CHURCHGOING AND CHRISTIAN ETHICS

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Churchgoing and the bias of virtue ethicists

The rise and growing dominance of virtue ethics within Christian ethics has brought with it a new emphasis upon the moral importance of churchgoing. Church communities and the stories, beliefs and virtues that they contain within their worship and liturgies have received renewed attention. As a result there is now a clear bias towards churchgoing and active membership of church communities amongst many Christian ethicists. However, with this bias has come a less congruent bias – a bias towards idealised rather than actual church communities. Perhaps this latter bias was inevitable given such a theoretical emphasis upon communities that, in both the past and the present, have often appeared fragile and ambiguous. Yet idealised communities ill fit a virtue ethic whether Christian or secular. The latter primarily requires actual communities to mediate virtues and to shape moral character.

This chapter will set out these claims in detail by taking an overview of the work of Stanley Hauerwas. Amongst Christian ethicists in North America today Hauerwas is outstanding. He has more influence and polarises more opinions than any other Christian ethicist of his generation. Within the discipline, Alasdair MacIntyre and Charles Taylor have both been highly influential as sympathetic philosophers. Yet, especially in North America, it is the work of Hauerwas which is widely read and discussed. In meetings of the American *Society of Christian Ethics* it is now quite usual to find several papers analysing his work, with only occasional references to MacIntyre and Taylor. Even in Britain, as early as 1985 the American James Gustafson was surprised to find so much enthusiasm for his work amongst

theologians from the Church of Scotland, the Church of England and the Roman Catholic Church. At the time he suggested to them that 'some thought be given to possible incongruities between the ecclesiology that is necessary for the sectarian ethics and ecclesiologies of these churches'.[1] Hauerwas' dominance of the discipline is quite remarkable.

This dominance may, however, also be somewhat misleading. At the heart of Hauerwas' recent work there is an ambivalence about whether he is discussing actual or idealised Christian communities and an increasing exaggeration of both Christian distinctiveness and worldly secularity. In a careful and, in part, sympathetic critique of his contribution to Christian ethics, David Fergusson's book in the present series argues for 'a more ambivalent reading of the relationship between church and civil society than is suggested in Hauerwas'.[2] He is finally not convinced that churches are as distinctive as Hauerwas maintains or that all of the inheritance of secular liberalism and the Enlightenment is to be so thoroughly discarded:

It is one thing to recognise the shortcoming and effects of liberalism, however, and another to appear to enter into wholesale condemnation. It is worth recalling in this context that the Enlightenment project did not simply spring from a misconceived epistemological programme but had its historical context in the religious wars of the seventeenth century. Liberalism was thus borne of a desire to establish a civil order which could unite competing religious factions on a moral ground which everyone could assent to independently of particular traditions.[3]

It is not necessary to rehearse the whole of Fergusson's critique of Hauerwas here since my focus is specifically upon churchgoing and Christian ethics. Within this rather narrower focus it is possible to detect changes in Hauerwas' thought over almost quarter of a century. In his earliest work Hauerwas'

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[1] James Gustafson, 'The Sectarian Temptation', *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America*, 40 (1985), p. 84. I am grateful to David A. S. Fergusson's *Community, Liberalism and Christian Ethics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge and New York, 1998, for this reference.

[2] Fergusson, *Community*, p. 78.

[3] *Ibid.* p. 76. For a finely nuanced theological account of liberalism see Robert Song's *Christianity and Liberal Society*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1997.

emphasis is still upon virtue ethics, but its orientation is around individual vision and character. In the middle phase of his work there is a greater emphasis upon churches as the primary communities that are the *loci* of Christian virtues, albeit with some indications that secular communities may sometimes embed these virtues more clearly than actual churches. In his most recent work, churches (idealised if not actual) are seen as the sole repositories of Christian virtues, and Christians are viewed as aliens in an increasingly hostile world.

