RESUPPOSITIONS OF CHRISTIAN ETHICS

Those who engage in discussions which attempt to relate ethics and political policy soon learn that they must define terms and clarify concepts if they are to realize their bases for agreement or disagreement. In a recent issue of The Ecumenist, Albert R. Jonsen, S.J., who is now a graduate student of religious ethics at Yale, has attempted to discern and define presuppositions which frequently impede useful discussion among Christians. A substantial portion of his exploration follows. (The Ecumenist: The Paulist Press, 304 W. 58th St., N.Y. 10019)

Any dialogist knows the time, trouble, and patience required before each speaker’s personal presuppositions about “church,” “nature,” “faith” etc., come to light. Similar vocabulary and similar logic often conceal profoundly differing understandings, feelings and points of departure.

Dogmatic theologians have applied immense effort to the task of unearthing such presuppositions. But in ethics they still seem to lie buried beneath the surface of debate. Recent controversies between Catholics and Protestants on nuclear war, birth control, censorship, bomb shelter behavior, etc., give the impression that Christians contribute more discord than common concern about such critical questions. Certainly, our disagreements cannot be the manifestation of disregard for human life, for the sacredness of marriage, for the value of liberty, as one occasionally hears. The Catholic who opposes contraception and the Protestant who advocates it are both profoundly concerned about both the value of human life and the sacredness of marriage. Their disagreement stems rather from the more radical and usually unexpressed presuppositions about how ethics should go about its business. Paul Lehmann’s recent Ethics in a Christian Context (Harper and Row, 1963) makes a substantial contribution to this question.

I would like to attempt to sift out of reading and discussion three presuppositions which often seem to bias the understanding of ethical dialogue. They are here expressed as vast simplifications, in which the breadth, depth and careful nuances of many authors and many schools of thought are sacrificed in order to mark out boldly certain common denominators. Quotations ripped from their contexts, are not intended to express the author’s thought, but to reflect basic views that many thinkers would accept as theses to be developed within their own systems.

A phrase from Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Ethics strikes me as a convenient theme to illuminate the principal differences between Catholic and Protestant ethical presuppositions. “One is distressed,” he writes, “by the failure of reasonable people to perceive either the depths of evil or the depths of the holy.” (Ethics, New York, 1961, p. 4.)

Catholics tend to approach an ethical problem as “reasonable people,” that is, with confidence in the ability of intelligence to delineate the problem and to provide norms for its solution. Thus, philosophical ethics, natural law, conscience and prudence play an extremely important role in Catholic moral theology. Prior to any properly theological examination of an issue, the moral theologian will investigate whether the acts involved are in conformity with rational human nature. The norm of morality, in moral theology as in ethics, is “right reason,” for in the realm of activity as in the realm of being, “grace perfects nature.”

The Protestant is much less confident about reason’s role. It is sometimes said, quite inaccurately, that Protestants reject reason and natural law. And it is true, as Reinhold Niebuhr writes, “Protestant orthodoxy allowed its idea of total depravity . . . to betray it into contempt for the rational contribution to morality.” (Interpretation of Christian Ethics, New York, 1956, p. 185.) However, contemporary Protestant ethics generally allows a place for rules, principles, laws and adequate rational motivation for fulfilling them. Yet, reason and law provide only guiding, pedagogical concepts, not absolute binding principles. Reason only prepares the way for moral decision, which the Christian must make ultimately in terms of the demand of charity, in terms of his neighbor’s need. “All that is less than love,” writes Brunner, “is relative, an indication of love, and as such it is certainly significant, but as such it cannot be fixed in any absolute ‘law’, in any kind of ‘lex naturae’.” (The Divine Imperative, Philadelphia, 1957, p. 89.)

Thus, arguments from natural law which Catholics may consider suasive and morally binding are, at best, advisory and tentative for Protestants. This attitude rests on several convictions. Firstly, reason,
wounded by sin, cannot shed very bright light on moral questions. The hopeless confusion of philosophical ethics is proof of this. Secondly, the so-called natural law is often "natural" only to the culture that proclaims it. Thirdly, reason and law tend to force codes and regulations onto the Christian's free exercise of his liberty in Christ. Finally, the Christian ethic must transcend and judge all natural morality, for it represents the divine judgment which condemns the false righteousness of man and reveals the impotence of human nature. It wrests from man the cry of distress and contrition, "the good I would, that I do not . . . who will deliver me?"

This attitude leads to our second point, expressed in Bonhoeffer's phrase, "the depths of evil." Catholics discuss ethical questions in terms of committing or avoiding sin. Moral theology prefaces its treatise on sin with a careful analysis of "the human act," its elements, determinants and obstacles. Sin is defined primarily as personal, actual sin, "the voluntary transgression of a moral law imposing obligation on the will."

