

CURRENT THEOLOGY

THE STATE OF MORAL THEOLOGY: A CRITICAL APPRAISAL

It is well known in the circles of professional education that educators are too specialized and too close to their work to assess in broad vision the over-all thrust and direction in which they are going. And so it is customary that college boards of directors be made up of businessmen and housewives, lawyers and dentists, as well as of academics of one type or another.

Few theologians would now contest the proposition that modern theology must be interdisciplinary. Bernard Lonergan's *Method in Theology* presents an impressive account of why this is so. There is no need to repeat the point here. I wish in this article to suggest some reasons why we may not evaluate the general thrust and trends in moral theology from the vantage point of moral theology alone. Charles E. Curran has written an assessment of the current condition of moral theology that strikes this observer much as would an evaluation of education offered by an educator.¹ His article expresses an enlightened awareness of details, but it is less successful in assessing over-all import. While he describes the trees well, he says less about the forest.

RÉSUMÉ OF THE ASSESSMENT

Curran describes what he envisages as the present self-identity of the discipline we call moral theology. He believes that this discipline has changed enormously, even drastically, in the last decade (p. 446), and to show the present state of the field he writes under three headings: natural law, authoritarianism, theological presuppositions. He thinks that the present plurality of theories and methodologies in Catholic ethics will expand and become even more manifold in the future (pp. 450, 466). One can welcome his admonition that as we disagree with elements in our past we must also adopt a critical stance in the light of a current pluralism in approaches and thus not succumb to the danger of forgetting the complexity of moral reality (pp. 451-52). Curran finds the papal concept of natural law defective (pp. 447-48), and he notes the considerable number of theologians who now often reject magisterial teaching:

Catholic theologians frequently deny the existing teaching of the hierarchical magisterium on such issues as contraception, sterilization, artificial insemination, masturbation, and the generic gravity of sexual sins. Newer approaches have

¹ Charles E. Curran, "Moral Theology: The Present State of the Discipline," *THEOLOGICAL STUDIES* 34 (1973) 446-67.

been taken to the question of homosexuality. Some Catholic theologians have argued against the moral norm condemning all sexual relationships outside marriage Another absolute norm in Catholic moral teaching that has been questioned is the prohibition of euthanasia in all cases A plurality of opinions also exists in other questions where previously there was *the* Catholic opinion. Contemporary theologians are calling for a rethinking of the absolute prohibition against divorce In questions of social and political morality there is also a divergence of opinions among Catholic theologians. (pp. 456-57)

Curran rightly notes, therefore, that the rejection of papal teaching on contraception is no isolated event. What was formerly considered to be an exception has today become routine and normal.

This, of course, suggests the problem of the Catholic teaching on the obligation to respond to noninfallible authentic teaching of the magisterium with an inner religious assent. Curran considers that the American bishops' discussion of this matter is presented in "a confused and inaccurate manner" (p. 459). He says little about the main theological point of an obligation to give this inner assent to authentic teaching and much about the comparatively incidental point of a right to dissent from it. He believes apparently that the formerly granted right to dissent in isolated cases should be extended so that it becomes a principle of usual theological activity:

Even when the hierarchical magisterium has spoken on a particular issue, there can still be a pluralism of Catholic thinking on this issue. Thus, from the viewpoint of a proper understanding of the moral teaching office of the hierarchical magisterium, it will be impossible to speak about *the* Roman Catholic position on a particular moral issue as if there could not be any other possible position. (p. 460)

The past exception becomes the future norm. No one, it would seem, can any longer articulate in moral matters the mind of the Catholic Church. If I understand rightly, this is no insignificant conclusion.

Because the differences in the theological presuppositions of Protestant and Catholic ethics are much less today, "there really are no outstanding pertinent theological differences between some Protestant and some Catholic ethicists" (p. 461).

Before I proceed to an assessment of Curran's evaluation, I make a few less central observations. One may regret the caricature involved in speaking of "some who reject any change in the methodology or the practical conclusions of the manuals of moral theology" (p. 447). If there are some who reject "any change," I do not know of them. To name Kippley as one of these is, in my opinion, unjust. I can only wonder if Curran has read all of Kippley's careful work. One can also regret the use of the weighted word "authoritarianism" to describe a position Curran

does not share. We may wonder, too, how one could write of pluralism in moral theology and not discuss at length the statement of the International Theological Commission of October 1972. This statement, "The Unity of Faith and Theological Pluralism," has a section, numbers 13 through 15, which deals expressly with pluralism in moral theology. It would have been helpful, too, if Curran had discussed the thinking expressed in a number of recent studies on pluralism in theology.² Reporting on them (if they were available at the time of his writing) would have added no little balance to his account.

PLURALISM IN MORAL THEOLOGY

For the most part I have no problem with Curran's factual description of the pluralism situation. My difficulties arise chiefly with his interpretation of the facts. I shall discuss these difficulties under five headings: (1) lack of distinctions; (2) New Testament on pluralism and unity; (3) unconvincing rationale for undifferentiated pluralism; (4) the magisterium's position; (5) healthy and unhealthy pluralism.

Lack of Distinctions

That there has always been a pluralism in the moral theology practiced in the Catholic Church is clear. But the pluralism of the schools is just as clearly not the pluralism of which Curran writes. He includes the former but goes considerably beyond it. This requires, therefore, that we identify the levels of unity-diversity that may be operative in our problem. Delhaye, for example, distinguishes four levels of thematic or lived morality: fundamental orientation, particular personal laws, social and political concerns, individual judgments of prudence. He notes that the exigencies of unity and diversity are evidently not the same on the several levels, and he feels that one of the causes of our moral disarray is that many Christians do not make these distinctions in the levels of their moral commitment.³ Curran unfortunately does not make these needed distinctions in his evaluation.

² Among the more recent studies dealing with pluralism in moral theology we may include Paul Toinet, "Implications philosophiques de la question du pluralisme," *Esprit et vie* 83 (1973) 177-81; Eugene Hillman, C.S.Sp., "Pluriformity in Ethics: A Modern Missionary Problem," *Irish Theological Quarterly*, 1973, pp. 264-75; Luigi Lombardi, "A proposito di fede e pluralismo teologico: Saggio di neo-teologia controversista," *Palestra del clero*, 1973, pp. 1022-38; Ph. Delhaye, "Unité et diversité en morale," *Esprit et vie* 83 (1973) 321-28, 337-42; "Pluralism, Polarisation and Communication in the Church," *Pro mundi vita*, no. 45, pp. 1-39. Delhaye adds two other references: S. Olejnik, "Pluralizm teologiczny a jednocz chrzescijanskiej moralnosci," with a French résumé, "Le pluralisme théologique et l'unité de la morale chrétienne," *Collectanea theologica*, 1972, pp. 19-37; D. Capone, "Nota sul pluralismo in morale," in *Studia moralia* of the Alphonsiana.

³ Delhaye, "Unité et diversité en morale," p. 322.

Another distinction appears to me fundamental to our problem, namely, that between what we may call complementary pluralism and contradictory pluralism. The first is enriching, the second is destructive. The second suggests that someone is out of touch with reality. To affirm and deny at the same time and in the same sense that a road leads to San Francisco suggests that one party is in for bad news. A complementary pluralism regarding our picture of God can only enrich our understanding, whereas a contradictory pluralism means that one of the parties is partially out of touch with the real God. If two ethicists affirm and deny in the same sense, it is not a happy situation for one of them.

