

## *Introduction*

Virtue ethics – whether secular or Christian – raises some curiosities which are only just beginning to emerge. For example, there is much discussion today about the importance of ‘communities’ as carriers of moral virtues, but an odd vagueness about the actual communities involved. Amongst Christian ethicists there is a renewed emphasis upon churches as moral communities, but little empirical analysis of the moral effects of churchgoing. There is an enthusiasm about ‘character’ and ‘identity’, yet little corresponding interest in those sociological methods which have usually been concerned to measure and analyse community, character and identity. In short, too much is too vague and ill grounded in social reality.

Virtue ethics, the very discipline which has challenged moral philosophy to take history, traditions and local communities seriously – the discipline which has argued that there is more to morality than the individualistic, narrowly rational concern about moral decision-making as construed by so many post-Enlightenment moral philosophers – has been curiously bashful about putting forward actual moral communities that can be analysed and measured. If anything, Christian ethicists have recently been even more bashful and reluctant to admit that sociology has any constructive role to play in their discipline. It is rare to find a Christian ethicist prepared to examine data about the moral effects of churchgoing. Instead Christian communities have become far too idealised.

This book sets out to challenge and reverse this situation. It starts with a theoretical issue, namely that posed by virtue

ethics. Yet it soon finds that theologians and sociologists alike have tended to assume that Christian communities, at least in their identifiable form as congregations that meet together and worship regularly, have little (beneficial) moral effect upon churchgoers. Sociologists of religion who are satisfied with this assumption can then safely ignore churchgoing as a social phenomenon, regarding it simply as an epiphenomenon. Theologians, in contrast, tend to argue that it is churches as they ought to be, especially churches as depicted in the New Testament, and not churches as they actually are, which are crucial for virtue ethics.

It is at this point that my investigation begins. Is it really the case that churches as they are have little or no moral effect within present-day society? In seeking to answer this question I will show that there is a great deal of evidence, much of it largely ignored, which challenges current biases. As it happens, whether or not someone goes to church regularly is a very good indicator of a whole range of beliefs and moral attitudes and behaviour. Churchgoers are more distinctive than is often imagined. Once these data are properly examined, it will then be important to return to the broader issues raised by virtue ethics. What implications does churchgoing, when studied rigorously, have for ethics in a fragmented and, perhaps, postmodern age? Is it possible that identifiable Christian communities offer more concrete and morally effective 'moral communities' than most other forms of 'community' in such an age?

Many of the monographs already published in this series, *New Studies in Christian Ethics*, have been deeply influenced by the agenda raised by Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue*. Most see weaknesses in the Enlightenment moral tradition as it has come to be interpreted in the late twentieth century. Specifically most share a scepticism about the ability of secular individualism and rationalism to resolve moral issues adequately. They believe that ethics should not be reduced either to a non-principled personalism or even just to the two principles of autonomy and individual non-maleficence. Instead, inter-personal virtues such as responsibility, altruism, moral order and justice are also

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considered to be essential within ethics. Monographs in the series point in various ways to the importance of various individual and corporate virtues being held in tension and see moral character rather than moral decision-making as the main focus of ethics. As a result of this focus upon virtues and upon moral character, most stress that it is moral communities that carry and sustain these virtues and mould this character. Finally, they argue in various ways that Christian ethics has something relevant and distinctive to say about these themes – virtues, character and community – even within a modernist, and especially within a postmodern, age.

For example, William Schweiker's *Responsibility and Christian Ethics* argues that an approach based upon responsibility has much to contribute to the present-day debate about ethics. He also believes that Christian ethics has a distinctive and valuable contribution to make to this approach. Within the secular world an awkward combination of increasing pluralism and technological power makes a notion of responsibility imperative. As power increases in the modern world – not just in the political and military orders but also in such areas as biotechnology – so ironically does pluralism. The latter ensures that people become increasingly confused about the bases of public morality just at the very moment that they are possessing an unprecedented amount of power. Schweiker, in contrast, argues that an ethical approach based upon responsibility (both individual and corporate), which has moral integrity as its aim, is more apposite.