The earliest phase is seen clearly in Hauerwas' first book *Vision and Virtue*, published in 1974. There he depicts the task of Christian ethics as follows:

Once ethics is focused on the nature and moral determination of the self, vision and virtue again become morally significant categories. We are as we come to see and as that seeing becomes enduring in our intentionality. We do not come to see, however, just by looking but by training our vision through the metaphors and symbols that constitute our central convictions. How we come to see therefore is a function of how we come to be since our seeing necessarily is determined by how our basic images are embodied by the self – i.e., in our character. Christian ethics is the conceptual discipline that analyses and imaginatively tests the images most appropriate to score the Christian life in accordance with the central conviction that the world has been redeemed by the work and person of Christ.[4]

He sets out this understanding of Christian ethics more fully the following year in *Character and the Christian Life*.[5] It already contains some of the enduring features of his thought, as well as some clear elements which he later modifies. Enduring features include an emphasis upon virtue, character and moral training as crucial for Christian ethics rather than upon moral decision-making as such. There is a stress upon the Christian life and the centrality of Christology and Atonement for this life. The concept of moral vision does not altogether disappear in his later work, but it does receive less emphasis. At this stage the influence of Iris Murdoch is openly acknowledged and, indeed, some of her Platonism may be evident in his language. Writing

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[4] Stanley Hauerwas, *Vision and Virtue*, Fides, Notre Dame, Indiana, 1974, p. 2.
[5] Trinity University Press, San Antonio, 1975.

at the time I noted that Hauerwas tended to use philosophy in addition to theology to illuminate his understanding of the task of Christian ethics, but that he might also have used sociology since 'the latter could analyse the images actually used by Christians in their moral lives and suggest ways in which these images are determined or determinative'.[6]

A decade later he recognises that 'though I had stressed the relational character of the self, this is not sufficient to indicate the centrality of a particular community called the church for the development of the kind of character required of Christians'.[7] From this point onwards in his writings he repeatedly makes reference to the church as the Christian community from which individual Christians learn and are shaped by Christian virtues. So at the outset of his important theoretical book *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* he now depicts Christian ethics as follows:

> The justification for calling this book 'social ethics' is that I wish to show why any consideration of the truth of Christian convictions cannot be divorced from the kind of community the church is and should be . . . my primary interest is to challenge the church to regain a sense of the significance of the polity that derives from convictions peculiar to Christians . . . if the church is to serve our liberal society or any society, it is crucial for Christians to regain an appropriate sense of separateness from that society . . . such a 'separateness' may involve nothing more nor less than the Christian community's willingness to provide hospitality for the stranger – particularly when that stranger so often comes in the form of our own children.[8]

With the focus evident here upon the role of the church in Christian ethics, there is also a conviction that church polity should derive from distinctively Christian beliefs. In turn, this suggests that the church should have a sense of 'separateness' from the world. It is precisely this new element of 'separateness' in his thought which soon gave rise to the charge of 'sectarianism', evident in the quotation from Gustafson. David

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[6] See my *Theology and Social Structure*, Mowbrays, Oxford, 1977, p. 117.
[7] From the introduction to the 1985 re-issue of *Character and the Christian Life*, p.xxxi. I am grateful again to David Fergusson (*Community*) for this quotation.
[8] Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic*, University of Notre Dame, Indiana, 1981, pp. 1–2.

Fergusson is not convinced about this charge, pointing out that Hauerwas, unlike a radical sectarian, is still concerned 'to serve our liberal society'.[9] Hauerwas is not, for example, suggesting that the church should simply withdraw wholly from the world as the Exclusive Brethren have done or even denounce the world totally as the Jehovah's Witnesses have done. At this stage 'separateness' seems to require a resolute distinctiveness but not the radical exclusivity of some sects (although, even here, many sociologists have followed Bryan Wilson's influential classification of sects[10] which includes many less radical positions). The fact that Hauerwas continues to write in such areas as medical ethics and to speak to professionals within these areas might support Fergusson. The final chapter will return to some of these issues in more detail.

Nonetheless, the language of 'the stranger' now emerges in his writings, as well as an increasing dichotomy between the church and what he views (and decries) as 'liberal society'. Accompanying this dichotomy is also an ambivalence about whether or not he is talking about the church as it is or the church as it ought to be. Sometimes it does appear to be the former. This allows him to suggest what almost looks like an empirical test of his understanding of Christian ethics. So he writes:

All politics should be judged by the character of the people it produces. The depth and variety of character which a polity sustains is a correlative of the narrative that provides its identity and purpose. The contention and witness of the church is that the story of Jesus provides a flourishing of gifts which other politics cannot know. It does so because Christians have been nourished on the story of a savior who insisted on being nothing else than what he was. By being the son of God he provided us with the confidence that insofar as we become his disciples our particularity and our regard for the particularity of our brothers and sisters in Christ contribute to his Kingdom. Our stories become part of the story of the Kingdom.[11]

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[9] Fergusson, *Community*, pp. 76f. Cf. Oliver O'Donovan, *The Desire of Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996.

