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The New Morality

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THE THOUGHTFUL CHRISTIAN is continually forced to ask the question 'Why?'. Granted that the Bible is the revelation from God, it is an answer, but not a complete answer, that 'God says it'. So in biblical theology we draw our systems that make coherent sense, and in morals we try to see how the biblical commands are in the best interests of man. It is this latter subject with which this article is concerned.

Our assumption is that all God's commands are in the best interests of man. This does not mean that God exists for man's benefit, but we must give due weight to the fact that man was made in the likeness of God. Now he has fallen, and the pattern has been disintegrated. It can be restored only through obedience to God's commands, and the essential beginning is the new birth, with all that this involves in forgiveness, cleansing, the incoming of the Holy Spirit, and the life lived out from God at the centre. Since God made man to be God-centred and God-directed, such a life is a life of fulfilment, and so of satisfaction, and it is a life

which is in the best interests of man. It involves the whole of man's being, and not some small department labelled 'spiritual'.

NON-CHRISTIAN ETHICS

The non-Christian, whether or not he is a humanist, approaches the problem differently, but, if he is genuinely concerned with man's best interests, his conclusions will frequently run parallel with the Christian ideal. Often he will not realize how much he has actually drawn from Christian faith and practice. Where he fails is: (i) By omitting God, he has denied a whole area of human experience. He can be compared with the 'body-building' type, who treats the body as though it were the sole purpose of man's existence, and who dismisses the pleasures and needs of the mind as irrelevant. (ii) By omitting the gospel of redemption, he shows an unwholesome pride in his own abilities, and lack of awareness of a true sense of sin; and he cuts himself off from the struggling sinners who form so much of the world. (iii) He has not made sufficient allowance for the depths to which sin has gone in all of us, so that all our thinking and

emotions are to some degree warped by it. Thus we are often unable to decide what is in the best interests of man, and we tend to rationalize our own emotions.

Christian morality has always been under fire. Mostly the attacks have been from the outside, by those who found it too exacting. From time to time attacks have come from the inside, when individuals and groups have forced the Church to recognize some blind spot in the application of biblical truth. Sometimes non-Christians have forced the reconsideration of some issue. Today the Christian Church is having to face a reconsideration of specific points, such as war, flogging, and capital punishment; but in addition we are challenged on our whole approach to morality.

THE NEW CHALLENGE

The challenge comes from outside, as in the Reith Lectures for 1962, *This Island Now*, by Professor G. M. Carstairs, and in sundry articles by some sociologists; and also it comes from some who write books as Christians, such as the Rev. Harry Williams (in *Soundings* and *Objections to Christian Belief*), the Bishop of Woolwich, and the authors of *Towards a Quaker View of Sex*.

The battle, as it has caught the attention of the public, centres in some of the problems of sex, especially in the field of premarital and extramarital relationships. Since sex is an explosive subject, it is almost impossible for anyone to consider the issues calmly and with reasonable impartiality. The approach of the outsider, who does not write as a Christian, whatever his personal attitude to Christ may be, differs from that of the man who writes deliberately as a Christian. The outsider writes from the basis of hedonism, the view that estimates the rightness or wrongness of actions by the amount of pleasure or pain that they produce. 'Pleasure' and 'pain' are not, of course, used simply of the physical results, nor do they necessarily refer solely to immediate pleasure and pain, although with the sex act the immediate pleasure looms so large that the remoter results are generally lost sight of. None the less Professor Carstairs on page 50 refers to societies, such as the Trobriand Islanders, where premarital sexual relationships are enjoyed without proving incompatible with a stable married life: thus, on a hedonistic basis one might say that the immediate pleasure was not outweighed by a subsequent greater pain.

There is no doubt that this argument is intended to allow far more freedom than is thought of by those who write as Christians. The latter are prepared to admit cases where fornication is not a sin, but, as an act of self-giving, is to be counted as goodness. Their quarrel with the orthodox Christian morality is over the possibility of having standards, rules and statements rather than the basic all-covering Christian love, which is expressed in generous self-giving. The choice is thought to lie between legalism and life, and often St Paul is blamed as the apostle of legalism, still hidebound by the rules under which he had been brought up, and, in following St Paul, we are said to be leaving the example of Jesus Christ.