Following the philosopher Charles Taylor, Schweiker argues that responsibility is linked to our capacity to reflect upon and then revise or transform our lives through criticism of what we care about. He does not follow those Christian ethicists who have tended to regard responsibility in individualistic terms as a personal revelation or intuition. For Schweiker responsibility involves cognition and critical reflection/interpretation and is a requirement both for individuals and for moral communities. It is based upon critical reflection aimed at the question of what has constituted our lives under the respect for others – and, for theists, our lives under God:

Personal and social identity is formed and assessed through acts of radical interpretation founded in a commitment to some moral project, some orienting faith. This means that self and community are always measured by a good which transcends immediate existence, the good of the integrity of life . . . Conscience is not a faculty of the soul, a divine spark in the mind; it is the practice of radical interpretation within which personal and social identity is constituted and formed in terms of the imperative of responsibility.<sup>1</sup>

Like other authors in the series, Schweiker seeks to show that Christian faith does have a distinctive contribution to make beyond the confines of Christianity, in this instance to the general discussion about responsibility. For Christians genuine moral integrity is an indirect consequence of seeking to respect and enhance the integrity of all life before God. An approach which is based simply upon personal autonomy and authentic fulfilment always faces the temptation in a troubled world of the will to power. But for Christians ultimate power is God's alone and faith in this God provides a confidence to live and act amid the fragmentations of life in the present-day world and beyond a culture based simplistically upon personal fulfilment and 'authenticity'. Christian faith offers a vision of 'goodness' shining through the fragmentariness and travail of existence. A Christian notion of responsibility is based upon an ultimate power, namely God, who is good and a finite world that is graciously respected by God.

There are obvious points of contact with several other monographs in this series. Kieran Cronin's *Rights and Christian Ethics* repeatedly links secular language about 'rights' to Christian notions of duty and responsibility. He also argues that Christians have deeper 'justifying reasons for acting morally' than secularists precisely because moral behaviour for Christians is a part of their relationship to God. So, having provided a very thorough critical account of different philosophical notions of 'justice', the final theological chapter of his book argues as follows:

In this chapter my main intention is to take the major models of rights

<sup>1</sup> William Schweiker, *Responsibility and Christian Ethics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge and New York, 1995, p. 185.

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I have been using: freedom, power and covenant, and to relate them in turn to a further model which may be thought of as the ultimate foundation of rights. This model has been mentioned in passing throughout this work. It is the notion that humanity's dignity comes from being created in the image of God. I want to argue here that having and exercising rights are a vital aspect of that dignity, and that being made in God's image gives a specifically religious justifying reason for acting morally.<sup>2</sup>

James Mackey's *Power and Christian Ethics* offers a notion of power as moral authority located finally in God which is also very close to William Schweiker's thesis. For Mackey Christian communities at their best offer a 'radical and encompassing sense of life as grace' which 'enlightens and empowers people to imagine and create an ever better life, and also to overcome the forces of destruction which one could otherwise only join and increase, but never beat'.<sup>3</sup>

Ian Markham's *Plurality and Christian Ethics* makes a number of similar points. Whilst he takes the claims of modern pluralism seriously, Markham finally believes that theism offers 'a more coherent description of life than any alternative world perspective' – it 'makes sense of the objectivity of value and the intelligibility of the universe'.<sup>4</sup> Similarly for Schweiker the very discipline of Christian ethics is finally 'faith seeking moral understanding'. The central problem that concerns Markham is how Christianity should relate distinctively (but without being exclusive) to a pluralistic political and economic order. In what appears to be an increasingly fragmented world – intellectually, culturally, and morally – how is Christian ethics to be done today? He argues for a position between secular relativism and religious exclusivism. In identifying a tradition of 'plurality', which he finds to be more apparent in America than in Britain, he believes that there is such a mid-path. In the final section of *Plurality and Christian Ethics* Markham proposes his bold claim

<sup>2</sup> Kieran Cronin, *Rights and Christian Ethics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge and New York, 1992, p. 233.

<sup>3</sup> James P. Mackey, *Power and Christian Ethics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge and New York, 1994, p. 203.

