Christian Ethics and Moral Theology

O. M. T. O'Donovan

EXAMINERS WHO COMPOSE papers in 'Christian Ethics' are fond of requiring their candidates to rehearse the methodological contrasts between their own discipline and that called 'Moral Philosophy'. For the day when they tire of this sport, I can suggest a more parochial, but not less teasing, question: how is Christian Ethics distinct from Moral *Theology*? For traditionally these two titles have represented two contrasted approaches to the study of Christian morality, respectively Protestant and Catholic in their provenance. And the source of the divergence is this: there are two different questions from which a moralist may wish to start his enquiry, the question of the individual conscience, 'What ought I to do?', and the question of community order, 'What ought to be required?'. From these two starting-points very different routes may be followed.

Professor G. R. Dunstan has produced a fine statement of ethical method, which, while plainly hailing from the Moral-Theological camp, has an originality and freedom from stereotype which enables it to outpace the standard Protestant challenges.[1] Barth's unkind caricature of the 'staff-officer of the Lord' could hardly be recognised in Dunstan's portrait of the moralist as a craftsman whose art it is to embody a vision of the right and the good into some workable institutional form. For Dunstan, the question 'What ought to be required?' has to be reformulated as 'What ought to be *expected*?' It is not 'law' that the craftsman fashions, but 'convention', which means any written or unwritten code (professional ethics, the rules of a game, common moral assumptions, international treaties), which it is not the job of some magistrate to enforce. Dunstan sees the ethics of the Old and New Testaments as paradigms of how the demand of divine righteousness can be given institutional expression in the life of a community. In the Anglican moral tradition, he argues (p. 32), the same work has been carried on in three directions: the formulation of a code of personal ethics for church members, the organisation and discipline of

the corporate ecclesiastical life, and the church's contribution to the ethical thought of the secular society around it.

It is to this last aspect of the moralist's work that the chapters of application and example which constitute the second half of the book are directed. On the ethics of *biological engineering* Dunstan takes a conservative view of what is possible, and so is inclined to deprecate Paul Ramsey's passionate polemic and prefer the sweetly reasonable approach of Bernard Häring. With Häring he argues tentatively that the animation of a fetus is linked to the development of the cerebral cortex at about eight weeks. A discussion of abortion and euthanasia displays a courteous hostility towards the 1967 Abortion Act and a blunter opposition to voluntary euthanasia. A final chapter contains a vigorous defence of the Just War tradition, strongly dependent on Paul Ramsey, from whom, however, the author rightly dissents on his limited concessions to nuclear deterrence. These chapters are lucid and persuasive, and the reader will be conscious of a warmth of feeling supporting the cool façade of the argument. However, they are necessarily so brief that the book is bound to be judged, not by them, but as a work of methodology, a creative reformulation of the Anglican Moral-Theological tradition which, with Kirk in the grave and Mortimer in the House of Lords, has been some decades a-slumbering.

And how does the revived Brünhilde appear, in the arms of this her Siegfried? No worse than she did, but unlikely to enchant anyone not already under her spell. I find three serious difficulties with Dunstan's programme, each of them reminiscent of a difficulty which 'Christian Ethics' was wont to find with 'Moral Theology' of old.

First, the concept of 'convention' is not a clear one. The old tradition used to be accused of packing so much into the notion of 'law' that moral obligations jostled along with ecclesiastical canons in an inextricable mêlée. Avoiding this, Dunstan has given us instead a new omnibus-*genus*, of which church discipline, table manners, professional etiquette and Red Cross conventions are all species. Are the common factors in these various social institutions more significant than their differences? I doubt it. At the very least there needs to be a sharp distinction made between conventions to which semi-formal sanctions are attached (as, for example, when a doctor is struck off the register for a breach of medical ethics), and conventions which are simply 'conventional', in the narrower sense that failure to conform is rude but nothing worse.

Secondly, just as the old Moral Theology was blamed for cherishing overmuch its role as the guide of secular legislators, so, too, Dunstan's view of the moralist's role in society seems still to have about it a strongly establishmentarian flavour. Consider, as an example, the author's quarrel with Paul Ramsey (pp. 59f.). The two are disagreed on a factual matter: Ramsey thinks certain procedures likely, which Dunstan regards as remote and improbable. On substantial ethical