One may possibly respond at this point that there are few, if any, contradictory positions among ethicists. Since every set of circumstances is unique, they are not really at odds with one another. This I strongly doubt. But even if one grants the allegation, the response suffers from all the weaknesses that have recently been uncovered in situation ethics. Furthermore, if Curran is not speaking of contradictory pluralism, he is not saying anything new or significant. We may presume, therefore, that he is speaking of contradictory positions.

Jorge Medina Estevez, dean of the faculty of theology of Santiago, Chile, and member of the International Theological Commission, points out a further distinction: between pluralism and plurality. These terms are often taken as equivalent, but there is a difference at least in some languages. Pluralism suggests the character of principle, namely, that diversities are legitimate, whereas plurality mainly reflects the factual situation. The question of legitimacy, he remarks, refers to both meanings.⁴

My final distinction refers to the pluralism found in the local churches throughout the world. In its proposition 9, the International Theological Commission noted that the local churches contribute an enriching diversity to the universal Church. When it retains its communion with the universal Church of the past and the present, the local congregation helps to lead the human race in all its diversities toward the unity God wishes for His people.

New Testament on Pluralism and Unity

The presence of complementary diversity in gospel theologies is so well known that we need not dwell on it. What is not so well known or spoken about is the astonishing (and, to our ears, shocking) insistence on unity of mind and practice. Because this is not the place for a thorough study, I shall merely summarize this thought and then add a few words from

⁴Jorge Medina Estevez, "Brève introduction aux 'Propositions' de la Commission théologique," *Esprit et vie* 83 (1973) 373.

recent Scripture commentators. Moral theology needs this input from biblical studies.

St. Paul sees the community as coming to a maturity in Christ precisely because it achieves a unity in faith and in knowledge (Eph 4:11-13). For the apostle, fractions in the Church are a sure proof that some are not being led by the Spirit, for disagreements arise from self-indulgence (Gal 5:19-21). Paul knows that the Corinthians are immature because they are divided; their divisions spring from their worldliness, from their being men of the "flesh" (1 Cor 3:1-3). When the community has the Holy Spirit, it has harmony and peace (Gal 5:22). Paul insists that the factioned Corinthian church put aside its divisions and be united again in its "belief and practice" (1 Cor 1:10). The Greek for this verse is strong: Paul demands a "perfect agreement" even in mind. In a solemn plea he asks here for an extraordinary (to our modern mind) unity, a perfect agreement in belief and practice. The Apostle's "all say the same thing" is not, of course, a mere external harmony. Richard Kugelman remarks that "this common Gk expression does not refer to agreement in words only, but means 'to be in perfect agreement' Christians must be united in their thinking (nous) and in the goal and direction (gnome) of their lives."⁵

Paul pleads in another letter with no little emotion that the Philippians "be united in your convictions and united in your love, with a common purpose and a common mind" (Phil 2:2). Jesus had already implicitly prayed for this kind of oneness when he asked the Father that his disciples would have a unity so remarkable that it would be explicable only by a divine intervention: "May they be so *completely* one that the world will realize that it was you who sent me" (Jn 17:23).⁶ Not by the widest stretch of imagination could we call that ecclesial community "completely one" if in it some members are at odds habitually and in important moral and disciplinary matters with those whose duty it is to articulate the faith and morals for and to the community. A pluralism in moral theology that fails to reckon with this New Testament insistence is failing to reckon with its sources.

John L. McKenzie is probably correct in observing that the disunity in the Corinthian church against which Paul wrote so vigorously was likely enough not deep by our standards, that is, no more than we now consider normal. The difference, notes McKenzie, is between Paul and us.⁷ What

⁵ Richard Kugelman, C.P., in *Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1968) 51:15.

⁶ For some reflections on and examples of shared vision together with complementary diversity in New Testament thought, see Raymond Brown, "The Unity and Diversity in New Testament Ecclesiology," *New Testament Essays* (Milwaukee, 1965) chap. 3.

⁷ John L. McKenzie, in the preface to Eugen Walter, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (New York, 1971) p. 6.

we consider normal, a contradictory pluralism regarding important issues, Paul would not tolerate. Like Jesus, he wanted us to be completely one—at least in important matters. Max Zerwick is of the same mind as McKenzie. He finds in Paul a consuming concern about unity, a concern that is “beyond all else.” Zerwick does not see in the Apostle’s insistence on oneness any special reason to suppose particular dangers to unity in the eastern regions. No, it is just Paul’s great sensitivity to the need for perfect oneness in the new creation, and “it therefore forces its way to the front. It is all the more important, therefore,” says Zerwick, “that we should yield to this insistence of the Apostle, and make his interest our own.”⁸ I regret not finding in Curran’s evaluation an indication of this Pauline concern in the important areas of moral theology. Lionel Swain goes so far as to say that “the essence of the Christian’s vocation described in Eph 1:3—3:21 is unity: unity among men (cf 2:13–17) established by union with the Father, through Christ in the Spirit (2:18).”⁹ It seems to me that this trinitarian-ecclesial unity may serve as an example of where moral theology should learn from doctrinal theology. Christian ethics is not the same as secular ethics. McKenzie adds that the concept of unity entertained in the early *ekklēsia* did not favor divisive influences. While Paul admits they are inevitable, “he does not praise them (1 Cor 11:19), and they are mentioned together with dissension and envy in a list of the most serious vices (Gal 5:20). They are called destructive parties or divisions (2 Pet 2:1).”¹⁰ All this sounds very different indeed from an undifferentiated commendation of pluralism in important matters of ethical theory and practice.¹¹

An adequate evaluation of pluralism in moral theology would, therefore, consider this New Testament heritage. An insistence on oneness of mind and practice would seem to pose no little problem to a concept of diversity that eliminates a shared vision regarding doctrine and practice.

Unconvincing Rationale for Undifferentiated Pluralism

Curran is too competent a thinker to argue for a wide pluralism in moral theology simply on the basis of its popularity. He does seem to be somewhat impressed by factual plurality, but he does not in his article

⁸ Max Zerwick, *The Epistle to the Ephesians* (New York, 1969) p. 99.

⁹ Lionel Swain, in *New Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture*, ed. Reginald C. Fuller, Leonard Johnston, and Conleth Kearns (London, 1969) p. 1188.

¹⁰ John L. McKenzie, *Dictionary of the Bible* (Milwaukee, 1965) p. 353.

¹¹ For other statements of the same kind, see Franz Mussner, *The Epistle to the Colossians* (New York, 1971) p. 130, and Otto Knoch, *The Epistle of St. James* (New York, 1969) pp. 203–4.

offer this as the main reason. Rather:

The basic reason for such a pluralism is the complexity of moral issues and the need for relational and empirical considerations, which involve many aspects and afford the possibility of arriving at different ethical judgments. In the past, when forbidden actions were described solely in terms of the physical structure of the act, it was possible to speak about certain actions which were always and everywhere wrong. A relational understanding of morality or an empirical calculus cannot admit such absoluteness. In the midst of all the circumstances which must be considered in complex questions, one must admit a possible diversity of concrete, ethical judgments. (pp. 460-61)

I find this reasoning unpersuasive. Though he does not make any distinctions (such as I think are needed), Curran seems to envision or at least include contradictory pluralism about basic matters or norms. If he means only complementary pluralism, he is not saying anything we have not known for centuries. Catholic theologians have for centuries taught that circumstances change many moral judgments, and that those circumstances included relational and empirical considerations (e.g., manner of dress at home, on the beach, or in center city). If, consequently, he is thinking of contradictory pluralism, what I have already said at some length is applicable here.

