

INTRODUCTION TO THE THEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND OF THE NEW MORALITY

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IN THE United States, in the last few years, a certain trend of Christian ethical thought has had a growing impact, both in theological circles and among the general public. It has been labeled "situationism," "situation ethics," "contextualism," "the new morality," etc. One could characterize it as emphasizing the concrete situation and the one absolute Christian value of love, while de-emphasizing the importance of absolute laws in discerning what a Christian ought to do. But, like any trend, the individual forms it takes with this or that thinker differ greatly. Some forms are merely changes in emphasis and would not be objectionable to Christians of a traditional mold of thought. Others constitute radically new positions and have already become controversial among Christians.

The storm center of the controversy in this country has been the writings of John A. T. Robinson, Bishop of Woolwich, and Joseph Fletcher, who have openly proclaimed a revolution.

But there is no need to prove that revolution is required in morals. It has long since broken out; and it is no "reluctant revolution." The wind of change here is a gale. Our only task is to relate it correctly to the previous [theological] revolution we have described and to try to discern what should be the Christian attitude to it.¹

The thesis that Robinson and Fletcher have nailed up in the market place is that Christian ethics is a radical "ethic of the situation," with nothing prescribed—except love.²

Robinson devotes only a brief chapter to the new morality, but notes that the most consistent statement of it is Fletcher's article in the *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* entitled "The New Look in Christian Ethics."³ In 1966, Prof. Fletcher developed his position at book length

¹ John A. T. Robinson, *Honest to God* (Philadelphia, 1963) p. 105.

² *Ibid.*, p. 116.

³ Oct., 1959, pp. 7-18.

in *Situation Ethics: The New Morality*.⁴ Harvey Cox's *Secular City*, published the year before, illustrates well the new position.⁵ Cox does not propound a general ethical approach, but his approach to sexual morality is situationist. The resultant controversy spread rapidly beyond the ranks of the theologians. Everyone is aware of the spate of scholarly and popular articles and lectures defending and attacking Robinson, Fletcher, and Cox.

Things have quieted down. Last year's scandalous proposal is now calmly discussed at ladies' luncheons (we may be mangling a phrase of Harvey Cox) or may even have passed that stage. What is notable is that there has shown itself, among educated American Catholics, clerical and lay, a grass-roots movement which, without adopting it wholesale, finds much that is valuable in the new ethics. The new Catholic trend is not to reject all ethical absolutes, but does feel that we have reached a state of inflation in the commodity.

John Reed has submitted that a deflation of absolutes took place in official Church teaching some time ago.

For many decades now, natural-law discourse has been conducted, in the teachings of the popes at least, and by the moral theologians, not in terms of absolute, immutable essences or natures, but in terms of order, finality, and relationships in the dynamic operations of life, and the problem has been situated in the determination of the varying applications of a relatively small number of basic principles in a constantly changing environment, rather than in the supposition of a complete and detailed compilation of "laws" already fixed and permanent. The immutability of the natural law is very relative.⁶

But the more recent Catholic movement tends toward further deflation and to question the method itself by which absolute ethical principles

⁴ Joseph Fletcher, *Situation Ethics: The New Morality* (Philadelphia, 1966). Heralding the book was Joseph Fletcher, "Love Is the Only Measure," *Commonweal*, Jan. 14, 1966, pp. 427-32. This is followed by a counterbalancing article of Herbert McCabe, O.P., "The Validity of Absolutes," pp. 432-37, followed by a rejoinder of Fletcher, pp. 437-39, followed by a rejoinder of McCabe, pp. 439-40. A similar prepublication presentation was "Situation Ethics: Between Law and Love," *Time*, Jan. 21, 1966, p. 55. In *Moral Responsibility: Situation Ethics at Work*, published by the Westminster Press in the spring of this year, Fletcher has gathered fourteen lectures and essays of his that amplify his views speculatively and practically. Included are the *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* article and the original *Commonweal* statement.

⁵ Harvey Cox, *The Secular City* (New York, 1965) pp. 192-93, 205-16.

⁶ John J. Reed, S.J., "Natural Law, Theology, and the Church," *THEOLOGICAL STUDIES* 26 (1965) 45.

are reached. Moreover, it is looking for a fundamental Christian ethics, i.e., positive Christian motives and norms, which will make more sense to thinking Catholics today than the established one does.

The trend has not yet found much expression in print, but probably the best philosophical expression of it can be found in the writings of Robert Johann.⁷ Practically all his essays either have this ethical purpose or work out other facets of his larger philosophical synthesis in which the ethics forms an organic part. Thomas Wassmer and John Milhaven have made similar proposals of an ethics that would be less absolutist in content and more contemporary in methodology.⁸ Having the same orientation, but perhaps more decisively worked out, are the positions of two writers from beyond American shores, Francis Simons, Bishop of Indore, and Louis Monden.⁹ Charles Curran, too, has shown appreciation of the new ethical trends, but the candid, negative comment of Paul Lehmann on Fr. Curran's paper illustrates how Catholic thinkers like Curran, for all that they have appropriated from the new trend, are far from a radical, thoroughgoing situationism.¹⁰

⁷ E.g., "The Reasonable Man," *America*, Apr. 13, 1963, p. 497; "Moral Response," *ibid.*, May 25, 1963, p. 761; "Permanence and Change," *ibid.*, Sept. 28, 1963, p. 359; "Way to Freedom," *ibid.*, Nov. 9, 1963, p. 568; "The Person," *ibid.*, May 2, 1964, p. 606; "The New Ideal," *ibid.*, Aug. 1, 1964, p. 111; "The Need of Intellect," *ibid.*, Sept. 5, 1964, p. 234; "Confidence in Life," *ibid.*, Dec. 5, 1964, p. 740; "Nature, Reason and Morality," *ibid.*, Apr. 10, 1965, p. 487; Fr. Johann's response to criticism of the aforementioned article, *ibid.*, May 22, 1965, pp. 766-71. An illuminating and important application of the approach is his paper, "Responsible Parenthood: A Philosophical View," *Proceedings of the Twentieth Annual Meeting* [1965], *Catholic Theological Society of America* (Yonkers, N.Y., 1966) pp. 115-28.

⁸ Thomas A. Wassmer, S.J., "Natural Law and Theology," *Philosophy Today* 9 (1965) 250-57; "Morality and Intrinsic Evil," *Catholic Lawyer* 11 (1965) 180-83, 236. The latter article, in part, continues reflections Fr. Wassmer presented in "A Re-examination of Situation Ethics," *Catholic Lawyer* 5 (1959) 106-12. John G. Milhaven, S.J., "Towards an Epistemology of Ethics," *THEOLOGICAL STUDIES* 27 (1966) 228-41. The article is complemented by the author's "Contraception and the Natural Law: A Recent Study," *THEOLOGICAL STUDIES* 26 (1965) 421-27.

⁹ Francis Simons, "The Catholic Church and the New Morality," *Cross Currents*, Fall 1966, pp. 429-45, an elaboration of the main principle exposed in his Council intervention of Oct. 6, 1965. Louis Monden, S.J., *Sin, Liberty and Law* (New York, 1965) pp. 73-144. Before presenting his own position, Fr. Monden offers (pp. 73-87) a perceptive study of situation ethics as it has developed within Catholicism and of contemporary factors that have influenced the development.

¹⁰ Charles E. Curran, "The Problem of Conscience and the Twentieth-Century Christian," in *Ecumenical Dialogue at Harvard* (Harvard Univ. Press, 1964) pp. 262-73. Prof.

