

Ethics and Theology

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PECULIAR enough are some of the twists and kinks in an individual's reasoning processes, but still more peculiar are these surprises when they occur writ large in the mentality of an epoch. And one of the benefits of wholesale religious controversy arises from the discovery of such mistakes long unnoticed by large majorities. We believe, of course, that Christianity is an ethical religion; in fact we hold that no other philosophy presents so accurate and so worthy standards of right and wrong; and further, it is true that however much individuals and groups have at times departed from those standards in actual conduct, Christianity has made notable progress in developing a better morality both within Christian groups and also among non-Christians. There are still discrepancies between conduct and creed in the Church but few if any churches present as sorry a spectacle as the converts Paul gained directly from heathenism. Nor have we any wish to minimize the wickedness of the non-Christian world. There are crimes aplenty and immense room for improvement, but nevertheless, in spite of American lawlessness and European selfishness, Europe and America are heaven compared with the brutality of ancient Rome. If present deplorable conditions lead us to discount such a conclusion, if we have tendencies toward emotional pessimism, perhaps the explanation is that we have become more sensitive to distinctions in right and wrong than either the first generation of Christians or the present generation of pagans. No one can seriously doubt that Christianity has had a tremendous influence on the morality of the Western world. To such an extent has the Christian ideal been accepted by all classes of people—in theory if not in practice—that it has become possible to argue: Since Christian ideals are best, the Christian religion must be true. This is the particular twist or kink referred to above. The defense of Christianity against its enemies has often rested on the assumption of its moral excellence. But suppose the moral excellence of Christianity is denied. There may have been a time and a place when such a denial was unthinkable. Today, however, voices are raised in favor of other kinds of morality. In fact, Christian theology is attacked as immoral. To meet this criticism, the old argument must be recognized as inverted. One cannot argue the truth of Christianity on the basis of its ethics; one must defend its ethics, if at all, on the basis of its truth. The ethics is a logical consequence of the religion, not its cause.

No one with any Christian training would, I suppose, want to deprecate morality. Nevertheless, it is quite possible so to exaggerate its importance, so to misunderstand its relative place in philosophy that only confusion both moral and theoretical can result. This overemphasis on morality, so it would seem, is an important contributory cause in the rise of modernism. The authority of conscience was insisted on, a moral consciousness was developed, ethical institutions were sought for. And as these aspects of human nature—indispensable as they are—were continu-

ally brought forward, they came to usurp the position of supreme judge. Thus we find statements of which the following two are typical. "Old theology is always becoming new in the vitalizing influence of ethics. . . . It is reason enough for doubting and for restudying any traditional teaching or received word of doctrine if it be felt to harass or to confuse the Christian conscience of an age. Nothing can abide as true in theology which does not prove its genuineness under the ever renewed searching of the Christian moral sense. . . . Christian ethics cannot consent to commit suicide in any supposed interest of theology."¹

And in a chapter on *Punishment and Forgiveness* whose theory would have definite consequences for the Atonement we read: "Now as in the days of Plato it is a paramount duty of Moral Philosophy to lay down Canons for Theology . . . the idea of substituted vicarious punishment would never for a moment be defended by a modern Christian except with a view to bolster up an obsolete theological tradition."²

One might also refer to current oral reports that the Evangelical view of the Atonement is a "butcher-house religion", and probably everyone who reads this has similar illustrations of his own.

It seems then that the Christian conscience has so developed that it is all conscience and no longer Christian. Moral sense has become the judge of truth and error. And moral sense turns out to be nothing but unadulterated mysticism. Now to some, mysticism has the connotation of piety and devotion. The hymns of Zinzendorf cast a holy halo about the word and after all no one dare slander the exemplary conduct of groups who studiously follow the Inner Light. But it is doubtful if their good points come from their mysticism. To the mystic, the final authority is a feeling or an emotion which no one but himself can experience. Its dictates are not open to verification by any other person. Truth, therefore, depends on one's emotions and if two mystics contradict each other, there is no possible basis of reconciliation, for, however much each of them might deny it, their theory makes them inhabitants of different worlds as much as Protagorean skepticism would.