But his rationale is unconvincing for other reasons also. First, it makes practical pastoral guidance next to impossible. Whether in the confessional or in the pulpit, a priest could hardly give clear moral guidance, because in principle a contradictory answer is always possible. Stanley Hauerwas is correct in speaking of "the disastrously vague character of the new moral theology."¹² To see that this is not an unkind characterization, one need only ask typical young people about the morality involved in areas Curran discusses. Many of them will decide issues according to "how one feels about" the matter. There is something wrong in a theory that does not work in practice.

Secondly, on the premise of contradictory pluralism together with a denial of moral absolutes, a secure knowledge of the moral implications of many acts becomes impossible. Who could possibly weigh the "relational and empirical considerations" involving "many aspects" of a given situation? Who would care to do it if he could, since this complexity affords "the possibility of arriving at different ethical judgments"? The matter becomes ludicrous when one transfers it from the library study to the rush of daily life.

Thirdly, one cannot be prophetic with this stance. We Catholics have been accused of humanism, and not without reason. If there were no

¹² Stanley Hauerwas, "Correctives for the New Morality," *Theology Digest*, 1973, p. 228.

absolutes other than love in gospel morality, how could one proclaim the holy will of God as an Amos or an Isaiah or a Jeremiah proclaimed it? A proclamation that begins "In my opinion" is hardly going to be prophetic.

Further, although it is not so intended, a contradictory pluralism issues practically in people concluding that almost anything is permissible, given the right circumstances. If there is no teaching authority that may not be contradicted, people will commonly consider their case either to be supported by somebody or to be the exception. If abortion were permitted in one percent of hard cases, large numbers would consider their case to be that hard one. One need not even say "would consider"—current history makes it obvious that they do so consider.

Lastly, who would care to listen to a Church in which contradictory pluralism flourishes in important matters? A hierarchy that may in principle and therefore as a matter of course be contradicted in its official teaching is a pitiable hierarchy. Its position is so weak, diluted, and ineffectual that few will take it seriously. That this is a clean break with Catholic tradition is hardly obscure.

Magisterium on Unity and Diversity in Moral Matters

We may be brief here, for the reader knows that Curran's view of pluralism is not shared by the magisterium. This needs no demonstration. A statement recently issued by the papal Secretariate of State may, however, serve as an illustration. Speaking of the 1974 World Population Year and the teaching of *Humanae vitae*, it asserted that "those who deal with such subjects without heeding the authentic, established teaching cannot claim to represent Catholic viewpoints."¹³

Curran himself expresses awareness that his view of pluralism is not shared by the magisterium. He writes: "Recently an American bishop has recognized the fact of this growing pluralism, although his reaction to the fact is *much different* from the general approving tone of this paper" (p. 457; italics added). And further on he explains how thoroughgoing the differences are:

The problem seems more acute on the level of the life of the Church, especially in terms of a recognition of the present self-understanding of moral theology by the hierarchical magisterium. If the assessment of contemporary moral theology elaborated in this article is accurate, then there must be important repercussions

¹³ Reported in the *Chicago New World*, Feb. 1, 1974, p. 1. Paul Toinet, writing of the magisterium's right to judge "compatibilities and incompatibilities," is of the same mind: "C'est bien pourquoi il apparaît inconcevable que la Magistère renonce aujourd'hui à exercer son jugement doctrinal sur les formes de théologie qui réclameraient, au nom du pluralisme, d'avoir en elle droit de cité" (*art. cit.*, p. 179).

and changes in the life of the Roman Catholic Church. The differences between theologians and the hierarchical magisterium on the condemnation of artificial contraception in *Humanae vitae* does not represent merely one isolated and unfortunate event; it points to the understanding of moral theology developed in these pages. (p. 466)

Here Curran is quite correct. And this is another reason why I am maintaining that moral theology must be criticized by biblical studies and doctrinal theology. Curran is raising issues deeper than ethics. In this issue of theologians versus magisterium the above citation makes it clear (and I wish this to be gently said and understood) who is to learn from whom, that is, who are expected to change their position.

Criteria of Healthy Pluralism

For all these reasons it would seem that we ought not to speak about theological pluralism unless we have made some distinctions and unless we have integrated a careful use of the term into our concept of the Church herself. We may at this point suggest some criteria by which we may judge in given areas of scholarly inquiry what is a healthy as distinguished from an unhealthy pluralism. I may begin by briefly reporting several norms offered by the International Theological Commission in its study of pluralism in theology. From their over-all discussion I find four statements that may serve as criteria. The first two here mentioned are concerned with theology as a whole, the last two with moral theology as such.¹⁴

1) The Church is the subject in whom the unity of New Testament theologies is had as well as of the dogmas presented through the centuries (6).

2) The criterion which distinguishes true from false pluralism is the faith of the Church expressed in her normative pronouncements. The fundamental criterion is Sacred Scripture in relation to the confession of the believing and praying Church (7).

3) The unity of Christian morality is founded on constant principles contained in Scripture, explained by tradition, presented in each age by the magisterium (14). Regarding this criterion Delhay remarks: "Il était donc indiqué de rechercher dans l'Écriture et la Tradition relayées par le Magistère les normes essentielles de la praxis chrétienne qui, comme nous l'avons dit plus haut, assurent à la fois l'unité de la morale et le cadre d'un pluralisme sain."¹⁵

4) This unity does not prevent a diversity of vocations and personal preferences in living the mystery of Christ. There is also within this unity

¹⁴ The propositions of the Commission are reported in *Esprit et vie* 83 (1973) 371-72.

¹⁵ Delhay, *art. cit.*, p. 339.

a possibility in the temporal realm of a diversity in analyses and options among Christians (15).¹⁶

To these criteria I may add several others. Although there is some overlapping between the Commission's propositions and what I shall say, the criteria of the former, correct as they are, do not exhaust what needs to be said.

5) A contradictory pluralism tends to destroy ecclesial unity, since unity is just another aspect of reality, and between contradictory positions there is no middle ground—one of them is out of touch with the real. The deeper the contradictions, the weaker the unity. Hence, if pluralism means not only a rare questioning of noninfallible authoritative teaching but also the permissibility of routine dissent, it is difficult to see where one could speak of anything more than an occasional pragmatic unity in ethical matters. Even more, if the pluralism means that private theologians may entertain a concept of ecclesial unity at odds with that of the official teaching office, that unity is still more deeply damaged.

6) Numbers do not make a position. The dissent of a given number of theologians and/or laity cannot automatically be assumed to be a basis for reassessing moral teaching. As I shall note later, in the history of divine revelation the prophets were constantly inveighing against the immoral positions of large numbers of the chosen people. One gets the impression that they were a minority condemning the majority. Richard McCormick is correct in noting that even a "massive dissent" from the magisterium's teaching is not necessarily a work of the Holy Spirit. He does ask that such a dissent be taken seriously, be tested, examined in a new communal reflection.¹⁷ One should further ask that the dissenters take seriously the obligation so often mentioned in the wisdom literature and assumed in Paul that we welcome correction and be ready to learn from the official teachers in the Church.

7) A healthy unity-in-diversity (that takes both elements seriously, not just the latter) leaves the *ekklēsia* strong in its mission to the world. A debilitating fragmentation cannot be of the Spirit. To see this we may look at the worth of contradictory pluralism from another point of view, namely, from that of a secular outsider. How would he view an institution in which no one can speak for the group in basic, fundamental matters? Would he consider it a weakness or a strength that a strong condemnation issuing from leadership had little impact on membership?