The new Catholic movement has its unity in a certain sympathy and kinship with more radical forms of the new morality as well as in an unmistakable distance.¹¹ But it varies widely within itself. At the moment, if the cliché be permitted, it is struggling to recognize its identity. A major difficulty is the fact that one of its most basic driving forces is precisely Christian faith seeking understanding, while it is not yet a thoroughgoing theological movement. It is true that H. Richard Niebuhr has influenced Johann and that Monden is indebted to Teilhard for Monden's vision of an evolving natural law. It is true that Catholic thinkers who welcome the tendency away from ethical absolutes to empirical rules that hold only for the most part can and do appeal to the *Summa theologiae*, where Thomas Aquinas treats of natural law and moral knowledge.¹² Nevertheless, the new Catholic trend is still philosophical rather than theological. It is primarily an internal critique of prevailing interpretations of natural law, bringing to bear ways of thought of modern philosophers such as Dewey or Heidegger, or, in Aquinas' case, of Aristotle. No thinker in the movement claims to offer an integral moral *theology* or *Christian* ethics. The ethical syntheses that Gérard Gilleman and Bernhard Häring have endeavored to center about Christ and His love have been welcomed by many

Lehmann's comment follows, pp. 274-79. Cf. "Masturbation and Objectively Grave Matter: An Exploratory Discussion," *Proceedings of the Twenty-First Annual Convention* [1966], *Catholic Theological Society of America* (Yonkers, N.Y., 1967) pp. 95-109, where Curran endeavors to apply both contemporary thought and the best insights of the traditional Thomistic teaching and gives his personal conclusion that the act of masturbation is not always objectively grave matter.

¹¹ Restraining influences have possibly been the address of Pope Pius XII to the International Convention of Young Catholic Women, Apr. 28, 1952 (*AAS* 44 [1952] 413-19) and his radio talk on the Right Formation of Conscience in the Young, Mar. 23, 1952 (*AAS* 44 [1952] 270-78), as well as the Instruction of the Holy Office, Feb. 2, 1956 (*AAS* 48 [1956] 144-45). See also, in the same Vol. 48 of *AAS*, references to the subject in two addresses of Pope Pius XII, to the Seventh International Congress of Catholic Physicians, p. 682, and to the Sixth National Congress of the Italian Clergy, pp. 708-9. In condemning "ethica situationis," the Roman documents do not condemn a name, but describe carefully the ethical theory they are condemning. A selection of pertinent Roman texts concerning situation ethics and an interpretation of their meaning are found in John C. Ford, S.J., and Gerald Kelly, S.J., *Contemporary Moral Theology* 1 (Westminster, Md., 1958) 104-40.

¹² E.g., *Sum. theol.* 1-2, q. 91, a. 3; q. 94, aa. 3-5; q. 95, aa. 2 and 4; 2-2, q. 57, a. 2; 2-2, qq. 47-56. Cf. Josef Pieper, *Prudence* (New York, 1959).

Catholic situationists as a pioneering first step, but no more than that.¹³

In this connection, the new morality of Robinson, Fletcher, and Cox draws attention inasmuch as they present their ethical views as arising organically out of a total Christian theology. If the writings in question, brief and aimed at a popular audience, do not offer a carefully grounded and constructed synthesis, they do point back, in so many words, to scholarly theological work. The "new morality" in its popular form reflects discussion that has been going on for some years among Protestant ethicists in the United States. The context of the discussion, in turn, was profoundly influenced by earlier theological developments on the Continent.

The following survey is offered to facilitate an introduction to this theological background of the "new morality." The first part of the survey endeavors to give some general indications as to what the earlier Continental developments were about and how they relate to the Catholic tradition of moral theology. The second part sketches the individual positions of leading Protestant ethicists of recent times in the United States.

ON THE CONTINENT

It is always arbitrary to decide when any intellectual movement begins, or even to decide at what time in the movement the chronicler will begin his account. For the theological movement we are considering, perhaps the least arbitrary point of departure would be the five years following the First World War, when the "dialectical theologians" burst into prominence and began to effect a radical turn of direction in the course of Protestant theology. In 1919 the first edition of Karl Barth's *Der Römerbrief* appeared, the second, significantly altered, in 1922. Emil Brunner hailed the first edition, Rudolf Bultmann the second. In 1921-1922 Brunner, Gogarten, and Thurneysen published theological works of their own. In the fall of 1922 Barth, Gogarten, and Thurneysen founded the review *Zwischen den Zeiten*, and Bultmann and Brunner soon joined them. Martin Buber's *I and*

¹³ Gérard Gilleman, S.J., *The Primacy of Charity in Moral Theology* (Westminster, Md., 1959); Bernhard Häring, C.S.S.R., *The Law of Christ* (Westminster, Md., 1961, 1963, 1966). Fr. Gilleman's book appeared first in French in 1952, Fr. Häring's first volume in German in 1954.

Thou came out in 1923 and soon left its mark on the Protestant theologians. Only later was it seen how close the theological reflections of Paul Tillich, who was also writing at the time, were to theirs.¹⁴

As differences grew among the theologians, the common term "dialectical theology" or "theology of crisis" soon ceased to be applied to the movement. Nevertheless, the development these theologians during their decades of teaching and writing effected in Protestant theology throughout the world possesses an undeniable unity of direction and vision. The following paragraphs aim at intimating some of the inner dynamics of this generalized development—in particular, how the insights of dogmatic theology molded the structure of ethics. The synopsis we will offer would not fit any one of the great theologians in all details, but will hopefully give some general idea of the theological climate in which a new Christian ethics was growing.

The new direction is best understood against the background of the prevailing theology of the time. At the beginning of the twentieth century the Protestant "liberal theologians" were continuing the work of the preceding century, utilizing the ever-advancing sciences to search for the "historical Jesus" and the faith of the first Christians. Like Martin Luther, they wanted to go back to the original gospel, "God's evangel, the New Testament, . . . a good piece of news, a war cry . . . echoed throughout the world by the apostles."¹⁵ The new theology that begins after World War I will only intensify this concern with the original gospel, recorded in the Bible. It is no coincidence that in 1921 Rudolf Bultmann published his *Geschichte der synoptischen Tradition*, which, with parallel studies of K. L. Schmidt and Dibelius, ushered in the era of biblical Form Criticism.

¹⁴ The first systematic synthesis of the new theology in the sphere of ethics was Emil Brunner's *Das Gebot und die Ordnungen* in 1932. The book has become recognized as the epoch-making turn into the new Christian ethics. The title of the English translation, *The Divine Imperative* (London, 1937), as Brunner has pointed out, does not do as much justice to his theme as the German title. Karl Barth's ethics is typically intertwined in his *Church Dogmatics*, beginning with principles of general ethics in 2/1 (*The Doctrine of God* [1940]; English translation: London, 1957). Paul Tillich has gathered essays on morality dating back to 1941 in *Morality and Beyond* (New York, 1963). Writings by Bultmann pertaining to ethical analysis are spread throughout his work. A selective list is given by Thomas C. Oden, *Radical Obedience: The Ethics of Rudolf Bultmann* (Philadelphia, 1964) pp. 171-73.

¹⁵ "Preface" to the *New Testament*, from *Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings*, edited by John Dillenberger (Garden City, N.Y., 1961) p. 15.

But for all their historical inquiry into the sources, the liberal theologians tended to interpret "the essence of Christianity" in the light of contemporary philosophy such as the Hegelian. In a sense the new theologians of the twenties will do this, too, they from an existentialist viewpoint. However, the philosophical orientation of the liberal theologians led them, unlike Martin Luther before them and the dialectical theologians after them, to see the essence of Christianity, the significance of the original gospel, as something human, as simply a summit of human thought and experience, from which other human thought and experience differs only in degree. Schleiermacher had centered Christian faith about a recognizable kind of human experience it provided. The Tübingen school saw Christianity as the fully-developed self-consciousness of human reason. In his Berlin lectures of 1899-1900 on *Das Wesen des Christentums*, Adolf von Harnack epitomized the message of Jesus as the revelation of God's fatherly love for each soul and the command of a higher morality based on love. For the liberal theologians, in one way or another, authentic Christianity was a religion and morality that fitted into the order of man's natural experience.

