foundation of the church upon Jesus Christ provides an authority which cannot be forgotten. This is especially true

of his teaching on the Sermon on the Mount which is impossibly exacting. It provides an intensification of Old Testament law which cannot be ignored. This is reflected in later Christian discussion of war, marriage, divorce and forgiveness.²⁴

The attitude towards the world that all this evokes is strangely ambivalent. The church worshipped Christ crucified, a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Greeks (1 Cor. 1:22ff.). It could not forget that its Lord had been crucified by the civil state. Christians were called to a new *polis*, the full reality of which would only appear at the end of the world. According to the Fourth Gospel, Christians are chosen out of the world and cease to be of the world (John 15:19). They are told to anticipate the hatred of the world just as Christ had known it (John 15:18). Yet the world remains the creation of God through the divine Word. It is the object of God's redeeming love and in it God's Word becomes incarnate.

The ambivalence of Christian attitudes to the world is already reflected in 1 Thessalonians. There, as we have seen, Christians are urged to live quietly and to mind their own business. Elsewhere, Paul claims that the secular authorities are ordained by God and deserve the recognition that is appropriate to them (Rom. 13:1ff.). He urges those within the church to live peaceably with all people (Rom. 12:18). On the basis of the analysis offered, we must assume that Christians continued to show commitment to the institutions and practices of the world out of which they had been called. This was a necessary condition for the presence of 'households' at the centre of Christian congregations. While many later followed a strict ascetic line by withdrawing from the civil world, this was not the rule for the majority. Peter Brown recounts the extraordinary witness of those who made an ascetic commitment, but notes that the silent majority must have been those who married, raised children, preserved households, and thus contributed to the survival of the church.²⁵ At the same time, apocalyptic strains in early Christian literature foretell the final destruction of earthly civilisations and polities. In this respect,

the Christian attitude to the state is eschatologically critical. The church must live in the knowledge that the secular powers are only provisional and may even be corrupt.²⁶

The ambivalence of these attitudes towards the world may be endemic to any theology of creation and redemption. In a world created and fallen, yet still loved by God, the church might expect to be confronted both by hospitality and hostility. It is significant that this ambivalence was removed most effectively in the theology of Marcion by denying outright the orthodox doctrine of creation through a disjunction of creation and redemption.

The ethical orientation of Christian writers in the early church reveals neither an exclusive differentiation from surrounding society nor an assimilation to conventional norms. One cannot ignore the ways in which Christian moral exhortation draws unashamedly upon pagan sources. Ambrose's treatise *On The Duties of the Clergy* explicitly borrows from Cicero's discourse by recommending, for example, the four cardinal virtues of temperance, prudence, courage, and justice. In the same context, Ambrose also repeats the point, found in earlier Christian writers, that the great philosophers were expounding wisdom that they had originally derived from Moses. Basil's *Address to Young Men on How They Might Derive Benefit from Greek Literature* commends the moral example set by Pericles, Euclid, Socrates, and others. These remain instructive when set within a Christian context.

Also of significance is the way in which patristic writers regularly appeal to natural law, often citing Romans 1–2. This was not presented in the systematic way that was later to characterise Thomism, but used in an *ad hoc* fashion to indicate the possibility of ethical recognition throughout the created order. This can be seen in the writings of Clement, Basil, Chrysostom, and Augustine.²⁷ Some commentators have even discerned a natural morality in the words of Jesus. 'If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him?' (Mtt. 7:11)²⁸

The Hebrew notion of 'wisdom' provided an interpretive

principle for recognising moral order everywhere throughout the cosmos. ‘She reaches mightily from one end of the earth to the other, and she orders all things well’ (Wisdom 8:1). Apologists of the second century – Aristides, Athenagoras, and Justin, for example – could expound the Stoic notion that the universe was governed by an order which was discernible in some measure by all rational persons. This order was identified by Justin Martyr with the divine Logos through which all things were created and which had become incarnate in Jesus Christ. The appeal to a universal moral order had a dual function. It enabled the apologists to recognise the moral perception of pagan society at its best, thus demonstrating that the Christian religion did not directly contradict what was already known in part. But it also had the purpose of showing the distinctiveness of Christian practice over against the customs of the host society. Thus the apologists can point to the *polis* of the church as morally exceeding the highest standards known in the ancient world.²⁹

The apologists might be perceived as adopting a craven though understandable posture towards pagan morality. Yet many of their themes are present in later writers and can be detected in Augustine. Rowan Greer has argued that the dominant model for configuring the relationship of church to world is that of alien citizenship.³⁰ This is the paradox of belonging provisionally to earthly polities, but simultaneously and finally to a greater polity, the city of God. This strange relationship of church to state is set out in the anonymous Epistle to Diognetus around CE 130.

