

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*

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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.

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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

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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

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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

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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