[10] E.g. Bryan Wilson, *Religion in Sociological Perspective*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1987, and *The Social Dimension of Sectarianism*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1990.

[11] Hauerwas, *A Community of Character*, p. 51.

Only the words 'insofar as we become his disciples' in this quotation raise doubts. Otherwise this does seem to be a statement about the empirical church. It is this church which carries the Christian narrative which, in turn, can nourish Christians and provide evidence to the world at large of the Christian character. Sociology might well have an important role in assessing the fruits of such nourishing. Yet even here Hauerwas leaves this escape clause. It could just be that an analysis of actual churchgoers would be flawed because some of them had not truly 'become his disciples'.

Herein lies the problem for Hauerwas now. He sees the church as the locus of Christian community, as the bearer of the unique Christian story, and thus as the agent of Christian socialisation. It should, then, be possible for others outside the church to see clearly the fruits of this socialisation. Yet he is aware of the obvious limitations and fragilities of actual church congregations:

But we must admit the church has not been a society of trust and virtue. At most, people identify the church as a place where the young learn 'morals', but the 'morals' often prove to be little more than conventional pieties coupled with a few unintelligible 'don'ts'. Therefore any radical critique of our secular polity requires an equally radical critique of the church.[12]

In *The Peaceable Kingdom*, written two years later, his criticisms of the church as it is are far more trenchant. Here he insists that 'what makes the church the church is its faithful manifestation of the peaceable kingdom in the world . . . the church must never cease from being a community of peace and truth in a world of mendacity and fear'.[13] Given such a high understanding of the church, it is hardly surprising that Hauerwas immediately sees that the empirical church, past or present, can hardly be depicted in such terms. Instead he adds:

The scandal of the disunity of the church is even more painful when we recognize this social task. For we who have been called to be the foretaste of the peaceable kingdom cannot, it seems, maintain unity

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[12] *Ibid.* p. 86.
[13] Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer of Christian Ethics*, University of Notre Dame, Indiana, 1983, and SCM Press, London, 1984, pp. 99–100.

among ourselves . . . And the divisions I speak of in the church are not just those based on doctrine, history, or practices important though they are. No, the deep and most painful divisions afflicting the church are those based on class, race, and nationality that we have sinfully accepted as written into the nature of things.[14]

It would seem from this quotation that the church (as it is) is quite a long way away from the 'peaceable kingdom' which he regards as essential to the church (as it ought to be). He even adds that we may 'find that people who are not Christians manifest God's peace better than ourselves'.[15] Confusingly, though, in terms of virtue ethics it is presumably communities as they are which actually nourish their members. People may, of course, be inspired by depictions of how their particular community ought to be. Yet it is actual, existing communities that are their primary means of socialisation. At one point in *The Peaceable Kingdom* Hauerwas himself seems to recognise this when he argues that 'people in a community must learn to trust one another as well as trust the community itself . . . all communities require a sense of hope in the future and they witness to the necessity of love for sustaining relationships'. He adds that 'there is a profound sense in which the traditional "theological virtue" of faith, hope, and love are "natural"'. He even believes that 'as much as any institution the church is sustained by these "natural virtues"', even though it is not the case that 'what is meant by faith, hope, and love is the same for Christians as for other people'.[16]

Hauerwas again faces an obvious dilemma. The church as it ought to be can enshrine Christian virtues properly, but unfortunately it cannot socialise Christians in the actual world. The church as it is can indeed socialise Christians, but sadly it does not enshrine Christian virtues properly. Of course there could be a church just around the corner which manages to do both . . . but after two thousand years this has yet to happen.