[I]nhabiting Greek as well as barbarian cities, according as the lot of each of the natives in respect to clothing, food, and the rest of their ordinary conduct, (Christians) display to us their wonderful and confessedly striking method of life. They dwell in their own countries, but simply as sojourners. As citizens, they share in all things with others, and yet endure all things as if foreigners. Every foreign land is to them as their native country, and every land of their birth as a land of strangers. They marry as do all; they beget children, but they do not destroy their offspring. They have a common table, but not a common bed. They are in the flesh, but they do not live after the flesh. They pass their days on earth, but they are citizens of heaven. They

obey the prescribed laws, and at the same time surpass the laws by their lives. They love all people, and are persecuted by all. They are unknown and condemned; they are put to death and restored to life.³¹

The writer goes on to compare the relationship of Christians to the world to that of the soul to the body. The soul dwells in the body but is not a part thereof. The soul is imprisoned in it and is persecuted by it, yet the soul loves and preserves the body it inhabits. Through bodily hardship, the soul prospers. Likewise, through persecution the church increases in number. It is stressed, furthermore, that the church is no earthly invention. It is brought into being through the action of God in sending the Son into the world to be its Saviour. It is by his healing of our corrupted nature that Christians are made citizens of heaven. The community of the church thus understands itself not as a human creation but as constituted by God. This theological *prius* becomes the criterion for the form and content of the church's polity.

The tension between commitment to the civil society and the church was sometimes broken in the inspiring example of the martyrs. This led to a disowning of any stake in worldly society, as for example in Tertullian's later writings. The tension could also be broken in less praiseworthy ways, especially after the conversion of Constantine. The order of the empire could too easily be identified with the order of the kingdom of God as, for example, in the tributes of Eusebius to Constantine. However, Augustine, in *The City of God*, returns to the model of alien citizenship. The earthly city cannot be identified with God's sacred order. It is a community of corrupt people in a fallen world. Its institutions must always remain imperfect. Yet it is capable of attaining a measure of peace and order through the restraint of evil forces. The people of God whose home is the heavenly city none the less have a stake in this earthly peace.³²

Augustine also echoes Stoic themes about the eternal law of God reflected throughout the creation. This is apparent even within the earthly city, although our supreme end can only be known and enjoyed through divine grace.

God, then the most wise Creator and most just Ordainer of all natures, who placed the human race upon earth as its greatest ornament, imparted to humans some good things adapted to this life, to wit, temporal peace, such as we can enjoy in this life from health and safety and human fellowship, and all things needful for the preservation and recovery of this peace, such as the objects which are accommodated to our outward senses, light, night, the air, and waters suitable for us, and everything the body requires to sustain, shelter, heal, or beautify it.³³

Peace is found, for Augustine, in the well-ordered obedience of faith to God's eternal law. This involves the love of God, the love of oneself, and the love of one's neighbour. This love (*caritas*) is infused into our hearts by the Holy Spirit. The understanding of the source of this love dominated Augustine's ethical reflections and led to the subordination of the four cardinal virtues of Stoicism to the theological virtue of love.³⁴ We do this not through external imitation, but through 'putting on Christ' by the grace of God, and thereby knowing the full measure of divine love. The pursuit of order through the love of God, self, and neighbour entails significant moral restrictions upon the waging of war (this leads to the just war theory) and to a ban on suicide (which the church has since held to). The dominant image of the Christian life is that of pilgrimage to the heavenly city.

This pilgrimage has a communal dimension. It takes place within the body of Christ. We are supported by the angels who already dwell in that glorious city. Within our mother church alone Christians receive training and instruction. It is the discipline, exhortation, and fellowship of the church which are necessary for our earthly journey. It is there that we learn how to honour our children and love our partners in marriage. It is there that we learn how to be good citizens and rulers, and how to relate to people of other nations, cultures, and races.³⁵ The heavenly city may be assisted by that measure of peace granted the earthly city. The temporal stability of society and the regulation of human life are useful to it in its state of pilgrimage.

This heavenly city, then, while it sojourns on earth, calls citizens out of all nations, and gathers together a society of pilgrims of all

languages, not scrupling about diversities in the manners, laws, and institutions whereby earthly peace is secured and maintained, but recognising that, however various these are, they all tend to one and the same end of earthly peace.³⁶

Where does this preliminary sketch leave us? One should beware of any attempt to see the early Christian communities as ethically or culturally monochrome. Diverse attitudes can be detected. A similar diversity can also be discerned in Jewish communities throughout the Diaspora.³⁷ None the less, it seems clear that the early Christians understood their lives to be shaped by their commitment to Christ and their belonging to the church. The Christian life was a following of Christ's commandments, which reflected also elements of the Torah. It was also a learning to live in fellowship with Christians from different backgrounds and of different social status. Towards the civil authority, it was a working out of attitudes which, without seeking confrontation, expressed a higher commitment to God. In all this we find an eclectic borrowing from pagan writers and a recognition of examples of goodness outwith the Christian community. None the less, both borrowing and recognition are positioned within a Christian framework. The moral life is part of the life of faith, of life within the church, and of one's earthly pilgrimage. In this respect, it is neither a following of the dictates of natural reason nor allegiance to a set of self-evident autonomous moral principles. For the New Testament and the early church, morality is determined by its position within the life of faith as the response that God's grace calls forth. While there is significant overlap with pagan ethical precepts, the new context for ethical behaviour provides a heightened awareness and intensifying of its significance. We can see how this aspect of early Christian life is retrieved by recent communitarian trends in theology.