As Weiss and Schweitzer convincingly argued around the turn of the century, Jesus was proclaiming a historical event that downgraded and relativized all the humanistic values of the world. He was announcing the temporally imminent coming of God's kingdom. The ethics Jesus preached was an "interim ethics," one that scorned the values of this world and summoned men to spend the brief time of waiting in ascetical service of God and each other. The theology that begins after World War I, though differing essentially from that of Weiss and Schweitzer, will retain the eschatological texture of the gospel and, therefore, of Christian ethics. Fifty years after Schweitzer made his point, Helmut Thielicke, the Lutheran situationist, would write at the beginning of his monumental *Theologische Ethik*: "Theological ethics is eschatological or it is nothing."¹⁶

For the dialectical theologians, reacting violently against liberal Protestant theology, the Word that God has freely chosen to utter breaks into human history and says "No" to even the best that is

¹⁶ *Theological Ethics 1: Foundations* (Philadelphia, 1966; the first edition of the first volume appeared in German in 1951) p. 47.

going on in the world. The Word was not that man's world would come to an end in a short number of years. The Word was and is that God's world is in the process of replacing man's and that this "irresolvable tension" now characterizes human history. The tension between God and man is double. The things of man, taken by themselves, might seem to have a certain value; confronted by the completely other God, they are seen to have, at best, a purely relative value. What is more, God confronts them now as man's Judge and Saviour. As such, He reveals the sinfulness of man, a sinfulness which the dialectical theologians with the original Reformers saw as pervading all that is human. As sin, of course, they were not thinking so much of deliberate acts as the way in which man's selfishness, ignorance, weakness—or, if you will, his *mauvaise foi*, *Angst*, inauthentic existence—characterized the human condition everywhere. This is true even of the Christian: the kingdom of God is not yet here in its proper reality, and he is *simul iustus et peccator*.¹⁷ The two poles of the Christian gospel, the complete transcendence of God and the complete sinfulness of man, dominate the new theology and, as a result, its ethics.

The Catholic moralist may find the formulae foreign but derive some light from their application in practice. Are not the difficult problems of the Catholic moralist and the Protestant ethicist basically the same? What to do when all practical alternatives are in part bad and in part good. Few men would deny, for example, that killing a human being is always bad and that nevertheless killing a human being is sometimes necessary. The Catholic moralist may justify the killing as "indirect" or by invoking a forfeiture of right to life or a special right of the state in regard to criminals. If the moral principles involved are "immutable," is it still not true that they apply only to man's fallen, sinful state and are adapted to it? Presumably self-defense, war, and capital punishment will not be necessary in the final kingdom. Might not the Catholic enrich his moral theology by bringing out that it, too, is an interim ethic?

The impact of the new theology on ethics was far from being purely negative. It did bring out the qualitatively infinite superiority of God

¹⁷ For the truth which the phrase can have for the Catholic, see Rahner-Vorgrimler, *Theological Dictionary* (New York, 1965), or *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche, s.v.*, or Karl Rahner, "Gerecht und Sünder zugleich," *Geist und Leben* 36 (1963) 434-43.

over man. It did bring out the pervasive sinfulness of the human condition, which brings it about that all man's ethical decisions have some evil in them. But the new theology brought out even more the positive transformation God's free Word worked, if freely accepted by man. True, sinful man, living in a sinful world, is radically cut off from God. He cannot comprehend or experience God's Word. It is not reducible to the categories of his thought and experience. But he can freely choose to believe. What he believes is that God has spoken to him in Jesus Christ the free, sovereign Word of forgiving love. For the dialectical theologians, as for Martin Luther, it is this free faith, transcending the purely human, that alone enables a man to be truly a man, to be himself, to exist authentically.

The Catholic may object that even the unredeemed sinner is still essentially human. The Catholic is thinking of the ontological dynamism, the subconscious nature, that makes a man. The Protestant theologian, with the vision of modern man, is focusing on man's conscious experiences and choices. Man was made to be with God. Until he turns to Christ, he is not with God on the conscious level. Hence he is not himself, not truly a man, not living authentically. Without minimizing certain disagreement, the Catholic, who sees man as simply a drive towards his final end, as "capax Dei" and "cor inquietum," can find something acceptable and illuminating in this Protestant approach to ethics.

But the next step raises more serious difficulties. Following Søren Kierkegaard and, more distantly, Pascal and Augustine, the new Protestant theologians deny man any capacity to love until he find God again, until he receive the graciousness of Christ. Using existentialist analysis, they depict man's alienation from his fellow men and trace it back theologically to his alienation from God. Only his acceptance of God's word that He now has accepted him and loves him gives man the security and confidence and light to accept and love his fellow man and himself. The loving "Thou!" of God to him, which he hears only through faith, inspires and empowers him to be an "I" saying "Thou!" to others. Personal love is, in fact, as the documents of the gospel testify, God's primary command to him. The primacy of love in ethics, the uniqueness of interpersonal relationship, the grounding of all this in the Good News of Christ's love, have already influ-

enced Catholic moral theology to good effect and will hopefully continue to do so. But can the Catholic adopt an attitude of love which sees no intrinsic value in man to respond to, but only the divine graciousness to imitate? Moreover, is the radical distinction that Protestant theology seems to make between the humanness and lovingness of the believer and the lack of the same in the nonbeliever verifiable in psychological experience and observation?

At the basis of this Protestant ethics, therefore, lies not a fixed nature but a historical happening, a meeting between God and me, a free address of God and a free reply of mine. Surprisingly, one consequence of the ethical basis has been to draw the Protestant ethicists closer to the Catholic natural-law tradition. For God's command to love is seen as calling the Christian into the human world to serve the Thou's he meets. It calls him to work, in the particular human situation he is in, with God's creative and redemptive activity there. He responds with love to each human "Thou" because he is responding to the divine "Thou," acting in the very uniqueness of the situation out of love for the man there.

But the Christian must know what God is doing in the situation in order to respond to and imitate His activity. The Word of God taken in isolation from the situation does not tell him. It tells him that God, creating and preserving, must be willing that the situation be. It tells him that God in redemptive love must be willing that each person in the situation believe in Him and grow in peace and love for God, his neighbor, and himself. But how in this particular, complex, confused situation? Does God will, for example, that I remain married to my present wife? The Protestant ethicists are near the Catholic tradition in posing the problem of concrete ethical cases.

Moreover, it follows from the above problematic that I must come to understand the situation I am in and that this requires human experience and reflection on what makes up the situation as well as requiring the light of faith. It seems to the Catholic observer that all the theologians of the orientation under discussion draw this conclusion explicitly or implicitly. I need to understand the concrete situation in its human, worldly make-up before I can divine God's concrete Word to me, God's redemptive will here and now, or—just as accurately—what action of mine will best serve love. A first fact, admitted

by most, if not all, of these theologians is that any situation I enter is structured by certain laws or patterns that mold many such situations. Theologians like Emil Brunner or, later, Helmut Thielicke invoke here Luther's "orders of creation." Despite the sinfulness of the world, there are certain general forces that at least can be utilized for good. The data of human experience illumined by Christian faith reveal this.

The meaning of the divine order of creation in marriage is this: it is life in community of two persons of different sexes, a community which is complete, based upon the natural foundation of sex love, but only fulfilled in the recognition of the fact that by divine appointment they belong to each other; through whose created distinctiveness the Creator maintains the human race, and through which the sex nature of man, which is disposed for community, can and should realize its personal character.¹⁸

The "orders" or structures in a situation can be less basic than that of marriage: the democratic form of my country's government or even a particular law, the draft law. Imperfect and sinful though they all may be, God's loving will wills them and works through them. It is for me to respect and respond to them.

But though the Christian finds in faith God's presence in his human world and its structures, still—here other elements of dogmatic theology make themselves felt—He is still present as the completely sovereign Other, touching the human at an indivisible point as the tangent touches the circle, transcending completely the human structures He Himself preserves. If in a given situation the structures do not serve His command to love, then the structures are to be bypassed.