At times Hauerwas is painfully honest. In the introduction to *A Community of Character* he acknowledges that 'perhaps the reason I stress so strongly the significance of the church for social ethics is that I am currently not disciplined by, nor do I

[14] *Ibid.* p. 100.   [15] *Ibid.* p. 101.   [16] *Ibid.* p. 103.

feel the ambiguity of, any concrete church . . . I find I must think and write not only for the church that does exist but for the church that should exist if we were more courageous and faithful.'[17] Two years later in *The Peaceable Kingdom* he makes a point of noting that this issue has been resolved – dedicating the book to his new-found Methodist congregation. Despite this new community, it is difficult to imagine that even it provided him with an adequate empirical basis for his notion of the 'peaceable kingdom'. Methodists have seldom been able to unite behind the sort of radical pacifism espoused by Hauerwas. Even the ideas expressed in some of his medically related books, such as the finely nuanced *Suffering Presence*[18] or *Naming the Silences*,[19] still seem to imply a more alienated church context than Methodism typically provides.

By the time the third phase of his writing is reached it is difficult to avoid David Fergusson's suggestion that:

this church advocated by Hauerwas nowhere exists. It is a fantasy community, the conception of which fails to reflect the ways in which the members of the church are also positioned within civil society. It does not correspond to any visible communities within the *oekumene*.[20]

The publication, with William H. Willimon, of *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony*[21] in 1989 decisively marks the start of this phase. Subsequent publications, including *Against the Nations*,[22] *Dispatches from the Front*[23] and *Where Resident Aliens Live*,[24] have re-enforced it. Characteristic of this phase is an increase in hyperbole in Hauerwas' writing. Even the titles of these books reflect this hyperbole – a feature which is only very occasionally acknowledged by Hauerwas himself.[25]

It is this increase in hyperbole which may tend to polarise other Christian ethicists. It coincided with Hauerwas' move from the Catholic University of Notre Dame to the Methodist Duke University. Perhaps he felt less constrained within this

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[17] Hauerwas, *A Community of Character*, p. 6.
[18] University of Notre Dame, Indiana, 1986, and T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh, 1988.
[19] Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1990.   [20] Fergusson, *Community*, p. 66.
[21] Abingdon, Nashville, 1989.   [22] University of Notre Dame, Indiana, 1992.
[23] Duke University Press, 1995.
[24] Abingdon, Nashville, 1996 (again with William H.Willimon).
[25] E.g. Hauerwas and Willimon, *Resident Aliens*, p. 165.

new environment or perhaps he had fewer colleagues to remind him of continuities between Christian and secular communities (as a natural law approach would suggest). Perhaps his increasing fame encouraged him to heighten his theories. Or perhaps it was a natural, polemical response to the criticism of sectarianism that was gaining currency.[26] Whatever the reason, his theories become increasingly exaggerated and distorted and less subject to any kind of empirical check.

A careful reading of *Resident Aliens* makes this clear. Of course it is written in a more popular format than his other books and it is also co-authored. Nevertheless it accurately represents Hauerwas' views in this third phase. The dichotomy between the church and the world has become sharper, with the church increasingly idealised and the world demonised. Liberal theologians are reminded at length about the liberal accommodation with the Nazis, with strong warnings to 'those who take the same path, hoping to update the church, to recover some of the scandal of Jesus by identifying the church with the newest secular solution: Marxism, Feminism, the Sexual Revolution'.[27] In earlier books Hauerwas praises the work of H. Richard Niebuhr,[28] but now *Resident Aliens* states that 'we have come to believe that few books have been a greater hindrance to an accurate assessment of our situation than *Christ and Culture*'.[29] Pastors are told that 'if we live as a colony of resident aliens within a hostile environment, which, in the most subtle but deadly of ways, corrupts and coopts us as Christians, then the pastor is called to help us gather the resources we need to be the colony of God's righteousness'.[30] The dichotomy is indeed sharp:

Life in the colony is not a settled affair. Subject to constant attacks upon and sedition against its most cherished virtues, always in danger of losing its young, regarded as a threat by an atheistic culture, which in the name of freedom and equality subjugates everyone – the Christian colony can be appreciated by its members as a challenge.[31]

[26] E.g. see the introduction to Hauerwas, *Against the Nations.*
[27] Hauerwas and Willimon, *Resident Aliens*, p. 27.
[28] E.g. in Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom.*
[29] Hauerwas and Willimon, *Resident Aliens*, p. 40.   [30] *Ibid.* pp. 139–40.
[31] *Ibid.* p. 51.