Protestants, mindful of man as simul justus et peccator tend to define sin primarily as a condition of man, an ineradicable state which God's loving mercy alone can overlook and forgive. Man not only sins; he is a sinner, alienated in his whole being from God, yearning both for self-assertion and for righteousness. "Whatever man does is tainted by evil, because evil is entrenched in the very heart of the personality. No moral effort can extricate one from this situation." (Brunner, op. cit., p. 71.)

This sinfulness, of course, does manifest itself by some particular acts of disobedience or breach of moral law. Thus, there can be specific acts that are certainly sinful. Bonhoeffer says, "Even in the midst of the fallen, lost world, it makes a difference in God's sight whether a man observes or violates the order of marriage and whether he acts justly or arbitrarily." (op. cit., p. 97.) Even here, however, the sinfulness of the act is not so much to be found in the nature of the act itself, but rather in its quality of failure to trust God's love or to act out of love.

For example, birth control might be considered sinful not because of the kind of action involved, but because it might imply a failure to trust in God's providential care for one's family. In this conception, then, sin means "the opposite of all Christian love. Means any falling short of disinterested love for neighbor . . . any falling short of the strenuous teachings of Jesus, any falling short of the full definition of obligation contained in 1 Corinthians 13—this is what is meant when Christians speak of man as sinful. If we ought to have 'faith effective through love', then sin means 'pride . . . working through selfishness'. Sin means: anxious self-centeredness. . . ." (Paul Ramsey, Basic Christian Ethics, New York, 1961, p. 290.)

This exalted expression of Christian obligation leads us to the third contrast, the "depths of the holy." If the Protestant is profoundly impressed with man's status as sinner, he is also overawed by the justification which a merciful God bestows upon him and the subsequent response that this demands of him. This response is expressed in language which the Catholic usually reserves for the ascetical life and spiritual perfection rather than for moral questions. Thus, moral theology treats "the precepts" at great length, but defers "the counsels," after brief discussion, to ascetical theology.

Protestant tradition, following Luther's rejection of this distinction, claims that the Christian vocation cannot be restricted or discussed in terms of minimum obligations nor the binding force of law or precepts. Thus, Protestant ethics is greatly concerned with discovering the meaning, force, and extent of the divine command of love. This is the atmosphere of Protestant ethics. "Nothing is good save obedience to the command of God, just because it is obedience. . . . But to be obedient to the Will of God means: love your neighbor! Hence the content of the commandment is not an abstract law, a programme that can be known beforehand and codified, but it means a swift responsiveness to the needs of others and action in accordance with their needs in their particular circumstances . . . it is wholly impossible to conceive of love in terms of rules and regulations." (Brunner, op. cit., p. 59.) Thus, the Christian is faced with nothing less than unconditional demand for obedience in love. Such a demand comes to every Christian, although it is strictly beyond his power to fulfill. This is so because the ethic
of Jesus is both a revelation of human weakness and an indictment of the world, because the Christian must never feel that he achieves any good or "wins" any grace apart from the merciful love of God.

Of course, Catholic moralists realize that they possess a clear mandate for their labors of spelling out the implications of the divine law in the Lord's words, "If thou wilt enter life, keep the commandments . . . thou shalt not kill, thou shalt not commit adultery . . ." They are also aware of his further advice, "If thou wilt be perfect, go sell what thou hast . . . and come, follow me." They know that there is a call beyond the law. But their discipline has become an "ethics of the law" primarily because of its historical development as a practical science for confessors. It has never limited itself to "mere law" in terms of its ideals. The standard moral theology texts, although they may have underestimated the ideals, have always insisted that the Christian be urged to go beyond the minimal limits of the law and be exhorted to live the fuller life of Christian love. In conclusion, we shall summarize the three differing presuppositions that seem to impede clear and unbiased dialogue in Christian ethics:

1. Nature, reason, law are fundamental and obligatory for Catholics; guiding and tentative for Protestants.

2. Catholics tend to discuss sin and guilt in terms of acts; Protestants emphasize sinfulness, a condition, an abiding state.

3. Catholics speak of obligation to keep minimal law; Protestants speak of "obligation" only to the highest command of love.

While these divergences in basic presuppositions are typical of the present state of the dialogue on Christian ethics, there are grounds for the hope that a more constructive atmosphere is emerging. On the one hand, many Protestant thinkers are manifesting a renewed interest in "natural law," and this interest will have the effect of helping Catholic theologians to articulate more clearly and in a more balanced fashion their own convictions on the role of "nature" and reason in man's existential encounter with the religious and ethical challenge. On the other hand, Catholic moralists today are laboring to develop a Christian ethics in which the method and language would more clearly manifest the divine command of love and the personal response that it elicits from the conscience of each Christian. This new interest of each partner in the "specialty" of the other will almost certainly lead to a Christian ethics in which the harmony of the orders of creation and redemption will be more richly manifest.

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