¹⁶ In his commentary on this proposition, Medina Estevez, a member of the Commission, notes that the characteristic sphere of moral pluralism is that of temporal activities (*art. cit.*, p. 375). Karl Rahner has also pointed out that neither the gospel nor the Church presents a blueprint for the temporal order.

¹⁷ Richard McCormick, S.J., "State of the Question," *America*, Oct. 20, 1973, p. 290.

We may imagine with a recent observer that the pope issued some vigorous statement on doctrine:

A promising test of the likely effect would be to survey the members of various departments in a Catholic university or college, not directly under the control of Rome or of a bishop, on their expected reaction to a strong condemnation of certain doctrines advanced in the theology department. Neither the theologians nor their Catholic colleagues are apt, as a group, to be jarred by the condemnation unless this latter could lead indirectly to attacks on academic freedom or job security.¹⁸

Some may feel that this is a healthy situation. I think our secular outsider (who, we may note, cares nothing about the doctrines involved) would find the situation pitiful. At the very least he would consider the Church weak, as having nothing to say to the world. I think he would be close to the truth. After all, who would pay much attention to statements from France or Russia if no one could speak for those nations? Who pays any attention to any group that cannot speak out authoritatively and with one voice in important matters (Rom 15:6)? A contradictory pluralism in ethics is a weakness when limited, a disaster when widespread.

Though it is surely far from the intentions of ethicists, the weakness of the discipline and its practical ineffectiveness is such that a recent European periodical of over 700,000 readers has seriously engaged in a study entitled "Do We Still Have a Moral Theology Today?"¹⁹ Paul Toinet wryly observes that if the Catholic Church had ever renounced her right and duty to pronounce on truth and falsity of previous theological debates, there would exist today no debate on pluralism. Any notion of imperative Catholic truth would have long ago disappeared from the earth.²⁰

8) Healthy pluralism, whether complementary or contradictory, is characterized by non-evasive encounter. Each side learns from the other, addresses its attention to the other's noteworthy affirmations and criticisms, does not evade embarrassing points brought against it. Some of our current debates pass muster here and some do not. The former do not need illustration, the latter do. James Hitchcock has written with devastating detail of the aberrations of the religious left during the last few years, and yet no one to my knowledge has seriously contested most of what he has said. John Kippley in 1970 wrote a strong theological

¹⁸ Michael J. Kerlin, "A New Modernist Crisis? Hardly," *America*, Oct. 6, 1973, p. 242.

¹⁹ Cf. Delhaye, *art. cit.*, p. 321. He adds in a footnote: "un résumé de l'enquête et des réflexions sur celle-ci ont été récemment publiés en un dossier: *Y a-t-il encore une morale?* par A. Chottin et R. Masson, Paris, Le Centurion, 1972."

²⁰ Toinet, *art. cit.*, p. 180.

support of Catholic teaching on contraception, a book that merited the following comment in this journal:

I hope the book will sell and be widely read; for K. does not present a simple apologetic for authoritative Catholic teaching. Rather, his book shows that he has read widely on both sides of the question, that he has given much thought to both sides, and that hard planning has gone into the exposition of his thought . . . The book is recommended.²¹

We are still awaiting an adequate reply. In the years intervening we find many theologians and nontheologians repeating that Pope Paul was wrong in *Humanae vitae*, but I have found no one dealing with what Kippley has said. Possibly answers have been given, but I have not come across them. Several years later Kippley reminds us again (as he had done in his book) that the majority position of the papal birth-control commission "was so untenable it has never been adopted in serious theology by the dissenters, who have admitted that their position is only as good as their reasons."²² The evasion of what Kippley is saying is hardly a sign of a healthy pluralism. Raymond Brown accurately put his finger on two of the chief dangers confronting renewal efforts in the Church when in his now well-known address before the National Catholic Educational Association he observed that "the real danger is from those ultra-liberals who scorn serious theology and from those ultra-conservatives who see in every investigation a threat to faith."²³ Curran does not scorn serious theology; nonetheless one would have expected a discussion of pluralism in moral theology to wrestle with some of these criteria. This seems especially true when the opinions of the private theologian run counter to the teachings of the magisterium and even, it seems to me, to the criteria of the International Theological Commission.

9) We may complete our criteria with an interesting one mentioned by Toinet. A "dissolving pluralism," he notes, will either fail to perceive or will evade crucial issues that touch at the very heart of the Catholic enterprise. "Une théorie pluraliste dissolvante aura pour caractéristique de ne pas percevoir ou d'éluder certaines questions cruciales touchant les exigences internes d'une pensée théologique d'essence catholique."²⁴ I find this quite true of Curran's discussion.

IS MORAL THEOLOGY PROPHETIC?

My purpose in this essay is not to take up individual issues in Christian ethics (except by way of illustration) but to back away and look

²¹ Robert H. Dailey, *THEOLOGICAL STUDIES* 32 (1971) 343-44.

²² John Kippley, "State of the Question," *America*, Oct. 20, 1973, p. 288.

²³ *National Catholic Reporter*, May 11, 1973, p. 10.

²⁴ Toinet, *art. cit.*, p. 181.

at the forest instead of concentrating on the trees. I am examining main thrusts, one of which is the pluralism question. I turn at this point to still another long-range matter. Since biblical prophecy is concerned especially with proclaiming the holy will of the Lord, and since moral theology is concerned with ascertaining this holy will in all the intricacies of modern life, we may expect that the one will exhibit certain similarities to the other—though there are obviously some differences too. These latter are so clear we need not dwell on them.

We may say that for God's people a prophet was a charismatic man called and sent by the Lord to proclaim his will. This concept seems broad enough to cover prophets of both Testaments.²⁵ Scripture scholars seem of one mind as to what characterized the genuine prophet of the Lord. I discuss these traits here because it seems to me that since we all say that prophecy is important in the contemporary Church, we would expect those who deal with the knowledge of right and wrong to be prophetic in their teaching if not in the exact manner of its proclamation.

1) *The prophet is a man sent, a man commissioned to proclaim the Lord's holy will.* Joachim Jeremias notes that for the synagogue the possession of the holy spirit of God was *the* mark of prophecy. "To possess the spirit of God was to be a prophet. In fact, Jesus repeatedly made an explicit claim that he himself *possessed the spirit.*"²⁶ John L. McKenzie points out that the true prophet has an immediate experience of God, and that the false prophet, sincere though he may be, is false because he lacks this awareness. He therefore "lacks the prophetic insight into the moral will of Yahweh and the reality of sin, [and so] the false prophet sees no evil where it is . . ." ²⁷ Beauchamp offers a brief definition of the false prophets: "those who speak in their own name (Jer 14: 14 f.; 23: 16), without having been sent (Jer 27: 15), following their own inspirations (Ez 13:3), are false prophets."²⁸ Being sent is in the new dispensation as well a necessary requirement for being authorized to proclaim the message. As the Father has sent the Son, so the Son sends those who are to declare Him to the whole world.²⁹ A Catholic theologian is always sent, if not juridically through diocesan faculties (a lay theologian), at least through being in communion with the bishop and

²⁵ See M. Eugene Boring, "How May We Identify Oracles of Christian Prophets in the Synoptic Tradition? Mark 3:28-29 as a Test Case," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 1972, p. 502.

²⁶ Joachim Jeremias, *New Testament Theology* (New York, 1971) p. 78.