The image of 'resident aliens' was doubtless chosen for its impact and may have been responsible more than anything else for its sales. Yet it is an image which effectively removes the church from reality. Augustine's image of the 'pilgrim' church would have been distinctly less sensational and would have allowed some check against the church as it is. There is a sense in which the church is properly seen as being in this world but not of this world. Pilgrims are clearly still part of this world, yet they have their sight set steadily beyond this world. At certain periods of history pilgrims have even dressed distinctively and travelled to dangerous and distant places, whilst leaving home and work for long periods of time. Even then they have typically relied upon the charity and hospitality of those who are not pilgrims. However 'aliens', whether in the older American form of resident foreigners or in the newer film form of visitors from other galaxies, are radical outsiders. They may take our guise but this is just a veneer, since in reality they are unlike us.

In the chapters that follow it will be seen that such a depiction simply does not match detailed empirical data about church-goers as they are. Even though it will become evident that churchgoers do have distinctive beliefs, values and practices, their distinctiveness is relative not absolute. Many nonchurch-goers share their beliefs, values and practices (apart from churchgoing itself), even though these are found more amongst churchgoers than amongst nonchurchgoers. This detailed empirical evidence helps to settle a theoretical debate which I have outlined elsewhere.[32] There I suggested that three distinct positions have been adopted, within both philosophical and theological discussions, about the status of moral communities in relation to postmodernism. The first is the most radical. It argues that legitimation is only possible within cultural-linguistic communities and that such communities are incapable of mutual communication. Precisely because the independent 'planks' offered by modernism (notably autonomous rational thought and empirical demonstration) have now been deconstructed, moral values or virtues can only be known

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[32] See my *Moral Leadership in a Postmodern Age*, T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh, 1997, pp. 67f.

within specific communities. This seems increasingly to be the position taken by Hauerwas. The second maintains that communities can communicate with each other precisely because individuals in the West today typically belong to more than one community. In his writings since *After Virtue* MacIntyre has sought to trace ways in which communities overlap and in which legitimation may sometimes decline in one at the expense of another. Jonathan Sacks is also an able theological exponent of the moral implications of simultaneously belonging to two communities – in his case those of a pluralist society and a traditional Jewish community.[33] A third response to post-modernism accepts the general position that moral values and virtues are shaped, sustained and carried in communities, but argues that there *are* some moral 'planks' that apply across cultures. It is possible that MacIntyre's own thought is developing in this direction.[34] In chapter nine it will be seen that several contributors to this series also take the third position seriously. Whether the second or third position is finally adopted, the first does seem to run contrary to the churchgoing data that follow.

The combination of hyperbole, an idealised church and a demonised secular culture – all of which feature strongly in the first position – can be found in the writings of a number of theologians influenced by Hauerwas' writing. It is now quite common to hear theologians talking with disdain about 'the Enlightenment project' or about 'liberal culture' and contrasting this with '*the* radical Christian alternative'. Such a perspective received powerful expression in John Milbank's magnum opus *Theology and Social Theory.* Elsewhere again I have criticised this challenging work for its hyperbole.[35] For example, at one point Milbank claims that 'I am going to show how all twentieth-century sociology of religion can be exposed as a

[33] Jonathan Sacks, *The Persistence of Faith*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London, 1992, and *Faith in the Future*, Darton, Longman & Todd, London, 1995.
[34] See his response in John Horton and Susan Mendus (eds.), *After MacIntyre: Critical Perspectives on the Work of Alasdair MacIntyre*, Polity Press, Oxford, and University of Notre Dame, Indiana, 1994.
[35] See my *Christian Ethics in Secular Worlds*, T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh, 1991, and David Martin's *Reflections on Sociology and Theology*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1996.

secular policing of the sublime . . . deconstructed in this fashion, the entire subject evaporates into the pure ether of the secular will-to-power.'[36]