It is conceivable that a case might arise in which, in order to obey the Divine Command, one might have to act "against the law." Such a case, for instance, would occur if the dissolution of a marriage had become a duty. This possibility does not exist for a legalistic casuistic ethic; to those who hold such views the question of divorce is regarded as settled in the sense that it can never be right to dissolve a marriage, under any circumstances whatever; it could *never* be commanded by God. For on this view the law is the highest court of appeal. It does not know that the knowledge of the commandment of love—and this means the knowledge of grace—in a concrete case, within the sinful reality, is able to break through what is required in a general way in the law formulated as a universal rule—for instance in the order of creation or the idea of marriage.¹⁹

¹⁸ Brunner, *The Divine Imperative*, p. 350.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 354.

Indeed, His command to love may, in the light of historical process, demand a total scrapping of some present structures and refashioning of new ones. This relativity of every human structure in the face of divine love is all the greater in that it, like everything human, is penetrated by sin, by man's blindness, prejudices, egotism, superficiality, etc.

The Catholic can agree, as Thomas Aquinas explicitly did, that the sovereign God transcends moral laws concerning marriage and can permit polygamy or divorce, just as He permitted, or rather commanded, Abraham to take the life of his son.²⁰ One of the most basic issues between the traditional Catholic morality and the new Protestant ethics seems to be a factual question: In commanding man to imitate His love, has God also delegated to man all discernment and choice of means or has He reserved certain means (e.g., direct killing of an innocent) to Himself? A dialogue on this crucial point of difference might be valuable if only in encouraging both sides to reflect more searchingly on the reasons for their own positions.

SITUATION ETHICS IN AMERICA

In 1962 Paul Tillich wrote:

One day several years ago, Emil Brunner was sitting in my apartment in New York and agreed happily and gratefully when I said, "It seems to me that in spite of the many divergences which exist between you and Barth and Bultmann and Niebuhr and myself, a kind of common ground in theology has developed in our generation."

It is significant that the one American theologian Tillich named, Reinhold Niebuhr, holds the dominant place in Protestant ethics in the United States. Though he would not formally be classified among the proponents of situation ethics, his thought has centrally shaped the intellectual climate in which such ethical theories have emerged. Niebuhr's impact on the American scene has been continuous since the appearance of *Moral Man and Immoral Society*²¹ in 1932, the same year as the publication of Emil Brunner's *The Divine Imperative*. In

²⁰ Instructive for understanding Aquinas' conception of natural law are the reasons he gives why God can permit or command a man to do what would be immoral for the man to do on his own authority: e.g., *Sum. theol.* 1-2, q. 94, a. 5, ad 2m; q. 100, a. 8, ad 3m; 2-2, q. 154, a. 2, ad 2m; *In 3 sent.*, d. 33, q. 2, a. 1; d. 37, a. 4, ad 3m.

²¹ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (New York, 1932).

this work Niebuhr strongly attacks the moral utopianism of the liberal theology and certain social theorists. Though upholding a love-ethic as the highest ideal of individual and social morality, Niebuhr scored the false hopes of those who anticipated a proximate historical achievement of perfect love and order. The selfishness and insensitivity of large social groups will always compromise love in dealings with other groups. Thus Niebuhr sees love as an "impossible possibility," but insists that all human actions seek to approximate this ideal of perfect love. The career of Reinhold Niebuhr has been marked by his continuous effort to illustrate pragmatically the possibilities of love in political and economic contexts. The realism of his "applied Christianity" has become characteristic of Protestant ethics in America.

A biblical faith has always been the wellspring of Niebuhr's ethical considerations, as it has been for his Protestant contemporaries on the Continent. He finds the law of love as the primary witness of the Scriptures. In his earlier writings Niebuhr discovers this appeal to love primarily in the teachings of Jesus. But his more mature thought, marked by the publication of his Gifford Lectures on *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, points to Christ's sacrificial death on the cross as the pre-eminent foundation of Christian love.

The same Christ who is accepted by faith as the revelation of the character of God is also regarded as the revelation of the true character of man. Christ has this two-fold significance because love has this double significance. "God is love," which is to say that the ultimate reality upon which the created world depends and by which it is judged is not an "unmoved mover" or an undifferentiated eternity, but the vital and creative source of life and of the harmony of life with life. But the essence of human nature is also love, which is to say that for man, who is involved in the unities and harmonies of nature but who also transcends them in his freedom, there can be no principle of harmony short of the love in which free personality is united in freedom with other persons. But the coerced unities of nature and the highly relative forms of social cohesion established by historic "laws" are inadequate as final norms of human freedom. The only adequate norm is the historic incarnation of a perfect love which actually transcends history, and can appear in it only to be crucified.²²

The perfection of human love must be found in *agape*, whose quality of sacrificial self-giving is the norm toward which mutuality in love and the calculations of justice must tend. Clearly, Niebuhr's emphasis

²² Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (2 vols.; New York, 1941, 1943) pp. 146-47.

on the primacy of love and his modification of the "social gospel" has affinities with the new theology arising at the time on the Continent as well as with the later appearance of situation ethics in the United States. Another point of contact lies in his important consideration of human sinfulness and justification by faith. He saw that egoistic selfishness is a disposition infecting all men's acts, even fundamentally virtuous acts. By faith in God's forgiveness, however, the individual trusts that his acts are accepted by God, even with their imperfections. This traditional Protestant concept of the Christian as *simul justus et peccator*, which Niebuhr studies anew in Emil Brunner's *Man in Revolt*, is a pervasive factor in situationism. Since every human act is ambiguous, necessarily involving some disvalues in its performance, moral choice must embrace the action that achieves the most appropriate balance of values.

In the actual determination of moral choice, Niebuhr was concerned to avoid both relativistic nihilism and rationalistic legalism. The fundamental barrier to nihilism is the law of love. Yet Niebuhr also affirmed in man a natural structure of personality that expressed the basic human drives and processes. These natural determinations exist in a dialectical relationship to human freedom. Freedom for Niebuhr is self-transcendence, in virtue of which the individual assumes a conscious stance toward his environment, other selves, and even the determinations of his own nature. Every man, every epoch, must achieve an apt, yet contingent unity in tension of nature and spirit, necessity and freedom. In virtue of the self-transcendence of his freedom, the individual must pursue the indeterminate possibilities of love beyond the determined requirements of nature.

These points of indeterminacy in the law of love correspond to the indeterminate character of human freedom. In so far as man has a determinate structure, it is possible to state the "essential nature" of human existence to which his actions ought to conform and which they should fulfill. But in so far as he has the freedom to transcend structure, standing beyond himself and beyond every particular social situation, every law is subject to indeterminate possibilities which finally exceed the limits of any specific definition of what he "ought" to do.²³

²³ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Christian Realism and Political Problems* (New York, 1953) p. 154. See also his *Faith and History* (New York, 1949) esp. chap. 11.

Thus Niebuhr assigns to freedom the task of determining anew for novel political and cultural contexts the general norms whereby the law of love can decide realistic goals for individual and social programs. He has been frequently critical of the Catholic natural-law theory for its rigid inflexibility. In Niebuhr's eyes the natural-law tradition has ignored the transcendence of freedom in transmuting the determined structures of nature in virtue of its own indeterminate possibilities. Moreover, he accuses Catholic moral teaching of lacking a true sense of history, so that it has been blinded to the historically-conditioned quality of its natural-law formulations. It should be noted, however, that Niebuhr does grant a moral wisdom that is available to all men independently of revelation. He has openly rejected the view of Karl Barth that all moral norms are derived from Scripture. Thus has the thought of Reinhold Niebuhr introduced the scene where the divergent forms of situation ethics now appear.

Paul Lehmann

Paul Lehmann has been a major force within the development of situation ethics in America since the appearance of his essay "The Foundation and Pattern of Christian Behavior" in 1953.²⁴ Ten years later his thought received its first full-length presentation with the publication of *Ethics in a Christian Context*.²⁵ Lehmann proposes an ethic which finds its point of departure in the present fact of the *koinonia*, the fellowship of those who believe in Christ as God and His continuing work. Thus the context of all moral discussion and decision is the Christian Church.