<sup>4</sup> Ian S. Markham, *Plurality and Christian Ethics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge and New York, 1994, p. 171.

that it is theism which makes most coherent sense of this mid-path.

Very similar themes can also be found in Jean Porter's *Moral Action and Christian Ethics*, Clinton Gardner's *Justice and Christian Ethics*, and Peter Sedgwick's *The Market Economy and Christian Ethics*.<sup>5</sup> For all of these writers moral action is a product of a subtle and complex juxtaposition of interdependent moral virtues – including, crucially, notions of responsibility and justice. However much one stresses such virtues as autonomy, authentic fulfilment, and individual non-maleficence, a strong notion of moral order, altruism, responsibility – both individual and corporate – and of social justice do seem to be required by Christian ethics. Porter's analysis returns specifically to Aquinas. Arguing against an understanding of ethics based simplistically upon moral rules, she seeks to re-interpret Aquinas' understanding of moral actions. For her the moral life consists of a subtle interplay between human dignity grounded in restraint and forthrightness, kindness and decency built up out of caring, and fairness and responsibility forming a basis for justice. These virtues are interdependent and become seriously distorted if adopted in isolation, as they frequently are in secular forms of ethics. They combine both self-regarding and other-regarding aspects: they are at once both individualistic and social. In arguing for this understanding Porter shows the influence of other Catholic philosophers, notably Alasdair MacIntyre and Elizabeth Anscombe.

However, the contribution to the series which provides the most substantial theological and philosophical appraisal of Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue*, as well as of the more specifically theological contributions of Stanley Hauerwas and George Lindbeck, is David Fergusson's *Community, Liberalism and Christian Ethics*.<sup>6</sup> What Fergusson offers is an appreciative, but finally critical, account of this debate, which takes communitarianism

<sup>5</sup> Jean Porter, *Moral Action and Christian Ethics* (1995), E. Clinton Gardner, *Justice and Christian Ethics* (1995) and Peter H. Sedgwick, *The Market Economy and Christian Ethics* (1999), all Cambridge University Press, Cambridge and New York.

<sup>6</sup> David A. S. Fergusson, *Community, Liberalism and Christian Ethics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge and New York, 1998.

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seriously without abandoning all of the achievements of realism and liberalism. Unlike theologians such as Stanley Hauerwas and John Milbank, he offers an account of theology which is radical but not radically postmodern. In doing this he sees himself more as a neo-Barthian than as a post-liberal.

What is at stake here? Within modern theology there is an increasing division between those who see themselves as a part of the liberal arts, engaging with secular disciplines and seeking to influence the wider political order from within, and those, in contrast, who argue that theology must abandon liberalism in any form, looking instead to the unique resources of the Christian community, and building up a radical theological critique of post-Enlightenment thought. Within secular social and political thought there is also an increasing division between libertarians who emphasise the autonomy of the individual and the centrality of individual choice, and communitarians, on the other hand, who stress the need for community, tradition and interdependency. David Fergusson seeks to offer a bridge between what he regards as unnecessarily polarised positions. For him it is essential that Christian ethics *is* distinctively Christian, albeit focused less upon the church than upon God made known in Jesus Christ. He is suspicious of those who exaggerate the distinctiveness of actual Christian communities and believes, instead, that Christians must still engage centrally with secular society. Liberalism has made real gains both within society and within Christian communities which he believes do need to be recognised. For David Fergusson an appreciation of their distinctive contribution can be combined with a positive account of some of the central features of liberalism.

For all of these writers Christian virtues held together in creative tension, and in the process moulding Christian character, do need to be carried in and sustained by moral communities. All of them admit that the actual communities that exist, in the form of church congregations, are fallible and flawed. Nonetheless, Christian ethics is essentially done within these communities and is shaped by the traditions and virtues that they carry but do not always exemplify. Actual Christian communities are bearers and harbingers of the Christian virtues of

altruism, responsibility, moral order and justice, amongst other virtues, which shape and mould the lives and characters of individual Christians. Inherent within this understanding of Christian ethics is a stress upon community, character and virtues held in tension. Christian ethics is no longer regarded as a discipline concerned with individualistic problem solving. All of the writers in the series have also been concerned in one way or another with the two key aims of *New Studies in Christian Ethics* – namely to promote monographs in Christian ethics which engage centrally with the present secular moral debate at the highest possible intellectual level and, secondly, to encourage contributors to demonstrate that Christian ethics can make a distinctive contribution to this debate.