At this point we ought to consider whether these modern writers are in fact saying the same as orthodox Christian moralists have said all along. Christian moralists have recognized that there may be occasions when one must choose the lesser of two evils. This is not to accept the other slogan, that the end justifies the means, which implies that one chooses a wrong action as a short cut to what appears to be a good end, when the same end can be reached by a good action. The necessity to choose between two evils arises occasionally, and it is due to the fact that we live in a sinful and disorganized world. Thus, to take an example from something in today's papers, a man in a key position in a firm might receive an anonymous call from someone offering to sell some secrets of a rival firm. It would then be his duty to deceive the caller so as, if possible, to trap him into arrest. Yet we regard deception and lying as wrong in themselves.

It is clear that this is not the sort of thing that the advocates of the New Morality have in mind. The very fact that I have stated the above problem in the orthodox way, bringing in standards and rules, cuts across their approach to morals. If it were possible to think out an example where fornication were the lesser of two evils — and, I admit, I cannot think of one — then the orthodox Christian moralist would still regard it as a sin for which one needed to ask forgiveness, and not as an action which was good in itself.

EXAMPLES

It so happens that the Rev. Harry Williams has supplied one or two examples, which are worth analysing.

The first (in *Soundings*, p. 81) is taken from the film *Never on Sunday*. A Greek prostitute is picked up by a young sailor, who distrusts his capacity for physical union. 'The prostitute gives herself to him in such a way that he acquires confidence and self-respect. He goes away a deeper fuller person than he came in. What is seen is an act of charity which proclaims the glory of God. The man is now equipped as he was not before.' The Christian wants to ask, 'Equipped for what?' For picking up another girl at the next port? Or for marriage? It is a fact that one of the causes of impotency in marriage is the fact that a man has had previous sexual experiences with a prostitute.

Another example is given by Mr Williams in *Objections to Christian Belief*, p. 52f. A 'righteous' man dreamed that he was watching a play. He turned round and 'at the back of the theatre there was a monster in human form who was savagely hypnotizing the actors on the stage, reducing them to puppets'. Later he realized that this monster was the God whom he was worshipping, and he broke away from his old religious life, which had been 'a compulsive response to a deeply embedded feeling of guilt'. Later he was found 'drunk among the bars and brothels of Tangier', but he had learnt 'that for him evil was not what the priests told him it was, but rather that evil was the disguised slavery to his own hidden corruption which had led him to go to Mass every day and to confession every month'. Canon E. N. Ducker, in *Psycho-Therapy; A Christian Approach*, p. 116f., comments on the tragedy that there was no-one to give a proper interpretation to the dream. The figure probably represented the repressed shadow side of the dreamer. He certainly needed the warning of the dream to draw him from his own reliance on good works. 'He was sitting on a volcano, the volcano of his untamed instinctual self. The eruption took place when he identified himself with his shadow, forsook his former God, and made the monstrous figure his God.'

I have quoted these two examples, not because all followers of the New Morality would accept them exactly as Mr Williams accepts them, but because they illustrate the sort of principles that are being applied. At least they show that the new approach is no easier to apply, and not necessarily more Christian in its outcome, than that of the orthodox Christian moralist. We shall return later

to the pragmatic tests, but must now take up the question of Christian standards.

LOVE AND LAW

There is no doubt that the doctrine of the primacy of love is central to all the New Testament writers. If it is the theme of the Johannine writings in particular, it is stated both by Jesus Christ (Mark 12: 28f.) and by St Paul (e.g. Romans 13) as basic. Equally it is true that the New Testament writers found it necessary to state standards for practical application by Christians. These standards were regarded as the manifestation of love in action. There is little doubt that the New Morality will quickly evolve its standards. Indeed Mr Williams says that the sociological implications of substituting 'Thou shalt not exploit another person' for 'Thou shalt not commit adultery' have yet to be worked out.

We may agree again that, the moment one has standards, one opens the door to hypocrisy and pride. Christianity quickly becomes identified with doing, or not doing, certain things. The same danger appears in the sacraments and in any form of worship, which can become a substitute for the real thing. I do not know of any church which is wholly free from such hypocrisy, but history and experience show that deliverance does not come by discarding standards. There have been movements which claimed the freedom of the Spirit, but which have foundered on the rocks of moral shipwreck.