We have been urging that Christian thinking about ethics starts with and from within the Christian *koinonia*. In the *koinonia* it makes sense to talk about the will of God as the answer to the question: What am I, as a believer in Jesus Christ and as a member of his Church, to do? For it is in the *koinonia* that one comes in sight of and finds oneself involved in what God is doing in the world.²⁶

Lehmann affirms that the Scriptures provide the community of believers with their basic vision of reality. He fears a false absolutization

²⁴ In John A. Hutchison, ed., *Christian Faith and Social Action* (New York, 1953) pp. 93-116.

²⁵ Paul Lehmann, *Ethics in a Christian Context* (New York, 1963). ²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 124.

of the Scriptures, and finds in the living reality of the Church the present key to the interpretation of the Scriptures. Yet with this perspective from within the *koinonia*, it is to Christ in His historical revelation that the Christian looks for fundamental moral guidance. It is through Christ that God established the Church as the instrument of His dynamic purposes, and Christ continues to use the Church as a privileged vehicle for these goals. Lehmann finds in the scriptural revelation a Trinitarian economy of salvation in which God became man in Christ to perform the functions of the Messiah as prophet, priest, and king. It is especially the kingly role of Christ that Lehmann finds significant, and this "political" activity of Christ in the world today is crucial for Christian ethics.

The "political" activity of Christ the Messiah must be understood in the Aristotelian sense of the *polis*, the society of men, idealized in the Greek city-state, where human life achieves its fulfilment through free association. The activity of God in the world through Christ is to achieve the perfection of the *koinonia*, the fellowship-creating community. God is continually doing in the world what is necessary to make life human. To be human is to be mature, and consequently, Lehmann affirms, Christian ethics aims at maturity, not morality. The vision offered is that of God present in human affairs and so structuring and guiding their outcome that a gradual advance is made toward community in fellowship among all men. The dynamics of Christ's political activity are a present factor in every man's life and should form the reality of all ethical decision. The Christian is one who is aware of what God is doing in the world and seeks to merge his own action with the humanizing activity of Christ. Surrounded and pervaded by this divine task and its energies, a pressure is exerted on the Christian to abandon neutrality and commit himself to the true reality of his situation. Hence Lehmann speaks, as other Protestant moralists have done, of a moral indicative.

For example, the ethical question—in the *koinonia*—is not 'What *ought* I to do?' but 'What *am* I to do?' because in the *koinonia* one is always fundamentally in an *indicative* rather than in an *imperative* situation. There is, of course, also an imperative pressure exerted by an indicative situation. The 'ought' factor cannot be ignored in ethical theory. But the 'ought' factor is not the primary ethical reality. The primary ethical reality is the human factor, the *human* indicative, in every situation in-

volving the interrelationships and the decisions of men. In the *koinonia* something is already going on, namely, what God is doing in the situation out of which the ethical question and concern arise to fashion circumstance and behavior according to his will.²⁷

The moral predicament of man is to continually determine the locus of God's humanizing of the world and enter appropriately into its currents. The maturity which is the goal of this humanization is the achievement of personality through self-giving. The individual grows into Christian maturity by joining with God to form a world where the conditions of such maturity are present to all men. The work of the Christian *koinonia* is the work of love. The question now bears on how the demands of love can be translated into choice.

Paul Lehmann represents an extreme position among new-morality thinkers in his almost total distrust of the application of principles to moral choice. In fact, his polemic against the legalistic moral systems of the past seems to go beyond what consistency with his own positive view would permit. His basic contention is that all previous ethical doctrines failed to close the gap between the ethical claim and the ethical act, due to their reliance on moral principles. It is only a *koinonia* ethic that realizes the primacy of God's activity in the concrete present in informing and validating moral decision.

The complexity of the actual human situation, with which a *koinonia* ethic tries seriously to deal, is always compounded of an intricate network of circumstance and human interrelationships bracketed by the dynamics of God's political activity on the one hand and God's forgiveness on the other. It is always in such a context that the Christian undertakes to determine what he is to do in the world.²⁸

Within the broad context of the Christian *koinonia* and the specific context of the milieu of decision, the Christian must always determine anew what the immediate dynamics of God's humanizing activity require. A choice determined by moral principles isolates the individual from the true concreteness of his God-directed reality. A second factor that influences Lehmann's attack on the use of moral principles is his judgment that principled morality creates a false sense of righteousness. To judge an action right by measuring it with a human standard grants man a power of moral efficacy that he does not possess. Every

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 131.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 141.

human action will always fail of itself. It is the complementary activity of God and God's forgiveness of the human imperfection that alone renders a human act moral. For Lehmann, an ethics of principles substitutes pride and hypocrisy for this humble acceptance of God's power.

The will of God must be sought, therefore, in the present moment. This demands of the Christian an imaginative perception of the present form of God's activity. Such sensitivity to God's "politics" is made possible by the Holy Spirit, who proceeds from both the Father and the Son, from creation and history. The rule of conscience becomes, not autonomy or heteronomy, but theonomy.

The *theonomous* conscience is the conscience immediately sensitive to the freedom of God to do in the always changing human situation what his humanizing aims and purposes require. The *theonomous* conscience is governed and directed by the freedom of God alone.²⁹

Thus God is working within the world situation and within the conscience of the Christian to reveal the patterns that choice should follow. Lehmann accepts as his own the insistence of Karl Barth that all knowledge of man must flow from Christology. The politics of God, first revealed in the Scriptures and newly revealed in the progress of history, is the sole norm of human behavior. And it is the Christian within the fellowship of the *koinonia* who is attuned to its lessons. Once the individual trusts that God accepts and makes up for the defects in personal action, the conscience is liberated from negativity into vital, flexible engagement.

Joseph Sittler

A Christian ethics in the indicative mode, similar to that of Lehmann, is proposed by the Lutheran theologian Joseph Sittler.³⁰ He finds in the Scriptures a revelation, not of morality, but of the divinely-directed reality in which the Christian must act. According to Sittler, the language of Christian ethics must be the language of organic relatedness found in the Bible. The Scriptures reveal man in an organic continuity with God, other persons, and the environment of nature and event that forms human life. God has acted in creation and redemption to establish and renew this pattern of relationships, and

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 358.

³⁰ Joseph Sittler, *The Structure of Christian Ethics* (Baton Rouge, La., 1958).

remains dynamically active in the structuring of human life by His work of sanctification. This divine-human reality is illuminated in Scripture not by propositional statements but by a narration of the dramatic acts of God. The Old Testament recites the story of man's alienation from God in the conflict of man-will and God-will, and the continual will-to-restoration by which God acts to re-establish man's obedient relationship with Him. The triumph of this restoration is the mortal involvement of God in the life and death of Christ. In the self-giving of Christ, all that operates to separate man from God has been graciously overcome.

According to Sittler's understanding, God's action in Christ was not a once-for-all historical fact, but a continuing deed that extends its influence into the expanding present. The Incarnation has made available a new context for acting in the world, a new center for Christian life. The appeal and foundation of Christian activity is the prior action of God. I love because I am loved. Thus Sittler bases Christian ethics on what he calls "the shape of the engendering deed."

The term *engendering* is used to assert that the organic relationship between God and man structured into existence in creation, incarnated into absolute involvement in redemption, persists and inwardly determines the realm of sanctification, that is, the field of Christian ethics. God's deed does not simply call, or present a pattern in front of, or evoke, or demonstrate. It *engenders*, that is, it brings into existence lives bred by its originative character. Only terms which denote a quasi-biological-organic relationship are adequate to elaborate in terms of ethics what is declared of the reality of the Christian God in his work for man's situation.²¹

Thus the shape of God's action in Christ accomplishes a shape in the life of the believer. This shape of grace is the nuclear matrix within which the life of the Christian and the faithful community unfolds. The Christian re-enacts the form of the deeds of Christ, which is an obedient God-relationship in service to God's kingly rule.