points, however, they seem to enjoy a fairly wide agreement, and in his latest writings Ramsey appears to be approaching the same view of fetal animation as that held by Dunstan and Häring.[8] What cause, then, for discord? It all seems to turn on Ramsey's camel-hair suit and his diet of locusts and wild honey, not at all the right way for a Dunstanian artificer to carry on! Now Dunstan is within his rights to complain that the hurling of prophetic anathemas is not in every case the most helpful way to tackle the problems of the world. Referring in particular to the controversy over *in vitro* fertilisation, he may perhaps be justified in objecting that Ramsey's anguish has led him to misunderstand the work of R. G. Edwards and to match 'extravagance of claim with extravagance of refutation'. But we cannot allow him to go further and exclude *a priori* all possibility of a Christian's denouncing, rather than advising, the culture in which he lives. Whether or not it is easy to recognise, there is such a thing as the demonic, which requires some more decisive reaction than a courteous offer of consultation. On the biological issue I cannot arbitrate; but on the question of moral methodology I judge that Dunstan, by casting the Christian moralist in the role of professional colleague to the secular expert, has improperly restricted the range of possible Christian response.

Thirdly, Biblical Ethics, which Dunstan treats, as the older tradition did, as the first chapter in the history of the church's self-administration. In one respect, he is better placed than his predecessors. Having abandoned their concentration on 'law', he is delivered from slavery to that grotesque search for ecclesiastical regulations, disciplinary rules, ordination rituals and the like, which marred the work of so great a moralist as Kirk when he dealt with the New Testament. In another respect his position is more exposed. No one, however determined, could suppose that primitive Canon Law accounted for all Biblical moral teaching; but in the notion of 'institutional convention' our author has a veritable carpet-bag of a category in which he seems to hope that he can squeeze everything. In rejecting the old Reformation distinction between 'ceremonial', 'civil' and 'moral' law, he refuses the only serious attempt ever made (albeit a crude one) to draw essential hermeneutical distinctions among the different *kinds* of ethical material the Bible contains. Until we return to, and improve upon, these analytic tools, we shall never unlock the resources of the Bible for modern ethical questions.

Dunstan's apparent belief that Biblical Ethics can be understood entirely as institutional paradigm cannot command our assent. In fact it does not altogether command the author's assent! For by admitting fleetingly to the occasional occurrence of 'first-order principles', which 'are not the words of law', but 'stand eternally in judgment over all law, all convention, all institutions, all human action, all human aspiration' (p. 29), he kindly lights the fuse which will blow his ethical methodology apart. For once that concession is made, we cannot

fail to ask how first-order principles in the text of Scripture are to be distinguished from institutional paradigm; what rules govern their conversion into convention or law; and how the institutional conventions of one age may authentically be translated, *via* the first-order principle, into institutional conventions for another? Admit the presence of the first-order principle, and the Bible immediately stops being the 'History of Christian Institutions' and becomes (whatever the hermeneutic subtlety needed to understand it) *das Gebot*, the demand of God, spoken to us and to all men for eternity.

But how is the demand heard? Inasmuch as human social regulations are always accommodated to historical possibilities, the ear which hears the word in its plainest form will necessarily be an individual's ear. There is one point at which the limitations of history are no excuse, one point at which any adaptation inevitably becomes dilution: and that is where the command speaks to *me*. What we require of each other can never be the same as what God requires of each, individually. In terms of social ethics, there must be a gap between the eschatological and the historical *ought*, a difference between what John the Seer beholds descending from Heaven and what he recommends for any present Ephesus, Thyatira or Philadelphia. But in terms of individual obligation there can be no such calculated commutation of absolute *ought* into relative, no deliberated compromise with hardness of heart. And that is why the first question in ethics must always be the question of the individual's responsibility, including, of course, his responsibility to society. As a member of both historical and eschatological communities it will be up to him to shape the one as closely as it can be shaped to the image of the other. For a moralist to jump first to the institution-forming questions is to prejudge the relationship between the ultimate and the intermediate, to risk diluting the command of God in the interests of a 'lesser righteousness' which may properly characterise cities and churches, laws and conventions, but never the disciple alone, face to face with his Master.

There is much to enjoy in Professor Dunstan's book, and very much to learn. But when I have to justify to myself the time I spend thinking about questions of morality, I do not think I shall follow him, or the tradition to which he has so distinctively contributed, in finding the answer in social artifice.

[1] *The Artifice of Ethics*, The Moorhouse Lectures 1973. SCM Press. 118 pp. £2.25.

[2] Ramsey, 'Abortion, a Review Article', *The Thomist*, Vol 37, 1973. All these writers are unnecessarily impressed by the phenomenon of 'twinning' as a difficulty for a theory of animation at conception. It is, however, a *responsible* view, taking the physiological data seriously. On occasion Dunstan can forget responsibility and wander towards subjectivism, as when he writes (p. 69): 'Humanity is an attributed status: an imposition from the humane cultural tradition upon the genetic inheritance.'