Others have criticised Milbank's *Theology and Social Theory* precisely because the central picture of the church that it presents is idealised and even misleading. So, Rowan Williams recognises the power of Milbank's book whilst regarding its idealisation as less than helpful. For Williams 'the insistence on thinking Christ in inseparable relation with the Church is . . . one of the most important constructive elements of the book', whilst at the same time 'the risk Milbank's exposition runs is, rather paradoxically, of slipping into a picture of history as the battlefield of ideal types'.[37] More specifically, he believes that Milbank's account of the 'peace of the Church' (sharing many similarities with Hauerwas' *The Peaceable Kingdom*) pays too little attention to how this peace is historically and socially constructed.[38]

Aidan Nichols is less gentle in his criticism:

Despite the numerous true judgments, good maxims and beautiful insights to be found scattered through this book, its overall message is deplorable. My objections can be summed up in two words: 'hermeticism' and 'theocracy'. By 'hermeticism' I mean the enclosure of Christian discourse and practice within a wholly separate universe of thought and action, a universe constituted by the prior 'mythos' of Christianity . . . For Milbank there can be no such thing as an intellectual indebtedness of the Church to natural wisdom. Every putative thought of such wisdom as can be named is not extraneous to the Christian *mythos*, and without a role in the dramatic narrative, from Genesis to Apocalypse, in which that *mythos* is expressed. Also, all natural wisdom is legitimately liable to deconstruction . . . Only the Christian *mythos*, the Christian narrative, the Christian (ecclesial) community, can secure the human good – the beautiful pattern of living – which always eludes the secular ruler's grasp. Milbank's social programme is . . . theocratic in that . . . it seeks to restore Christendom

[36] John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1990, p. 106.
[37] Rowan Williams, 'Saving Time: Thoughts on Practice, Patience and Vision', *New Blackfriars*, vol. 73, no. 861, June 1992, pp. 319–26.
[38] See also Duncan Forrester, *Christian Justice and Public Policy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997, p. 244.

. . . Unfortunately Milbank goes too far: in attempting to persuade to the faith of the Great Church it damages it, and not with some light scar but a grave wound.[39]

In his response to these two critics, Milbank agrees that 'between my "formal" or ideal descriptions of the Church (of an "ideal" happening, and "ideal" yet real, if vestigial transmission) and rather minimal attempts at "judicious narrative", there may exist a certain tension'.[40]

This admission raises again the issue of whether the focus in virtue ethics is primarily upon the church and churchgoers as they are or as they should be. For much of the time in both Milbank's *Theology and Social Theory* and in Hauerwas and Willimon's *Resident Aliens* it seems to be upon the latter. Nevertheless there are occasional indications in *Resident Aliens* that virtue theory does require a depiction of churchgoers as they are. Christian 'discipling' of the young, for example, does seem to need the presence of actual, rather than idealised, 'saints':

Christian ethics is, in the Aristotelian sense, an aristocratic ethic. It is not something that comes naturally. It can be learned. We are claiming, then, that a primary way of learning to be disciples is by being in contact with others who are disciples. So an essential role of the church is to put us in contact with those ethical aristocrats who are good at living the Christian faith. One role of any colony is to keep the young very close to the leaders – people who live aright the traditions of home. There is no substitute for living around other Christians.[41]

In line with virtue ethics, *Resident Aliens* recognises that 'all ethics, even non-Christian ethics, makes sense only when embodied in sets of social practices that constitute a community . . . such communities support a sense of right and wrong'.[42] Manifestly these must be actual and not purely idealised communities. Doubtless utopian images do have an important

[39] Aidan Nichols, 'Non Tali Auxilio: John Milbank's Suasion to Orthodoxy', *New Blackfriars*, vol. 73, no. 861, June 1992, pp. 326–32. See also Gregory Baum, *Essays in Critical Theology*, Sheed and Ward, Kansas City, 1994, p. 70, and Ian S. Markham, *Plurality and Christian Ethics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge and New York, 1994, p. 146.
[40] John Milbank, 'Enclaves, or Where is the Church?', *New Blackfriars*, vol. 73, no. 861, June 1992, pp. 341–52.
[41] Hauerwas and Willimon, *Resident Aliens*, p. 102. [42] *Ibid.* p. 79.

correcting and visionary function in many communities,[43] but it is difficult to see how they can act as primary means of socialisation. In *Resident Aliens* there is also a clear recognition that actual communities can be dysfunctional: 'in a world like ours, people will be attracted to communities that promise them an easy way out of loneliness, togetherness based on common tastes, racial or ethnic traits, or mutual self-interest . . . there is then little check on community becoming as tyrannical as the individual ego'. In contrast, Christian community is 'about disciplining our wants and needs in congruence with a true story, which gives us the resources to lead truthful lives'.[44] Both in Christian and in non-Christian contexts here, a process of socialisation seems to be envisaged which involves empirical communities.