The true way-out is the evangelical, biblical and Pauline truth of justification by faith, and it is good to see that much pastoral psychology is coming to this doctrine on pragmatic, as well as theological, grounds. Whereas writers like Mr Williams urge us to open the door to our real selves buried in the unconscious, the orthodox Christian is not so optimistic about the results. Knowing how deeply sin has entered into every single part of us, into the unconscious as well as the conscious, we despair of finding any sure refuge in ourselves. We may disguise our need by a safe orthodoxy, or we may gladly accept God's justifying love in Christ, and count upon the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and His renewal of us into the likeness of Christ.

Once we have said this, we may more safely consider our standards for daily living. If we do not have our standards broadly formulated, we shall easily be

swept off our feet when the crisis comes. This is specially so in crises of sex. If I start with the assumption that fornication or adultery may in rare cases be consistent with the divine law of love and self-giving, it will be more than an open question that *my* problem is one of the rare exceptions. This is not just a piece of orthodox exaggeration to score a debating point; it forms the basis of so much literature, and so many plays and films, that one knows it to be so.

Moreover the Lord Jesus Christ Himself saw nothing inconsistent in stating the commands of the Decalogue alongside His summary of the whole law in terms of love to God and man (Mark 10: 17f.; 12: 28f.). In the Sermon on the Mount, with its application and extension of the Law, He gave no hint of any fresh interpretation of the Law against adultery, but pointed out that adultery of the heart was as important in the sight of God as the act itself (Matt. 5: 27f.).

SOME OBSERVATIONS

In conclusion we may make one or two observations on the practical results of the movement away from orthodox Christian standards, especially in the field of sex. Here one is forced to use the facts of the past to throw light on the future. The only examples which can be urged by the New Morality are a few primitive peoples like the Trobriand Islanders who were so thoroughly studied by Malinowski. Some of Malinowski's conclusions have been challenged (as in *Man and Culture*, edited by J. R. Firth), but we may accept that he has shown that it is possible to have a primitive society in which a wide degree of sexual freedom is encouraged before marriage, and yet the total society is relatively stable and peaceful. It should also be noted that, at least after marriage, and over a certain area before, there are definite laws and standards among the Trobrianders.

One wonders how far the advocates of the New Morality seriously suppose that modern civilization could in fact change (up or down?) to the Trobriander ideal. An historian who was not a Christian, J. D. Unwin, made an excellent case for the control and restraint of the sexual impulses when he wrote *Sex and Culture and Sexual Relations and Human Behaviour* in 1933 and 1934. He found a definite correlation between the control and relaxation of sex desires and the rise and fall of the civilizations

of the past. There is nothing in history to encourage the belief that sexual freedom makes for the well-being, rather than the gradual disintegration, of a civilized community, and a Christian, who accepts the New Testament standards as God-given, would not expect a different conclusion, since God's standards are in man's best interest.

History shows that man has made his progress by being different from the rest of the animal world. An animal is largely bound by the circle of its instincts. (Although some object to the word 'instinct', it is still meaningful, though not self-explanatory.) Man has to harness and direct the drives that make for the survival of the individual and the group. This will often involve hard self-denial; otherwise flabbiness settles in over the whole of an individual's and community's being. Jesus Christ and the New Testament writers visualize the way of progress as involving self-denial.

The further problem of the homosexual cannot be discussed within the scope of a short article. The Christian needs to have the fullest light from medical and psychological sources about the probable causes of homosexuality, but this must be with a view to its cure, and if possible its removal. Scientific opinions are still in a state of flux about this. Meanwhile the Christian, whether or not he himself is sexually balanced, tries to see the problem from the point of view of the homosexual himself, but he cannot in all honesty agree that homosexual actions are right, since all such actions are forbidden throughout the Bible, and not simply in the story of Sodom.

To sum up; the statement of the Christian way of life in terms of commands and prohibitions is not inconsistent with the primal command of love. Christian morality advances through a constant examination of the application of New Testament commands and principles in the light of the current situation. Justification of greater laxity must proceed only with extreme caution, since laxity is so often the enemy of maturity. When this laxity implies what is directly forbidden in the New Testament, the Christian must call a halt.

For further reading:

The New Morality, by Arnold Lunn and Garth Lean (Blandford, 1964. 154pp. 5s.) is an extremely good assessment of contemporary writings.