Sittler is quite insistent that faith is the most comprehensive term for the God-relationship of the believer. He criticizes those proponents of a love-ethic, naming Reinhold Niebuhr explicitly, who subordinate all elements of the Christian life to love. According to Sittler, love is never commanded for its own sake. The total personality of the Christian is invaded by the Christ-life. Faith designates a human life utterly

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

determined by the God-relationship. Faith is a totality response, doing God's will in continuity of obedience.

For only faith is a large enough term to point to the total commitment of the whole person which is required by the character of the revelation. The very strangeness of the deed of a God who in concrete Incarnation in the earth-scene of man's death and lovelessness dies death out of its ancient dominion, and loves love into the supreme activity of God—this very strangeness evokes as adequate to itself nothing less than a totality response which is called faith.³²

However, the will of God is love, and love is the task of faith in the world. Faithful love must obey Christ in His identification with human need. Faith active in love conforms to the sensitive style of Christ in perceiving the fluctuating, novel emergents of human life. The content of love is disclosed to the believer in his own obedience to it.

For Sittler, the introduction of redemptive love into the matrix of historical events is not a general program given in advance. He repudiates moral principles in favor of a vital pattern of response. The teachings of Jesus are not a legislation of love, but paradigms of love. His words and deeds reveal a relational and living style, open to the hidden demands of human need. The content of Christian ethics is disclosed in ever-new, ever-fresh ways. Sittler offers little systematic guidance in the formation of Christian decision except to state that such ethical choice is generated between the two poles of faith and the facts of life.³³ Faith penetrates the world of facts with creative sensitivity, exposing there the exigencies and opportunities of love. Since the needs of men are shaped by the collectivities in which they are involved, it is through these same structures that the Christian must work to achieve the requirements of justice. Recalling a Protestant emphasis indicated earlier, Sittler sees that ethical decision can never be wholly liberated from man's creaturely, sinful situation. In the heartbreaking choices where disvalue is grasped along with love, it is only love working in faith that frees us from despair.

H. Richard Niebuhr

To a degree paralleled only by Paul Lehmann, the predominant American development of situation ethics has occurred in the thought

³² *Ibid.*, p. 46.

³³ See *ibid.*, pp. 74 ff.

of H. Richard Niebuhr, the brother of Reinhold. Prior to his death in July, 1962, he exerted considerable influence on the theological scene, partially through his writings, but more importantly through the generations of students he taught at the Yale Divinity School. Yet it was only with the posthumous publication of *The Responsible Self* that a systematic development of his ethical accomplishment appeared in print.³⁴ As one enters the thought of H. Richard Niebuhr, he finds himself in a climate of reflection different from that of Lehmann and Sittler. Deeply impressed with the variety and values of the great world-religions through his study of Ernst Troeltsch, Niebuhr rejects an explicit theological point of departure for Christian ethics. In fact, he severely criticizes the "Biblicism" of Karl Barth that seeks to derive knowledge of man solely from revealed affirmations about God. The subtitle of *The Responsible Self*, "An Essay in Christian Moral Philosophy," is significant in this regard. Niebuhr proposes a method that is philosophical in the Socratic tradition of seeking self-knowledge. His starting point is, in fact, a phenomenology of moral experience with the added qualification that it is the moral experience of a Christian.

I use the term, philosophy, in the quite nontechnical though widely accepted meaning of love of wisdom or understanding and want to say by my subtitle simply that these are the reflections of a Christian who is seeking to understand the mode of his existence and that of his fellow beings as human agents.

The point of view is that of a Christian believer; the object to be understood is man's moral life, the method is philosophical in this broad sense defined.³⁵

Niebuhr attempts to uncover the basic structure of all human action in the world. The key metaphor which, he suggests, can best fulfil this description is that of man the responder, *homo dialogicus*, rather than the traditional metaphors of man the artisan (subject to an ideal) or man the citizen (subject to a law).

In his analysis of the phenomenon of responsibility, Niebuhr first points out that a human response is always an interpreted response, an intelligent reaction to a question posed by experience, rather than a spontaneous reflex. Moreover, this response has the quality of

³⁴ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self* (New York, 1963). For a significant and stimulating presentation of his earlier thought, see the concluding chapter of his book *Christ and Culture* (New York, 1951).

³⁵ *The Responsible Self*, p. 42.

accountability; it anticipates a reaction from that sector of experience to which it is directed, an answer to its answer. The individual is significantly formed in the present mode of his response by a complex history extending through his life and the life of civilization. The present response, in turn, even now projects into the future by its prediction of the effects it will solicit. A final essential component in a phenomenology of responsibility is social solidarity. Here Niebuhr admits a profound influence of the social psychology of G. H. Mead. The entire context of responsibility is shaped by community. The individual comes to understand and deal with material reality only in a triadic relation that binds him to other persons. More importantly, man's crucial choices seek to achieve a more satisfactory participation in his relations with other persons. In dependence on Josiah Royce's philosophy of loyalty, Niebuhr discovers that the individual always acts as the member of a community. The ethos of society is always present in conscience as a judge of response. From these various elements Niebuhr can summarize the essence of responsibility as follows:

The idea or pattern of responsibility, then, may summarily and abstractly be defined as the idea of an agent's action as response to an action upon him in accordance with his interpretation of the latter action and with his expectation of response to his response; and all of this in a continuing community of agents.³⁶

The consideration then turns to how the Christian viewpoint determines the ultimate context of a response that is *fitting*.

The life of responsiveness of every man is integrated into a pattern of at least minimal coherence. Yet for most men the unification of their actions is incomplete and unstable. There are various systems of motivation that alternate in guiding response, with the result that one leads one's life in a variety of compartments. For the person who believes in God, and especially for the Christian, a far more radical unification is possible. The Christian acknowledges that his responsibility is in absolute dependence on the *alteraction* of God. In absolute contingency, the Christian sees God's providential intention in all the forces that press upon him for response. He summons the strands of his life into unity by responding in every action to the ultimate action of

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

God that approaches him through the multifold interaction of human existence.

The self which is one in itself responds to all actions upon it as expressive of One intention or One context. For it there is no evil in the city but the Lord has done it; no crucifixion but the One has crucified. How and why these events fit in, it does not yet know. So far as it acknowledges in positive or negative faith, in trust or in distrust, the One in the many it accepts the presence only of One action in all actions upon it.³⁷

Thus the ultimate norm of fitting response for the Christian is to determine in the environment of decision what is the action of God here and how best answer in accordance with its intention.

In *The Responsible Self* Niebuhr does not discuss in satisfying depth the exact nature and scope of God's unifying purpose in the world.³⁸ Yet it is clear that he does see God working primarily toward the increase of a community of love. The individual can respond perfectly to God's alteration only through a universal community. And his committed response to God must, in turn, serve to strengthen this universal community by integrating its allegiance to God as the supreme cause of its loyalty. In *The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry*, where Niebuhr offers a sensitive description of interpersonal love, he expresses the definition of the Church simply, but directly, as "the increase among men of the love of God and neighbor."³⁹ The One Action of God which the Christian response seeks to interpret will always be reduced to an action in the service of love.

H. Richard Niebuhr is considerably less polemical than certain other situationists in his attitude toward traditional systems of morality. His principal criticism is that in their controlling metaphors of man the artisan and man the citizen they tended to isolate the individual in himself. Man came to regard his service as subject to an ideal or a law, rather than to God Himself. By measuring one's action against the

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

³⁸ However, as James Gustafson points out in his Introduction to *The Responsible Self* (pp. 6-41), the more precise Christological focus of Niebuhr's ethics was very much present in his classroom teaching. This was to be the subject of a projected volume to follow *The Responsible Self*.

³⁹ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry* (New York, 1956) p. 31.

ideal or the law, one could be subtly drawn to a narrowly individualistic notion of perfection. Regarding the methodology of moral decision, the place accorded to principles in the classical ethical doctrines could easily oversimplify the issues involved in choice of action. Niebuhr's ethical metaphor of responsibility reveals man in an extremely complicated web of ongoing interactions. In order to respond fittingly to God's action, the individual must correctly interpret and anticipate the various forces that impinge on his own action to fortify it or frustrate it. Hence moral choice must be broadly and realistically sensitive to all the conditions that can contribute to success or failure. Niebuhr frequently points out that the relational theory of value he proposes is far from arbitrary and relativistic. The universal interaction in which moral choice is placed is anchored ultimately in the Absolute. God is an *alteragent* in every situation I confront. God forms a triad with every relative value I touch. There is no moral choice which is not absolutized by its relation to the One.