²⁷ McKenzie, *Dictionary of the Bible*, p. 697. Commenting on Hos 4:6, D. Ryan makes much the same point in *New Catholic Commentary*, p. 681.

²⁸ Paul Beauchamp, *Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (New York, 1967) p. 415.

²⁹ Jn 20:21; Mk 16:15; Mt 28:18-20; Rom 10:14-15. Alois Stoger, *The Second Epistle of Peter* (New York, 1969) p. 158, notes the deviousness of false prophets and their abusive accounts of moral freedom and power of the spirit. He is commenting on 2 Pt 2:2-3.

through the bishop with the Holy See. Insofar as theologians are at odds with the sending magisterium, they are not sent. They lack the first note of a prophet among God's people. If a private person feels he has a direct commission from the Holy Spirit to admonish an officer about disciplinary matters, even then he will be humble and willing to be corrected himself (1 Jn 4:1-6).

2) *The prophet does not conform his message to popular morality or to what men will accept.* This must be the case, since God's thoughts are not men's thoughts, and His ways are above ours as the heavens are above the earth.³⁰ The full gospel has never been popular, and even though we are happily living in the midst of a biblical renewal, the picture has not substantially changed. Guy Couturier, commenting on Jer 23:9-40, notes that among the scriptural signs of the false prophets is that their moral conduct is lacking and their message flatters the popular passions.³¹ James puts it starkly: anyone who makes the world his friend is making God his enemy.³²

It is perhaps significant that not a few of the current divergences from the magisterium in moral theology tend to make the gospel teaching easier to take. I do not doubt that this is due to a well-intentioned effort to present a picture of the gospel acceptable to modern men and women. But what seems not sufficiently realized is that this aim is exactly what the prophets did not try to do. For St. Paul, seeking the approval of men is a sign of failing to serve Christ. Speaking in vigorous language of those who were introducing a new version of the Good News into the community, Paul pronounces an anathema on them. Then he asks: "So now, whom am I trying to please—man or God? Would you say it is men's approval I am looking for? If I still wanted that, I should not be what I am—a servant of Christ."³³ It is difficult to locate in the prophetic tradition theologians who seem to begin with "what modern men will accept" and then delve into the tradition to find rare statements among the older theologians and thus build them into principles that run counter to the great thrust of those same older theologians. It is still more difficult to consider prophetic this kind of procedure when in the search for more permissive ways one chooses to set aside clear magisterial statements regarding the same matter. The disciple has become the teacher.

Tailoring ethics to the expectations of majorities is a desalting of the

³⁰ Is 55:8-9.

³¹ Guy Couturier, C.S.C., in *Jerome Biblical Commentary* 19:71.

³² Jas 4:4. See also 1 Jn 2:15-17. For a somewhat extended discussion of the New Testament meaning of "world," see Rudolf Schnackenburg, *Christian Existence in the New Testament* (Notre Dame, 1968) pp. 190-228.

³³ Gal 1:9-10.

salt. It has no basis in Scripture. A moral theology that moves smoothly with popular wisdom, with what men and women want to hear, is unpersuasive, unimpressive, dull. It has the marks of compromise all over it. While he may not be uncritical, the true prophet is independent, unapologetic, fearless. He will contradict and run counter to the stream because he loves truth and is driven to proclaim the holy will of the Lord. A recent reviewer of Paul Minear's *Commands of Christ* has observed that

in my darker moments at any rate, it seems to me that, whatever its advancing technical merit, NT scholarship since Strauss has functioned in the main to deflect the crippling objections which the biblical text would otherwise pose to post-Enlightenment and contemporary redefinitions of Christianity. Nevertheless, there regularly appear works that travel in the opposite direction—independent, out-of-season, unapologetically calculated to give the Bible back its cutting edge. The modest but substantial book here under review belongs to that class. Consider the title: not the “principles” nor “ethics” nor even the “challenge,” but the “commands of Christ.” The book’s very project, then, crosses the grain of our culture, exposing and contradicting it and us. Moreover, the commands in question are specific, concrete, and clear.³⁴

This I find refreshing. It is prophetic. There is something unreal about conformism. The prophet of the Lord is never a slave to popularity or style.

What I am saying has not gone unnoticed in the literature. Speaking of the tendency we have to confuse ethics and apologetics, Stanley Hauerwas notes the temptation we have to baptize the secular in the name of relevance and that for the glory of God:

The new morality is a response to the feeling that the Church has misled the world by its stubborn defense of a system of unintelligible symbols and of values eroded beyond recognition. It is naturally assumed that the way to expurge our guilt in this respect is by fondly embracing “modern man’s self-understanding”. . . What we have here is not apologetics, but capitulation. As such, it betrays not only the task of Christian ethics, but also the “modern” man it wishes to address. For such a man exists only in rhetoric.³⁵

This reminds me of Tom F. Driver’s comment on Andrew Greeley’s *Sexual Intimacy*: parts of it are based, he thinks, “on an erroneous theological assumption—namely, that the God we have known all along as Yahweh is the same who presides over the modern sexual revolution. It sounds to me like the old game of baptizing everything in sight.”³⁶

³⁴ Ben F. Meyer, in *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, July 1973, p. 400.

³⁵ Hauerwas, *art. cit.*, p. 229.

³⁶ Tom F. Driver, book review, *America*, Dec. 8, 1973, p. 448. For more biblical commentary on this issue, see regarding Mi 3:5–8, D. Ryan, in *New Catholic Commentary*, p. 709; and regarding Jer 23:17, Beauchamp, *Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, p. 416.

3) *The prophet is rejected by the majority.* Though this trait is so well known in biblical circles that I hesitate to write of it here, yet we find in theological circles the curious assumption (it is never proved) that Christian ethics should be acceptable to the majority. Just as curiously, it is further assumed that if the majority do as a matter of fact reject gospel morality, the fault could not be with the majority's morals—it must be the fault of our previous understanding of the gospel. By any revealed standard, this is odd. Scripture does not tire of telling us over and over that the gospel will be rejected by most people. The crowd hounded and ridiculed and abused Jeremiah because he proclaimed the will of the Lord.³⁷ Jesus recalled that his ancestors routinely murdered the prophets, and he warned that his own representatives would be rejected by many and even be persecuted.³⁸ He said that few walk the hard road and find the narrow gate that leads to life.³⁹ The author of 2 Timothy makes it clear that those who are faithful to Christ are certainly (not probably) going to be persecuted.⁴⁰ Paul says the same thing to the Thessalonians: he warned them that they should expect persecution.⁴¹ Commenting on Hos 9:7, Denis McCarthy remarks that in rejecting the whole line of the prophets, Israel was showing “the natural, hostile response of the guilty to the reprover.”⁴² Bruce Vawter writes that “the vicars of Bray, too, have reacted in their perennially predictable way, obediently furnishing texts as required to bless whatever deeds their masters care to have clothed with respectability.”⁴³

A genuine ethics worthy of the gospel must be ready to contradict what the majority wishes. As Hauerwas rightly notes, “we cannot start with the question of what modern man will accept as true. . . . An apologetic that is not first based on truth is but propaganda.”⁴⁴ Though the moral theologian rightly tries to present the word in attractive terms and in new thought patterns, he must be prepared to see men and women no longer

³⁷ Jer 20:7-8; see also 6:10 and 23:28-29. The NAB footnote on this last reference is interesting.

³⁸ Mt 23:29-32; 10:17-25.