Now, of course, there is a proper theological concern with the church as it ought to be. All thoughtful theologians, from the beginning of Christianity, have recognised as much. This is not my point. Rather it is that the specific insight of virtue ethics, which is especially relevant to a study of churchgoing and Christian ethics, is that the moral life is shaped by particular communities despite their actual frailties and ambiguities. Whereas there has been a tendency for moral philosophy to focus upon ethical decision-making as if individuals could act solely on the basis of autonomous reasoning, virtue ethics is more distinctly sociological in character. If MacIntyre has drawn particular attention to virtues as they are carried and nurtured within overlapping communities, Charles Taylor focuses more upon the tradition and community based ante-cedents of apparently autonomous choices. However, both philosophers have, in effect, a strong sense of the sociology of knowledge. Moral notions are socially generated and – even when this is not realised by the participants themselves – rely upon specific communities for their support. Given this under-standing, a sociological examination of specific moral commu-nities becomes possible – unless these communities are so

[43] Cf. Karl Mannheim's classic *Ideology and Utopia*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1936.
[44] Hauerwas and Willimon, *Resident Aliens*, p. 78.

idealised that they bear little relationship to empirical communities. Whereas many moral philosophers are interested in little other than the rational criteria used within ethical decision-making, virtue ethicists such as MacIntyre have an additional interest in social structures. Within virtue ethics, properly understood, the mechanisms of socialisation become at least as important as formal rational criteria.

In part *Resident Aliens* recognises this. For example, a whole chapter is devoted to theological education. In this the authors criticise their fellow theologians for being too preoccupied with their own interests and insufficiently attentive to the realities of church life. At one point they even suggest that different fashions within academic theology may have more to do with keeping up the interests of theologians themselves than with equipping students for parish life and effective ministry. There is nothing new about this particular charge – it could have been levelled just as effectively at Augustine or Aquinas – but it does serve to underline the incongruity of their own focus upon an idealised rather than an actual church.

This incongruity continues in *Where Resident Aliens Live*, the sequel to *Resident Aliens*. At more than one point Hauerwas and Willimon disarmingly admit that mainstream Methodism really does not seem to fit their seemingly 'sectarian' approach to theology and ethics. Hauerwas readily admits that his own approach has been much influenced by the Mennonites through the theology of John Howard Yoder. Nonetheless they write:

One can understand why someone might wonder where we get our ecclesiology. After all, we are both United Methodists, in varying degrees of happiness. Mainstream United Methodism is about as far from some of the views of resident aliens as night is from day. Yet in its stress on sanctification, on the importance of the practical, practiced embodiment of the faith by the laity, we thought that our resident aliens are a very Methodist people.[45]

Behind this admission there is an obvious tension. On the one hand the two authors do not believe in a sectarian withdrawal from the world. They point out that 'the accusation that

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[45] Hauerwas and Willimon, *Where Resident Aliens Live*, p. 22; see also p. 40.

we are ''sectarian'' strikes us as especially strange . . . because both of us work at a large, secular university'.[46] On the other, they are not sure why the term 'sectarian' should be a term of theological abuse at all and argue that it is only certain individuals within mainstream denominations who actually embody the virtues that they believe are distinctively Christian. They provide repeated practical examples of individuals who do embody these virtues, but in doing so they underline their conviction that most denominational Christians, at least for much of the time, do not.