At this point the article might diverge into a discussion of the nature of truth, for the need of a comprehensive philosophy, including epistemology, physics, and so forth, is abundantly evident. But the more particular question to which attention is directed is: Should ethics determine our theology, or should theology determine our ethics? Nor permit it to be said that each influences the other. However true that may be in some sense of the words, one theorem or set of theorems cannot be both consequence and postulate. We may, to be sure, learn a theorem of geometry before having studied geometry. But because we learn the axioms last it does not follow that the axioms are based on the theorems. So too, our parents may teach us some very valuable morality long before we know anything of theology. The question which separates Rashdall and,

¹Newman Smyth, *Christian Ethics*, p. 11.

²Hastings Rashdall, *Theory of Good and Evil*, Vol. I. pp. 311, 312.

as I conceive, Evangelicalism is the problem of logical dependency. A mere question of logic, of definition, of theory; yet vitally connected with our view of the Atonement. Is theology or ethics logically prior?

Our answer depends on our general world view, more particularly on our concept of God. For the immediate purpose of this article, we may summarily divide all philosophies into two types. The first may be called Platonic, if you wish, and be taken to include all systems which picture the ultimate as Law. Consistent with prevailing modes of Greek thought Plato, it will be remembered, posited superior to the Demiurge who fashions this world of ours, a pattern, the World of Ideas, which has eternally existed independent of him. Modern philosophers, naturally, do not take seriously all that Plato said, but practically all adopt the position that Law is supreme. The second type of philosophy may be styled Personalism, or better, Voluntarism, though with as little accuracy as the former designation. Plato's Demiurge was personal, and so today what is ordinarily called personalism might be classed with the previous type, for the distinction in names here made is a very arbitrary one. This second type of philosophy we are trying to understand is one in which not Law but the Lawgiver is supreme. If then the Person is supreme and all laws depend upon His ordinance, it follows that there can be no law superior to Him. Students find it easy to conceive of God as creating by divine fiat physical law. He might have created any other kind of a world had He so desired. Little stretching of the imagination is required to picture a world where it takes water to prevent alcohol from freezing and where lead expands on cooling. But as a matter of fact God chose to create the sort of world we actually live in. Now for some peculiar reason people find difficulty in applying the same consideration to ethical laws. Instead of recognizing God as Sovereign in the moral sphere, they seem ordinarily to think of Him as being compelled by some vague superior power to make morality what it is—a remnant of the Platonic World of Ideas. But it seems more reasonable to think of God as just as untrammelled in creating moral distinctions as in creating physical facts. Once then we are able thoroughly to grasp the absolute Sovereignty of God in all realms, our initial moral problem is solved. Morality, like the physical universe and its laws, is what it is because God made it that way; and if we want to live a moral life we must determine what standards God has set up. Now it is possible to learn something of God from His works. We might, for example, learn that honesty is the best policy and conclude God is that kind of a God. But it is to be noted that the discovery of ethical principles by empirical methods is exceedingly difficult. The history of ethics, one of progressive skepticism it seems to me, can fairly well be summed up in the words of G. E. Moore, "We never have any reason to suppose that an action is our duty. . . . It is difficult to see how we can establish even a probability that by doing one thing we shall obtain a better total result than by doing another. . . . No sufficient reason has ever yet been found for considering one action more right or more wrong than another."

If this be not sufficiently serious there is still another difficulty in establishing ethics and then passing on to theology. It is apparently a matter of experience that the consciences of men may be seared and their moral judgments warped. If it be true that God has given up some to a reprobate mind, their moral opinions are probably insecure bases for ethical theory. So one might almost expect the world in desperation to reverse its procedure and attempt to base ethics on theology. The view then would be that the nature of God is not to be determined by means of our consciences or intuitions, but these rather are to be corrected in the light of the nature of God. We must expect the objection to arise that if our moral judgments cannot be trusted, neither can our theological. To this the Evangelical has an answer not permitted to the Deist or Pantheist who may well have followed the position as so far stated. God has revealed Himself, not only in nature³ but much more explicitly in the Scriptures. Naturally there is little hope for Evangelical Christianity if the Scriptures cannot be regarded as a divine revelation. But assuming this important point for the present, if the Scriptures teach vicarious punishment and our consciences don't like it, so much the worse for our consciences. In the determination of truth such personal subjective considerations are to be eliminated, else we too have taken the first step into mysticism and modernism.