³⁹ Mt 7:13-14.

⁴⁰ 2 Tim 3:12.

⁴¹ 1 Th 3:3-4.

⁴² Denis J. McCarthy, S.J., in *Jerome Biblical Commentary* 15:25.

⁴³ Bruce Vawter, C.M., *The Conscience of Israel* (New York, 1961) pp. 147-48. Alois Stoger, *The Gospel according to S. Luke* 2, 153, recalls how the young Church clashed with the world-wide Roman Empire and thus impressed the historian Tacitus so that he could say that the Christians incurred “the hatred of the human race.” Even in its youth the gospel was not popular. See also Couturier, in *Jerome Biblical Commentary* 19:61; Stoger, *op. cit.* 1, 116; W. J. Harrington, O.P., in *New Catholic Commentary*, p. 1004; Wilhelm Thusing, *The Three Epistles of St. John* (New York, 1971) p. 65; Beauchamp, *op. cit.*, p. 415. We find this same human trait likewise in the civil sphere: the thoroughly honest man will make enemies. A young federal prosecutor, George Beall, known to be unafraid of going after the mighty, remarked upon accepting his post as United States Attorney: “If I leave this office without enemies, I will not have done the job properly” (reported in *U.S. News and World Report*, Oct. 1, 1973, p. 21).

⁴⁴ Hauerwas, *art. cit.*, p. 230.

walk with the Lord because "this word is intolerable; who can hear it?"⁴⁵ Not only is gospel doctrine difficult; so is practice. But they alone lead to life.⁴⁶

4) *The prophet proclaims absolute precepts.* There are so many absolutely worded precepts in both Testaments that I shall not mention one. I am aware, of course, that some ethicists who deny absolutes other than love consider their positions compatible with biblical morality. Others disagree. I merely add that the attempt to explain away some of the absolute precepts in Scripture strikes me as unreal, as doing exegesis with a preconceived thesis that forces meaning into texts.

The need for a greater immersion into Scripture on the part of moral theology may be illustrated by Bright's perceptive study of the apodictic prohibition in the Old Testament.⁴⁷ He deals in no little detail with the two main ways Hebrew expressed a prohibition: 'al with the jussive and lō' with the imperfect. It is generally agreed that the lō' prohibitive has a far stronger force than the 'al prohibitive. Careful study of biblical linguistic usages suggests, as one would expect, a wide range of intent all the way from the weak to the strong: wish, request, plea, earnest entreaty, exhortation, solemn admonition, stern warning, flat order, apodictic prohibition. Among his conclusions Bright notes that the

legal prohibitive and the wisdom admonition move in different worlds and have different concerns. The one lays down the normative policy to which members of the community must at all times conform; the other urges youth to wise and right living and warns of the consequences of folly. The one carries with it the sternest of sanctions, supported by the righteous will of Yahweh himself; in the other, where motivation is supplied or implied, it is generally prudential.⁴⁸

In my opinion, it would be helpful if those who accept a divine revelation would deal with this sort of biblical distinction in their efforts to develop a religiously orientated ethics. And it seems indispensable that they would explore thoroughly what Scripture has to say about the motivational aspects of divine law. Bright adds that

nowhere is the difference between apodictic prohibition and Wisdom admonition more clearly evident than in the motivation attached to each. Here we move in two different worlds. In the bare apodictic sentence no motivation is given: you simply will not do it; it is so ordered! Where motivation is supplied in an apodictic context, it is all but invariably: because Yahweh had forbidden it and requires its punishment. In the Wisdom admonition a motive clause is frequently

⁴⁵ Jn 6:60. ⁴⁶ Jn 6:67-69.

⁴⁷ John Bright, "The Apodictic Prohibition: Some Observations," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, June 1973, pp. 185-204.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 200.

added. Though this may occasionally be warning that Yahweh will take action in the event of transgression, in the overwhelming majority of cases the motivation is purely prudential.⁴⁹

The significance of these distinctions for the consequentialism discussion is hardly arcane. The prudential admonition cites consequences, the apodictic command need not and does not. In revealed morality “the apodictic prohibition is a binding command of absolute validity; it needs no motive save that its giver has given it and demands that it be obeyed.”⁵⁰ Scripture takes absolute moral norms for granted. And it also takes for granted that the individual person must accept moral direction from those who have the authority to give it. Philbin is surely right when he observes that “there is no support in the Scriptures or in Church tradition for the view that all questions of conduct, as opposed to those of belief, are to be decided by personal assessment of each case. The indications are all in the other direction.”⁵¹

5) *The prophet is faithful to his tradition.* We may take it as widely known, as Vawter points out, that “both in the OT and in the NT it is recognized that prophecy in order to be true must be consistent with known revelation.”⁵² Weber notes that the biblical prophets were so dependent on those who had gone before them that their works were filled with references and allusions to the earlier prophets. These “men of tradition,” he adds, “were not essentially innovators; they called men *back* to the authentic faith.”⁵³ We may not conclude that authentic, prophetic persons today must only call men back to the past, but we may conclude that they must be faithful to their past. The pastoral epistles repeatedly insist on clinging to the tradition and adhering to what has been taught. Luke makes a point that the early faithful did cling to the teaching of the apostles, and Paul calls the Galatians foolish because they did not adhere to the teaching they had heard.⁵⁴ There is no doubt that a binding teaching authority is already operative in the apostolic *ekklēsia*.

If our use of the term *sensus fidelium* is in accord with scriptural thinking, we may raise the question as to who the faithful are. Richard McCormick refers to the *sensus fidelium* as a source of religious truth, but he does not mention who the faithful are. Though I am confident he does have in mind a clear concept, yet I would like to see moral

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 201. ⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ William J. Philbin, “The Way of Faith,” in Paul Surlis, ed., *Faith: Its Nature and Meaning* (Dublin, 1972) p. 160.

⁵² Vawter, in *Jerome Biblical Commentary* 62:22.

⁵³ Paul J. Weber, S.J., “Of Prophets Now and Then,” *Review for Religious* 31 (1972) 982.

⁵⁴ Acts 2:42; Gal 1:6-9; 3:1-5.

theologians discuss the question as such. I would presume that both theology and common sense would reply that "the faithful" are precisely that, namely, faithful. They are, it seems to me, those who accept the whole gospel, who are willing to carry the cross every day, who lead a serious prayer life, who accept the teaching magisterium commissioned by Christ. We could hardly call faithful those who reject knowingly anything Jesus has taught or established.

6) *The true prophet proclaims authentic teaching.* In our age of great emphasis on subjectivity we assume that a true position manifests itself through our own personal insight into and our experience of it. While biblical men did not deny the value of subjectivity, they demanded objective evidence, and especially a faithfulness to what they knew Yahweh had already revealed of His holy will. Hence the genuine prophet is known by this trait also: he proclaims truth. Dt 13:1-6 is a classical locus for this criterion: the false prophet is known to be such, even if he works a sign or wonder, in that he declares a false doctrine. McCarthy comments on this passage: "Deuteronomy attempts to establish a more universal, even theoretical norm by which a prophet might be judged: the self-proclaimed prophet whose words led the people astray from strict Yahwism must be false."⁵⁵ Commenting on the same passage, Beauchamp is of like mind: "Even in the OT, did not the Deuteronomist see in the doctrine preached by the prophets the authentic sign of their mission (Dt 13:2-6)? Thus it remains today."⁵⁶ Beauchamp's last sentence is pregnant with significance.