The aim of my study is to build critically upon these conclusions. Whilst I am convinced by the general thrust of post-MacIntyre Christian ethics, I also believe that it often underestimates some of the theological and especially sociological problems involved. It tends to produce a theological understanding of churches as moral communities which underestimates the synchronic and diachronic plurality of Christian resources. In addition it tends to produce a picture of churches as moral communities which fits ill their social reality. It can also treat the ‘secular’ world as being distinctly more secular than it actually is. *The challenge I believe is to find ways of expressing Christian distinctiveness which do not exaggerate the theological and sociological distinctiveness of churches as moral communities.* As yet this a challenge which has occupied the attention of too few Christian ethicists. Making grand claims is just too easy. Making claims which actually fit the ambiguities of churches and society is much more difficult.

This study will seek to clarify and reinforce some of the philosophical and theological grounds upon which the conclusions presented in the previous studies in the series have been made. However, above all else, it will seek to clarify the specifically sociological factors involved in them. It is the latter which have yet to be faced adequately in most of the other monographs. James Mackey’s *Power and Christian Ethics* comes nearest to facing them. He acknowledges more frankly than



others the weaknesses of existing Christian institutions if they are to be regarded as responsible moral communities in the modern or postmodern world. He challenges existing Christian communities with the paradigm of community presupposed in the New Testament. Specifically he argues that power as coercion soon becomes the dominant mode both in society at large and in the churches in particular, whereas in the message of Jesus of Nazareth power is commended only in the mode of moral authority. Yet, having made this challenging analysis, Mackey remains vague about its actual implementation. In short, he is clear about the ambiguities and paradoxes of power in relation to existing 'moral' communities, but he is less than explicit about the specific social structures and institutions that might carry and contain power responsibly.

What is needed, I believe is a clearer philosophical, theological and especially sociological understanding of moral communities in relation to the current debate about values in a fast-changing world. The term 'moral communities' was used in a philosophical and eminently sociological sense by Durkheim, intimately linked with his understanding of the function of religion in society. Few of the other writers in the series have engaged at length with the functionalist literature which depends so heavily upon Durkheim despite its obvious relevance. I have argued elsewhere<sup>7</sup> that this literature suggests three levels at which the links between Christian ethics and moral communities can be explored critically. In sociological language these are the levels of legitimation, socialisation and institutionalisation. In more theological terms they concern the issues of justification and apologetics, Christian nurture and formation, and ecclesiology. The bulk of this book will be concerned with the middle level, since it is this which is treated too summarily in much of the virtue ethics literature. However the final chapter will return to the first and third levels.

If a more sociological approach is taken, then it becomes important to examine closely the empirical evidence about Christian communities. Particularly important are the attitudes

<sup>7</sup> See my *Moral Leadership in a Postmodern Age*, T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh, 1997.

and behaviour of those who participate regularly in these communities. Do they show signs of being shaped and moulded by specifically Christian virtues? To focus this question more sharply, do regular churchgoers show distinctive evidence of altruism and moral order? Do churchgoers differ in their moral behaviour and attitudes from nonchurchgoers? It is, I believe, important to ground this theoretical discussion of Christian ethics in the evidence that these questions might help to uncover. MacIntyre himself has always moved between the two worlds of sociology and moral philosophy. Unfortunately his critics and followers alike have tended to ignore the sociological.

Of course a sociological description of the characteristics of churchgoers can never provide a sufficient basis for Christian ethics. Those of us who are churchgoers will be only too aware of our frailties and ethical shortcomings. Nevertheless, an account of Christian ethics which so emphasises character and community would be very unwise to ignore evidence of actual Christian communities. Yet this is the very serious weakness of theologians such as Hauerwas and Milbank that they move too quickly from actual to idealised Christian communities. It is to them I must turn first.