

CONSCIENCE AND ITS PROBLEMS: AN INTRODUCTION TO CASUISTRY by Kenneth E. Kirk *James Clarke & Co, Cambridge, 1999. Pp. liv + 407, £17.50 pbk.*

In the period before Vatican II, much Catholic moral theology had an emphatic and interlocked concern with law and casuistry. The post-conciliar renewal was particularly intense with regard to these two components. Whilst retaining the gains of renewal, now there are also attempts at retrieving certain discarded aspects of the tradition, including casuistry shorn of legalism. Germain Grisez's *Difficult Moral Questions* (1997), running to almost a thousand pages, is a monumental effort to state and answer a variety of questions not yet the subject of explicit or clearly applicable Church teachings. It will surely help redirect future Catholic moral theology. On the Anglican side, Kenneth Kirk's respected study of casuistry has just been reprinted.

Kirk (1886-1954) was probably the outstanding Anglican moral theologian of his generation, first publishing his volume on casuistry in 1927 and revising it in his lifetime. In his helpful introduction, David Smith presents Kirk's conception of casuistry as: case centred; concerned with accountability and rationale for moral action; making heavy use of a comparative case analysis; and rooted in an identifiable religious and cultural tradition. Even this simplifying list immediately draws attention to both the abiding value of some form of casuistry and its limitations. Kirk divides his work into two main parts, first dealing with conscience and casuistry and then with problems of conscience. He is explicit about his debt to Aquinas, and conscious of the similarities between his approach to law, conscience and casuistry and the treatment to be found in contemporary Catholic textbooks.

Kirk was simultaneously aware of both the merits and the risks of deploying casuistry. For him the disrepute of the concept was due to its abuse rather than its real nature, and he believed its abuse arose not so much in hypocrisy or lax immoralism as in the follies of a high-minded moral rigidity. In a fine passage Kirk reflects that there are more things in the human heart than are dreamt of in academic ethics. We might recall that as well as being an Oxford academic, when Kirk wrote this he had been chaplain to the forces in France and Flanders during the First World War, and then a college chaplain. He subsequently became a markedly pastoral bishop. According to Kirk, Christians should prepare to face future problems by a deliberate, devoted and prayerful effort to extend the range of their sympathies.

Given his insistence on the communal, social dimension of human nature, and the importance of loyalty and belonging to a tradition, Kirk's account of conscience and casuistry is firmly located in the ambit of the Church of England of his day. In some ways this limits the appeal of the volume, but paradoxically it vindicates the point about the social, rooted, communal dimensions of an individual's conscience.

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