This criterion continues on into the New Testament. The Johannine letters emphasize the point that there are false prophets in the world of the latter part of the first century, and doctrine is an effective way to distinguish the true from the false. We find a little treatise on the subject in 1 Jn 4:1-6, and it occurs again in 2 Jn 8-9. On this last verse Vawter remarks that "'progress' was probably one of the slogans of the false teachers, implying the superiority of their doctrine. On the contrary, fellowship with God (see 1 Jn 2:23) is only to be achieved by adhering to the true doctrine of Christ and his Church."⁵⁷ Commenting on 2 Pt 2:1, Stoger offers some hard words that theologians need to ponder in prayer: "The teaching spread by false prophets leads to divisions within the church; it destroys the unity of the church. . . . He who tampers with the teaching of Christ condemns himself; his deed is his condemnation."⁵⁸ Discussing the "sound teaching" idea found often in the pastoral letters, Dibelius and Conzelmann remark that 1 Tim 1:10 f. "provides the

⁵⁵ D. J. McCarthy, "Prophetism (in the Bible)," *New Catholic Encyclopedia* 11 (1967) 871.

⁵⁶ *Op. cit.*, p. 419.

⁵⁷ Vawter, in *Jerome Biblical Commentary* 62:32.

⁵⁸ Stoger, *The Second Epistle of Peter*, pp. 156-57.

concrete criterion: the gospel which is a firm part of the church's teaching tradition."⁵⁹ Citations like this abound in current biblical scholarship.⁶⁰ I have cited some of them here to indicate that my critique of Curran's article is not based on mere personal opinion. Any theory of pluralism in theology that neglects an honest confrontation with this and other prophetic traits in Scripture cannot be considered adequate. Moral theology needs a critique from outside itself.

If one is looking for an example of one who exemplifies the biblical traits of a prophet in his person, surely the best known is Pope Paul VI. Like all biblical prophets, he has a commission from the Lord to teach and he is faithful to his religious tradition. Like them, he proclaims the holy will of God whether people find it to their liking or not. Like them, he is widely rejected because he openly speaks against the immorality of our day—in the sexual area as well as in any other. Like them, he does not dilute either doctrine or moral teaching.

SOME UNANSWERED QUESTIONS

We may now turn to several questions moral theologians should explore and answer. Mere assertions such as "modern men think that" or "there are many ethicists who" are a new authoritarianism. We are asked to accept premises without proof. I should like to suggest some assumptions and premises that need to be tested and justified, together with a few questions that beg for answers.

1) Is habitual and frequent dissent from authentic, noninfallible teaching in the Church biblically or theologically justified?

In his assessment of current Catholic ethics, Curran makes it clear that dissent is not now what it occasionally was in the past, a rare phenomenon considered permissible only within narrow limits and confined to the pages of scholarly publications. He seems to be trying to establish that there is now in principle a right to dissent (and so to teach publicly) frequently and as a matter of normal procedure. Is there such a right?

I find neither in Scripture nor in the magisterium any basis for this practice. On the contrary, we read so frequently that I shall not cite texts both in Paul's major letters and in the pastorals an adamant insistence

⁵⁹ Martin Dibelius and Hans Conzelmann, *The Pastoral Epistles* (4th ed.; Philadelphia, 1972) p. 25.

⁶⁰ I may offer several examples: Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S.J., regarding Gal 1:6, in *Jerome Biblical Commentary* 49:11; Joseph A. Grassi, regarding Col 2:8, *ibid.* 55:23; Bruce Vawter, regarding 1 Jn 2:24–25, *ibid.* 62:17; W. J. Dalton, regarding Jude 3–4, in *New Catholic Commentary*, p. 1264; Franz Mussner, regarding Col 2:8, in *The Epistle to the Colossians*, p. 134; John L. McKenzie, "Teach, Teaching," and "Truth," *Dictionary of the Bible*, pp. 871 and 902; Lucien Cerfaux, *The Spiritual Journey of St. Paul* (New York, 1968) pp. 213–16.

that the faithful accept and cling to what they are taught by those who articulate the faith to the community. The same is true in magisterial teaching. It is academically unacceptable that an exception be blown up into a rule.

2) Does not a "right" to frequent dissent and public teaching of it postulate two magisteria in the Church?

There are a number of reasons why the response to this question must be affirmative. One is the practical and indisputable fact that many Catholic priests and religious and laity do accept the teaching of dissenting theologians as against that of the pope and bishops. Even if one attempts no theoretical justification, the fact is plain to see.

Then there is the current custom among some theologians of considering episcopal and papal statements as merely opinionative when they are intended to be much more. These statements are discussed alongside those of private theologians, and no special import is granted to them. Curran's article may serve as an example.⁶¹ He expresses little concern that his view of pluralism is not that of the bishops.⁶²

The same affirmative answer follows if one holds that contradictory pluralism is desirable. I may illustrate the point that we really and for all practical purposes have two magisteria operating in the Church with the example of the contraception controversy. It is now widely admitted that the majority opinion in the papal birth-control commission was based on weak reasons. Even if one counters with the remark that the reasoning of our best dissenters is now based on other considerations, it still remains that the vast majority of married (or single) persons who follow their advice are doing so with an act of faith. One can confidently say that not one percent of our married laity have read and understood for themselves what Fuchs, Schüller, Knauer, McCormick, Janssens, and Chirico have written about the matter. If they make the judgment that contraceptives are permissible in some circumstances, they can be doing this only on the basis of their own private insight or on a human faith in the theologians who teach this or in the priests who filter the latter's teaching to them. The large majority of Catholic people entertain their position on contraception through an act of faith either in the magisterium or in dissenting theologians and priests. But this is practically to have two magisteria—even when the latter declare that they have no intention of substituting for the official teaching authority. We should notice how this principle is now operating not in one confined area of dispute but quite generally: Sunday worship, nature and practice of religious life, premarital sexual relations, sterilization, and others.

Fourthly, this affirmative response may be suggested by Curran's

⁶¹ See, e.g., pp. 466-67. ⁶² Pp. 456, 457, 458, 460.

interesting and repeated references to the "hierarchical magisterium," a characterization that seems to imply there is some other magisterium in the Church. As a matter of fact, he even refers to "the so-called authentic or authoritative, noninfallible hierarchical magisterium."⁶³ I do not wish to push this too far. If he does not mean to suggest that there is a second magisterium in the Catholic Church, it would be well to use other terminology. If, on the other hand, he does wish so to imply, I would like it clearly said and then established in a competent theological manner. In any event, his position on pluralism does postulate two magisteria in practice.

One need hardly demonstrate that the theory or practice of two magisteria runs flatly counter to the teaching of the one magisterium we do know. I may cite one recent example. Speaking to the General Superior of the Sulpicians, Pope Paul VI mentions only one teaching authority to which other teachers must conform: "Thus two things must be done by teachers in the seminary: maintain fidelity toward revealed truth, of which the authentic interpretation is in the hands of the teaching authority of the Church, and keep one's mind open to the problems which are being discussed in this world in continual change."⁶⁴

3) Is a "Catholic's position" necessarily a Catholic position?

When one puts the question as plainly as I have it here, the answer is obviously negative. But this is not a useless question. We find it widely assumed that because individual Catholics hold a particular view, theirs is a Catholic view. This is to use the word "Catholic" analogously, if not equivocally. To suppose an affirmative answer to this question, as Curran does, once again implies two or more magisteria in the Church.

4) Is a contradictory moral pluralism a weak effort to make a virtue of necessity?