The understanding of sin, and consequently salvation, in Niebuhr's thought derives from the strain of distrust which his phenomenology of contemporary man brings to light. He finds in the moral attitude of most men, even Christians, a basic fear and defensiveness toward a universe judged hostile. Men are tyrannized by the image of death as a terminal destruction, and form their lives to gain some satisfaction while they may. If such persons do acknowledge a God controlling the destinies of the world, He is seen merely presiding over their futility. The salvation which a true believer affirms in Christ is the liberation from distrust to trust. When a person surrenders to the benevolent intention of God in every action upon him, he is freed for a positive, energetic response to life. The passage from distrust to trust is the passage from fragmentation to unification, from alienation to reconciliation. True to his starting point, Niebuhr does not dwell upon the distinction between membership and nonmembership in the Church. Yet he feels that Christians possess in the life of Christ a pre-eminently effective symbol to guide a life of responsiveness in trust. By His willing submission to death on the cross, Christ culminates a life that continually offered to God a response perfect in its form and confidence. In some mysterious way Christ works even today in those who accept His spirit to advance this reconciliation in trust.

But now for Christians Jesus Christ appears not only as the symbol of an ethos in which the ultimate response to the inscrutable power in all things is one of trust. He is also the one who accomplishes in them this strange miracle, that he makes them suspicious of their deep suspicion of the Determiner of Destiny. He turns their reasoning around so that they do not begin with the premise of God's indifference but of his affirmation of the creature, so that the *Gestalt* which they bring to their experiences of suffering as well as of joy, of death as well as of life, is the *Gestalt*, the symbolic form of grace.⁴⁰

Christ has become the form and cause of Christian responsibility. The Christian is introduced into a panorama where every value can attract his action as a meeting place of God and man.

Joseph Fletcher

In his book *Situation Ethics*, Joseph Fletcher offers a version of contextual ethics far less carefully elaborated than that of Paul Lehmann or H. Richard Niebuhr, but one that is destined to reach a wide audience due to the popular style and enthusiasm of its argument. This work is an amalgam, often loosely structured, drawing on the thought of William Temple, the two Niebuhrs, Lehmann, Emil Brunner, Karl Barth, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Fletcher proudly presents situationism as a middle course in decision-making between the false extremes of legalism and antinomianism. Whereas legalism comes to a situation encumbered with prefabricated rules and regulations to be rigidly obeyed, antinomianism relies on the existential moment alone with no guiding maxims from previous experience. The method of situationism, as proposed by Fletcher, employs ethical maxims as an illuminator of problems, but is ready to compromise them or set them aside if circumstances demand an exception. As the presuppositions of this approach, he cites pragmatism, relativism, positivism (understood by Fletcher as a theological voluntarism), and personalism.

For Fletcher, situationism as an ethical method is substantively neutral and does not itself answer the metaethical question, what is the ultimate norm of value? Yet the Christian finds in his faith-commitment that this norm is love. Fletcher sees the foundation and sole absolute of the Christian life in Jesus' summary commandment, the love of God and neighbor. The Christian pursuit of love is

⁴⁰ *The Responsible Self*, p. 175.

distinctive due to its eucharistic motivation, responding in gratitude to the redemptive love shown in Christ. The love which is the sole ruling norm of Christian decision is New Testament *agape*—goodwill at work in partnership with reason.⁴¹ This Christian *agape* is neither desire nor sentimental liking, but a nonreciprocal, neighbor-regarding gift of self. Fletcher insists that love is the only intrinsic good. Everything other than love derives its value extrinsically according as it can function in the service of love.

Apart from the helping or hurting of people, ethical judgments or evaluations are meaningless. Having as its supreme norm the neighbor love commanded of Christians, Christian situation ethics asserts firmly and definitely: *Value, worth, ethical quality, goodness or badness, right or wrong—these things are only predicates, they are not properties.* They are not “given” or objectively “real” or self-existent. There is only one thing that is always good and right, intrinsically good regardless of the context, and that one thing is love.⁴²

Love makes an action good. The situationist, following Fletcher, holds that whatever is the most loving thing in the situation is the right and good thing. And justice is nothing other than love working out its problems; love and justice are the same, for justice is love distributed.

Fletcher is careful to emphasize that love is careful and calculating. As it seeks the greatest amount of neighbor welfare for the largest number of neighbors possible, reasonable love calculates its duties, opportunities, and resources. Eager to avoid the charge of antinomianism, Fletcher assigns a respectful place to moral principles provided they are applied as guides to the moral situation, not as prescriptions.

To repeat the term used above, principles or maxims or general rules are *illuminators*. But they are not *directors*. The classic rule of moral theology has been to follow laws but do it *as much as possible* according to love and according to reason (*secundum caritatem et secundum rationem*). Situation ethics, on the other hand, calls upon us to keep law in a subservient place, so that only love and reason really count when the chips are down!⁴³

There are no universal laws except the universal command of love. Love examines the relative facts of the situation and discovers what

⁴¹ For a discussion of Fletcher's many uses of the word “love,” see Richard A. McCormick, S.J., “Notes on Moral Theology,” *THEOLOGICAL STUDIES* 27 (1966) 607–54, at pp. 613–17.

⁴² *Op. cit.*, p. 60.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

it is obliged to do. Since no action is good in itself independently of love, only the end justifies the means, nothing else. For it is precisely love that is always an end in itself, the one purpose which is not relative and contingent. For Joseph Fletcher, love clearly rules.

Other American Contextualists

Though he has not published a single book developing his own ethical position, James Gustafson has become, through his reviews and critical surveys, perhaps the primary overseer and commentator on situation ethics in America.⁴⁴ As a former student of H. Richard Niebuhr, Gustafson personally embraces a relational social ethics in the general spirit and viewpoint of his teacher.⁴⁵ He sees the questions of Christian ethics as involving a broad and complex field of inquiry, and has warned of the narrowness of certain moral theories. In the debate between contextualists and the advocates of principles, for instance, both sides have been blind to necessary elements of any Christian ethics. Gustafson favors a starting point in reflection on the nature of the Christian's life in Christ. The person who is related to Jesus Christ in faith has a radical freedom to be himself and to be obedient to the command of God. Christian ethics must interpret the situational expressions in moral conduct of this quality of life. In this task the moral theologian relies on Christian revelation and faith, an analysis of the self, and a study of social structures and processes. Gustafson has been critical of an exaggerated "love-monism" that emphasizes an ethics of love while neglecting God's judging action in human history and His demand for obedience. While he applauds the role of sensitivity, affections, and imagination in moral decisions (as affirmed, for example, by Paul Lehmann), he feels the function of imagination in conscience requires more extensive interpretation. Human action needs guidance from a more deliberate moral reflection than situation ethics has yet provided. Finally, Gustafson calls for a theory of virtues that express the moral patterns developed through

⁴⁴ See James M. Gustafson, "Christian Ethics," in *Religion*, ed. Paul Ramsey (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1965) pp. 287-354; also "Context versus Principles: A Misplaced Debate in Christian Ethics," *Harvard Theological Review* 58 (1965) 171-202. For a brief discussion of the latter, see McCormick, *art. cit.*, p. 611.

⁴⁵ See James M. Gustafson, "Christian Ethics and Social Policy," in *Faith and Ethics*, ed. Paul Ramsey (New York, 1957) pp. 119-39.

experience. These virtues offer a way of moving between the opened moral world and the substance of Christian conviction.