Ironically, one of the many merits of virtue ethics for a theologian is that it does invite us to be more attentive to the specific ways that those involved in Christian communities are in reality shaped by these communities. In places Hauerwas and Willimon do seem to recognise this. For example, they commend Episcopalians for their support of the ideas in *Resident Aliens*:

They are one of the few church families in the North American context who stress ecclesiology and can therefore see that Christian theology begins in ecclesiology, in church practices, not in something called 'Systematic Theology'. Theology begins in church and works its way out, rather than beginning in a university department of religion and dribbling back to the church as the practical application of great thoughts. Most seminary curricula embody this mistake. For example, we teach systematic theology as something that is necessary to do prior to teaching ethics. This presupposes that you have to get your ideas systematized before you talk about practices. As a result, we fail to see that theology itself is a practice in service to the church, which is in service to the world. Resident aliens challenge the presumption that theology is about ideas.[47]

There is an important insight here which I will develop further in the final part of this book. It *is* a feature of much recent Anglican theology[48] that worship is regarded as central

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[46] *Ibid*. p. 29.   [47] *Ibid*. pp. 57–8.

[48] E.g. Stephen Sykes, *The Identity of Christianity: Theologians and the Essence of Christianity from Schleiermacher to Barth*, SPCK, London, 1984; David Ford and Daniel Hardy, *Jubilate: Theology in Praise*, Darton, Longman & Todd, London, 1984 (American title *Praising and Knowing God*, Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1985); and Harmon L. Smith, *Where Two or Three are Gathered Together: Liturgy and the Moral Life*, Pilgrim Press, Cleveland, 1995.

to both theology and ethics. However, for the most part, Anglican theology has tended to be more inclusive than *Resident Aliens* appears to be. The writings of Stephen Sykes exemplify this. In a warning that Hauerwas and Willimon might have heeded, he notes:

The hyperbole at the heart of Christian discipleship occasionally commits itself to an unguarded affirmation of the absolute incommensurability of Jesus' teaching with any previous example of religious teaching. But irrespective of what may be stated about Jesus' own person, in respect of what he taught we are dealing with the relative novelties of a process of religious change. Under no other circumstances could what he said have been intelligible to his contemporaries. Those who have new things to communicate do so by means of modifications of previously held beliefs. The modifications may be slight, or they may be far-reaching; but they can never be total.[49]

The connection between worship, on the one hand, and theology and ethics, on the other, is not unique to Anglicans,[50] but it does seem to be characteristically Anglican. It is also an insight which might encourage theologians to look more attentively at worshipping communities as they actually are and not just as they might in theory be.

Yet perhaps there is a fear amongst theologians that there is no empirical evidence to support claims about the actual distinctiveness of Christian communities. Perhaps they fear that, in practice, churches do not have significant influence upon their members. Citing Milbank with approval, Hauerwas and Willimon mention sociology only to dismiss it. For instance, in what itself looks like an empirical assertion, they claim that 'the American church has suffered under sociological determinism for so long, it is difficult to get the church to believe that our theological convictions could possibly be as determinative of our lives as "sociological reality" '.[51] Or perhaps theologians (including Hauerwas and Willimon at times) fear that churches *do* have an influence but that it is a far from beneficial influence. If they have such fears, it is possible that they may have

[49] *Ibid.* p. 18.
[50] See Geoffrey Wainwright, *Doxology: The Praise of God in Worship, Doctrine and Life: A Systematic Theology*, Clarendon Press, Oxford and New York, 1980.
[51] Hauerwas and Willimon, *Where Resident Aliens Live*, p. 67.

acquired them from sociologists. In the next chapter I will show that there is a long-standing bias amongst sociologists of religion that churchgoing is either without social significance or that it has significance but is dysfunctional. Until recently few sociologists have challenged this bias. In the last few years a few have begun to note new evidence which contradicts it, although even they have seldom spotted earlier data suggesting a radically different picture.[52] A fuller sociological account of churchgoing is long overdue. To this end, later chapters will examine in detail a rich and largely unexplored source of data on churchgoing as it relates to Christian beliefs, values and practices.

All of this depicts the moral significance of churchgoing as it is rather than as it ought to be. It could just be that actual churchgoing is more interesting than some exponents of virtue ethics have allowed. By focusing too quickly upon some idealised church, they may not have allowed us to see clearly the actual patterns of Christian socialisation that have carried Christian faith, values and practice from one generation to another across two millennia. In the circumstances it might be helpful to gain a more accurate picture of churchgoing as it is before deciding what it should be.

[52] A striking, but polemical, exception is Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge, *Religion, Deviance and Social Control*, Routledge, New York and London, 1996.