At this point some very conscientious persons raise an apparently serious objection to the view here outlined. If this view were true, they say, honesty might not be the best policy. If morality depends purely on God's ordinance just as the laws of physics, then possibly stealing would be right and right would be wrong. Unless such an objector has definitely aligned himself with Plato and Rashdall, it is not likely that he means God in creating the world was under obligation to suit his fancy in the matter. That we have become accustomed to given ethical standards is no reason for believing that God had to make the world that way. Even if our moral opinions are correct, it is no more a reason for so believing than our knowledge of physics is for putting God under the compulsion of physical laws. If then the objector do not mean this, it is likely his objection arises from an emotion resulting from previous training respecting honesty. Certainly in this world honesty is best. But it is best precisely because God made the world that way. Anything God does is right, because He does it; and had we no knowledge of God we could not guess what sort of moral standards He might set up for some hypothetical world not now in existence. The reason we object to stealing or to any other sin is that we have learned that it is contrary to God's ordinance. We must learn God's plan first and develop our morality afterward. To those who still have doubts about this way of stating things it is recommended first to put oneself in the place of some heathen who, with a conscience as

³Even if ethics cannot be learned by a direct empiricism, still one might possibly so learn a little theology if it be granted that theology is systematically less complicated than ethics, and that the reprobation of the mind is most acute in the ethical sphere.

void of offense as was Paul's when persecuting the infant Church, is sacrificing his child as a religious rite; and second to put oneself in the place of those who consider orthodox Christianity immoral. If this be done with careful thought, one must, so I should suppose, come to this conclusion:

We must adjust our ethics to our theology, not *vice versa*. We must argue, not from our moral standards to the truth of the Bible, but from the truth of the Bible to the morality it upholds.



Books Received

THE CHRISTIAN ATTITUDE TOWARDS WAR, by Albertus Pieters, D. D., William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

If ever there was needed a corrective for the excessive pacifistic tendencies in the Church it is now. Student movements are flooded with pro-pacifistic literature which is clouding the Biblical conception of peace, and all but crowding out the emphasis on individual salvation.

This pamphlet by the beloved Trustee of the League comes from the pen of a fair and scholarly thinker. Students of the League and all Christian students are requested to send to the author for copies of this pamphlet. In lieu of printing a particular student edition, and instead of having an article in this magazine, Dr. Pieters will mail copies of the pamphlet to League members, addressing him at 44 East Fifteenth Street, Holland, Michigan.

BUCHMANISM, by Harold T. Commons, B. A., First Baptist Church, Atlantic City, New Jersey.

A perplexing movement is this cult known as the Oxford Group Movement. League groups wishing to become acquainted with a first-hand analysis of the teachings and practices of the movement are urged to secure this little pamphlet. Mr. Commons is an active supporter of the League whose testimony can be regarded as trustworthy. He will gladly supply quantity orders at the rate of one cent the copy, by addressing him at 17 South Marion Avenue, Ventnor, Atlantic City, New Jersey.

THE OXFORD GROUP MOVEMENT ANALYZED, by T. T. Shields, D. D., The Gospel Witness, Toronto, Canada.

Fast on the heels of the retreating Oxford Group, whose testimony meetings stirred Toronto, comes this keen and mordant analysis of the movement from the lips and pen of a metropolitan pastor and noted preacher.

Copies of the brochure may be secured at the Gospel Witness, 130 Gerrard Street, East, Toronto, Canada, at five cents the single copy, or one dollar for twenty-five, post paid.