While he has not propounded a general ethical doctrine, in his discussion of premarital sex in *The Secular City* Harvey Cox adopts an approach that is clearly situationist.⁴⁶ He finds in contemporary sexual attitudes a massive confusion caused by remnants of tribal and town culture. Here especially the gospel must liberate men from mythical taboos and cultural conventions, and humanize sex through an exorcism of false values. In the forefront of this necessary desacralization, Christian ethics must recapture its quality of being "evangelical," good news. The gospel invites men to exercise the full resources of human imagination in responsibility for others in a community of persons. The Christian believes that God is at work in history bringing men to adulthood. Thus he must fashion and discard moral norms in a continuing conversation with the Bible and with culture. The gospel ethic which Cox proposes demands disciplined risk and a persistent iconoclasm of the rigid idols of the law. Only in this way is a person free to follow Christ as He leads the way in civilization and in history.

Finally, notice must be taken of Albert Rasmussen and his book *Christian Social Ethics*.⁴⁷ Rasmussen develops an ethics of responsive love in community that is especially indebted to Paul Lehmann. Also worthy of mention is *The Renewal of Man* by Alexander Miller.⁴⁸

Paul Ramsey and John Bennett

Two of the foremost thinkers and teachers in the field of Christian ethics in the United States are Paul Ramsey and John Bennett. They have directed telling criticisms at the proponents of situation ethics, and are normally considered on the side of principles in the debate with contextualism. Such a rigid distinction is easily misleading, however, for there are close affinities in their thought with the major themes of contextualism. It is interesting to note that the title of chap. 2 in Ramsey's early work *Basic Christian Ethics* is "Christian Liberty: An Ethic without Rules."⁴⁹ In this book Ramsey sees Jesus in His

⁴⁶ Harvey Cox, *The Secular City*, pp. 205-16.

⁴⁷ Albert T. Rasmussen, *Christian Social Ethics* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1956) esp. pp. 162-73.

⁴⁸ Alexander Miller, *The Renewal of Man* (New York, 1955).

⁴⁹ Paul Ramsey, *Basic Christian Ethics* (New York, 1950) esp. pp. 46-91.

life and teachings rejecting all code morality in favor of the supreme command of love. The actions of Jesus testify that serving the needs of one's neighbor is infinitely superior to observing law. Thus for the Christian the love command is incommensurable with all other moral laws and principles. Everything is commanded which love requires, everything without exception. Christian ethics in its obedient love transcends the natural morality that lies within the reasoning competence of all men. However, even here Ramsey points out that love lays down its own directions, internal self-regulations determined only by the needs of the neighbor. Love is never unruly, since the needs of other persons teach such love what to do.

In his more recent works Ramsey continues to propose that the basic norm and the distinctive character of the Christian life is Christian love (*agape*). Yet his concern has centered intensively on the question whether *agape* must work through rules and embody itself in certain principles which regulate and guide practice. Ramsey responds with an understanding of Christian morality as "faith effective through in-principled love." There is a structure to the human relationships that sustain love which ethical analysis must elaborate. Directions about how love of neighbor is to be enacted can be derived from the moral experience and reflection of the Christian community. Ramsey has been especially critical of a wholly future-facing *agape*-ethic that ignores the morality of the means in its prudential calculation of results.

It should be affirmed that *agape* does not first and always face toward the future alone. Rather does *agape* face in the present also toward a man's existing neighbors and companions in God, seeking to determine what love permits and requires to be now done or not done toward them. Thus, love posits or takes form in principles of right conduct which express the difference it discerns between permitted and prohibited action, and these are not wholly derived from reflection upon the consequences.⁸⁰

The end does not justify the means. Ends and means should mutually interpenetrate one another, without reading the means-end situation only from the end backward. Christian *agape* must control not only

⁸⁰ Paul Ramsey, *War and the Christian Conscience* (Durham, N.C., 1961) p. 4. Chaps. 1 and 8 of this work present a helpful introductory summary of Ramsey's ethical position.

the choice of goals, but must enter into the proper determination of conduct through which these goals are achieved.

The function of moral rules in Ramsey's agapism is to express the requirements of love. Christian ethics begins with the multiple claims and needs of the neighbor for whom Christ died. Here Ramsey distinguishes between general principles of conduct and summary rules. Certain principles are discovered to have a general validity, such that failure to act in accord with these principles would always involve an act contrary to the requirement of love in that situation. There are other rules of conduct, however, summarizing love's past obedience or experience, that may find a particular situation in which they no longer express what love itself directly requires.⁵¹ Christ has transformed all relationally objective norms, so that charity must play a creative role in its alliance with the principles of natural justice. Ramsey finds the Catholic tradition guilty of a static conception of natural law that is inflexible in its definition of ethical means. In his view Catholic moral theology fails to allow divine charity any vital role in the matter of morality.

For the fact is that, in the view here proposed, charity enters into a fresh determination of what is right in the given concrete context, and it is not wholly in bondage to natural-law determination of permitted or prohibited means. These rules are opened for review and radical revision in the instant *agape* controls; this was, indeed, what all along drove the Christian to the very act of devising them, and to employ them for centuries not as a reliance but as a service.⁵²

Christian love, which normally acts within the law and lays down principles for the guidance of action, continues to exert a free and sovereign pressure toward fresh determination of what should be done in situations not rightly covered by the law.

John Bennett, President of Union Theological Seminary, has been especially concerned, like Paul Ramsey, with elaborating the role of principles in Christian moral decision. But whereas Ramsey centered primarily on the proper *means* of Christian conduct, Bennett more immediately addresses the question of the formation and choice of *goals*.

⁵¹ See Paul Ramsey, *Deeds and Rules in Christian Ethics* (Scottish Journal of Theology Occasional Papers 11; Edinburgh, 1965).

⁵² *War and the Christian Conscience*, p. 179.

In a manner reminiscent of his colleague Reinhold Niebuhr, Bennett attempts to relate the general norms of love revealed in Christ to the sinful and "technically autonomous" social order. His characteristic task has been the search for moral generalizations to give a sense of direction to Christian involvement in the world. For Bennett, the Christian ethic must guide in determining the goals which represent the purpose of God for each period of history. In seeking to express these goals, he borrows from J. H. Oldham the notion of "middle axioms." "A 'middle axiom' is more concrete than a universal ethical principle and less specific than a program that includes legislation and political strategy."⁵³ These "middle axioms" mediate between the broad guiding principles perceived by Christian faith in the Scriptures and the most concrete policy guiding an immediate action. For example, the guiding principle that should control race relations is the equal dignity of all races before God. As pertinent "middle axioms" Bennett proposes (in 1946), first, the securing of equal opportunity for the members of all races in such matters as employment, housing, education, legal protection, and political rights, and, second, the progressive overcoming of involuntary segregation as a humiliation to the minority race.⁵⁴

Although Bennett sees the Christian relying primarily on faith in revelation for the task of elaborating these axioms, he affirms a moral wisdom available to all men. There is a moral order that can be known with varying degrees of clarity apart from revelation. These perceptions of moral truth are supported by facts of experience open to all. Yet the influence of Christian faith within a given culture strengthens the vivid understanding of the claim and range of these moral principles. In thus accepting a form of natural law, Bennett criticizes, however, claims for a universal moral law that are excessive. There is the constant danger of thinking abstractly about social issues and imposing laws or principles that are absolute or too rigid on the many varied situations. Intermediate moral principles do not carry with them clear guidance concerning their application to concrete circum-

⁵³ John C. Bennett, *Christian Ethics and Social Policy* (New York, 1946) p. 77. For a discussion of Bennett's use of "middle axioms," see Paul Lehmann, *op. cit.*, pp. 148-54.

⁵⁴ Bennett, *op. cit.*, pp. 82-83.

stances. The final shape of decision must incorporate the autonomous structure of political and economic process.⁵⁵

This introductory survey has hopefully intimated some of the vital forces at work in contemporary Christian ethics. A first view suggests that there is much here that could enrich the Catholic tradition and much that could be enriched by it, and some things that seem to call the Catholic tradition in question and vice versa. An excellent prospect for dialogue.

⁵⁵ See John C. Bennett *et al.*, *Christian Values and Economic Life* (New York, 1954).