I think it is. We find in the literature of religious pluralism the common argument "is to ought." We have pluralism; therefore it is good. In a recent analysis of decadent societies, a historian has written that

decadence is dissipation in the literal sense, in which the center disintegrates and the parts fly off in all directions. "Pluralism" is welcomed as a positive good, because it is imposed as a historical necessity. Societies which are young, vigorous, purposeful, and possessed of a great dream are rarely pluralistic. . . . The loss of the vital center, while it can hardly go unnoticed, is nonetheless little discussed and, since the recognition is so traumatic, is by tacit consent ignored as much as possible.⁶⁵

⁶³ P. 457.

⁶⁴ This document, issued July 6, 1973, is published in *Review for Religious*, November 1973, pp. 1230-33.

⁶⁵ James Hitchcock, "The Problem of Decadence in Catholicism," *Critic*, Sept.-Oct. 1973, p. 16.

5) Is an ethics without absolutes anything more than a homiletics?

We have seen from Bright's study that Scripture has a prominent place for the apodictic prohibition that binds always and everywhere. This is one reason among many why the Bible is a perennial best seller: it says something. It seems to me that the alternative to an ethics with some apodictic teaching is an ethics of exhortation. To say invariably to common people "there may be an exception to this norm" or "some theologians say yes and some say no to your question" is perhaps to comfort them, but it cannot be called a prophetic, challenging stance. When an ethics knows only a contradictory pluralism and/or a whole series of "maybes," it ceases to be interesting. It becomes quite unlike biblical morality, which in the wisdom literature is detailed in saying what courses of action are good and what are bad. It becomes quite unlike St. Paul, who terms extramarital relations fornication or adultery and does not suggest that tender love changes the situation. Hauerwas is correct in referring to the "disastrously vague character of the new moral theology."⁶⁶

6) What does moral theology say of the "new creation"?

It seems to me that much of contemporary pluralism in moral theology pays too little attention to the close intertwining of gospel morality with gospel faith. When Paul speaks of us as new creatures, he is not merely referring to an invisible grace transformation but also to a mode of living unknown to the pagan. When he wants us to put off the old man and to die with Christ, he is referring to ethical action and not simply to a doctrinal/sacramental reality. Christian morality is a revolution, not merely a restatement of non-Christian ethics. In my judgment, one can say that gospel morality is not unique only if, on the one hand, he divorces it from doctrinal theology, or, on the other, he looks on it as minimalistic. If one does not think that asceticism, contemplation, passive purifications, discernment of the Spirit are part and parcel of Christian morality, he may indeed think that it is substantially the same as a secular ethics. If one does think that the content of the teaching of a St. John of the Cross is an essential part of practical Christian living, he could hardly avoid viewing gospel morality as far advanced beyond the content of secular ethics.

7) What is the place of the cross and self-denial in Christian morality?

One finds in the literature supporting premarital sexual relations, contraception, and abortion little or nothing about common gospel themes: carrying the cross *every day* (Lk 9:23), the seed dying in the ground as a condition of its fruitfulness (Jn 12:24), renouncing all things to be a disciple (Lk 14:33), chastising our bodies lest we become

⁶⁶ Hauerwas, *art. cit.*, p. 228.

castaways (1 Cor 9:24-27), following the hard road and entering the narrow gate (Mt 7:13-14), crucifying ourselves with Christ (Rom 6:5-6), giving up our old selves and our illusory desires (Eph 4:22), and a host of other texts. One could hardly argue that these ideas are not to be operative in practical everyday life. Yet they rarely appear in discussions of moral problems. A selective use of Scripture is always suspect. Pope Paul has spoken of this problem: "We are also confronted with the growing tendency to prune away from the Christian life everything that requires effort or causes inconvenience. It rejects as vain and futile the practice of Christian asceticism and the contemplation of the things of God."⁶⁷

8) May moral theology neglect contemplation?

Almost never do we read in contemporary Christian moralists how their discipline relates to the contemplation themes of the great mystics. Rarely is ethics discussed in reference to prayerful communion with God, an idea prominent in Paul and the greatest theologians of our twenty-century theological tradition. Ethicians are not sufficiently aware of how this-worldly their ethics appears or how impersonal their discussions seem when they make no reference to the "one thing," gazing on the beauty of the Lord (Ps 27:4; Lk 10:38-42). The prophets proclaimed the holy will of Yahweh for what it was, the holy will of Yahweh. What men did or did not do bore directly on their personal relations with the Lord God. We have now instead in moral theology an artificial divorce between interpersonal relations with God and the everyday business of life, between adoration and activity. It is remarkable how few are the points of contact with our extremely rich prayer-action heritage of Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine, Basil, Gregory the Great, Bonaventure, Thomas, Suso, Tauler, John of the Cross, and Teresa of Avila.

Almost all of current ethics is ethics of action, of means. It has little to say about the end, the purpose. The situation is not unlike taking a trip from New York to San Francisco, all the while talking about maps and tires and water and gasoline but never about the loved ones to be seen in San Francisco. There is something deeply wrong with a morality so truncated.

It is not enough to respond to my objection by saying that spiritual theology deals with prayer. It does. But if one accepts the conciliar teaching that in the Church "action is directed and subordinated to contemplation,"⁶⁸ it is difficult to grasp how he could fail to fault a moral system that rarely looks to the end of the whole operation. Once again we see how very different gospel morality ought to be from a secular

⁶⁷ Pope Paul VI, Aug. 6, 1964; included among the documents presented by Joseph F. Gallen, S.J., *Review for Religious*, November 1973, p. 1278.

⁶⁸ Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, no. 2.

ethics. And it is not likely that a contradictory pluralism will further a more prayerful community life.

CONCLUSION

We may take it as obvious that there are many fine developments in the moral theology of the last decade, and the biblical renewal is not the least of them. So also do we welcome the far more friendly and co-operative work done by secular, Protestant, and Catholic ethicists. But it is difficult to appreciate Curran's judgment that "the present state of moral theology as described here is in keeping with the best of the Roman Catholic theological tradition" (p. 467). I refer to the questions I have just asked, but especially to Curran's judgment on pluralism. A neutral outside observer would consider that an organization that cannot speak with one voice on important matters is weak at best, chaotic at worst. I think he would tend to accept the judgment of Hauerwas that "this new emphasis [in ethics] that acceptance of the other is good in itself entails a parallel conception of God. God is viewed as the great understander, the paradigm liberal, who perceives all and is committed to nothing."⁶⁹ If Curran were correct, our observer would probably wonder with the publication we have cited "Y a-t-il encore une morale?"

The vast preponderance of Catholic tradition has held that theologians must, as a normal rule, learn from papal teaching, accept and defend it. To reject this and then appeal to an exceptional case in that tradition as "the best" is neither impressive argumentation nor model use of the sources. The level of pluralism found in this tradition (schools and opinions) was surely not on the level envisioned by Curran. Thomas Aquinas, whom Curran often cites in selected areas, would have repudiated a great deal of current pluralism in moral theology. Whatever else we may say, we can hardly avoid saying that the acceptance of a contradictory pluralism is a break with the Catholic tradition. Nor can I reconcile it with the position of the International Theological Commission.

Finally, one can hardly consider a moral theology which neglects crucial and primary gospel themes as completely "in keeping with the best" in our tradition. This is settling for far too little. I submit we should be as critical of our own age and methods as we are of our forebears'.

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⁶⁹ Hauerwas, *art. cit.*, p. 231.