

into the basis of the bargain, seems to violate the probabilities of the rest of the action. This is reminiscent of Hawthorne, and so is the device by which Updike displaces the catastrophe of his story from the human characters to the inanimate church—an effective set-piece, but too obviously stage-managed, a purely aesthetic climax where we have been led to expect a moral one.

For all that, *Couples* impressed me as an intelligent and skilfully composed novel on a significant theme, and most of the comment I have heard or read upon it seems to me to have done Updike less than justice.

The Church and Moral Decision¹

by Peter Harris

Not all the discussion between progressive and conservative wings in the Church is about doctrine and liturgy. As the *Humanae Vitae* affair revealed there are growing areas of disagreement on questions of morality. Though the ones I want to write about are found in acute form in Roman Catholic circles where there is a sharper clash between individual and authority, they are also frequent wherever any strong doctrine of revelation, particularly of a fundamentalist kind, prevails. This essay aims simply to elucidate some of the questions which do not always get properly examined in the heat of debate and to analyse some of the presuppositions behind popularly held and taught views which lay some claim to being representative of 'traditional Christian morality'. Not infrequently the views of serious moral thinkers are dubbed 'situation ethics' or 'purely subjective morality' and by being so labelled are accounted suitably disposed of along with the rest of the contents of the bin marked 'new theology'. There is a risk that more than garbage is disposed of in this way. I want in this essay to do a bit of 'cool looking' at some of the presuppositions of the supporters of 'traditional Christian morality' (self-styled) and also to look at a problem that crops up frequently in these discussions: what can be reckoned as specifically 'Christian' in a moral view which does not understand moral imperatives to have been delivered timeless and eternal in some earlier period of history? In other words this part of the essay could be seen as an attempt to answer the accusation of reductionism, 'that's just humanism' which is often levelled at

¹This essay grew out of a paper delivered to the National Theological Commission of England and Wales and later expanded for the Conference at Spode House in January 1970: *The Teaching Church and the Taught Church*.

essays in relocating the specifically Christian elements of Christian moral theory.

I. *Authority v. Private Judgment: the structure of moral judgments*

It is sometimes assumed that the very structure of moral decisions is different for a Christian who accepts divine revelation from how it is for others. It is somehow assumed that for the Christian such sure guidance is available that the chief difficulty in making a morally good decision lies not in discovering what he should do but rather in overcoming the obstacles from his own weakness and from temptation, etc., which hinder his making this speculative knowledge into a practical decision. The ease with which he may know what is right is in sharp contrast to the laborious and groping way in which others, without the benefit of divine revelation, have to come to a decision in their own conscience about what they should do. The only alternative to the certainty of a conscience that accepts divine authority mediated by the Church is the highly dubious and fallacious dictates, or better, gropings, of private judgment. This assumption has often been so ingrained in certain forms of Christian education that 'conscience versus authority' could seem an appropriate statement of basic disagreement.

The fact that Vatican II found it necessary to preface a good number of its statements with a reevaluation of the significance of personal conscience for Christians as well as for others shows how far this assumption has penetrated.¹ Only a little thought is necessary to detect the false assumptions lying behind the posing of the problem in this disjunction. But they have infected so much debate that it is worth while, I think, to uncover them again.

Obedience and Responsibility

First, if we normally reach moral decisions simply by accepting authoritative teaching then all moral decisions are reduced to the one moral colour; that of obedience. Secondly the disjunction suggests that some moral decisions can be private, brewed up simply in the inner secrecy of a 'private' conscience. Thirdly, implied in all this is an idea that moral decisions can be reached by two entirely separate forms or structures of moral enquiry.

The first point is of particular importance for understanding current moral debates among Roman Catholics, for in our Church the emphasis on the role of authority and on obedience as its counterpart has been both strong and pervasive, whether the authority in question has been that of popes, councils or bishops, encyclical letters or canon law, parish priests or religious superiors.² Such

¹Cf. Pastoral Constitution, *Gaudium et Spes*, Paras 16 and 17; Declaration on *Religious Freedom*, particularly paras 1 and 3; Declaration on *Christian Education*, para. 1.

²I do not here want to enter into the debate about monastic obedience under vow or its equivalent in other forms of religious life. This seems to me to be a separate question about the validity of monasticism as a way of life, though doubtless the monastic tradition has not been without influence in other forms of Christian life.

emphasis on obedience has been saved theoretically from grosser distortion by the qualification ' . . . in all except sin'. In practice it has often meant a real devaluation, sometimes personally damaging, of the notion of personal responsibility as well as debilitating the development of moral awareness. I shall want to argue that the thrust of Christian moral teaching deriving from the New Testament is precisely towards growth in moral awareness as transcending the more childish forms of morality where all virtues coalesce into obedience. Indeed, the paradigm of Christian morality has often been sought in the obedience of child to parent rather than in the mature judgment of the morally 'wise' man.

Against this distorted notion of Christian morality it is necessary to assert that after the last word has been spoken by any authority whatsoever, *it remains the inalienable right and inescapable duty of the moral adult, to make his own moral judgment and to accept personally the responsibility for his own decisions.* To put it slightly more concretely, it is better to help your neighbour because you see that he needs to be helped than to do so because it has been commanded that you should. This is in fairly sharp contrast to some attitudes prevailing in religious circles where blind obedience has been extolled as an essentially Christian attitude towards morality.

What is a private judgment?

The second assumption I wanted to question was whether really the only alternative to 'obedience to authority' is 'private judgment'. In fact, of course, it would be very difficult to discover or describe a private judgment. Decisions cannot be made without reference to social context, to the vast hinterland of custom, law, moral rules, the opinion of other members of society and so on. True, one can to a degree retire into more or less selfish criteria for decision, but this is by no means the only possible alternative to blind obedience. Good moral decision would seem to arise out of a kind of dialogue between individual and community in which full attention is given to public moral advice, rules, laws, etc., and the individual's own developed sense of responsibility, critical judgment and moral awareness or sensitivity. In this case, moral decision will be neither blind obedience nor private judgment, yet will remain a responsibility which is fully personal and for which the person taking it can be considered fully accountable. Without such an interplay of individual and community in which the community does not take over responsibility and the individual remains free and responsible, there does not seem much room for moral progress within human community. Again, I shall want to argue that the principal thrust of New Testament moral teaching is towards moral progress rather than towards a new and perfect code of moral laws. Coercion by the community of the individual tends in the long run against such moral progress and growth in

freedom. It is all too easy to succumb to the temptation of making 'law and order' an end in itself and obtaining at all costs a prescribed pattern of behaviour rather than affording a context in which moral sensitivity can develop.

The social context of Moral Choice

I suggested thirdly that behind these questionable assumptions lay the implication that moral decision could take two distinct forms or structures, one in which painstakingly a man could search for moral wisdom through discussion, reading, philosophizing and so on. This would lead to conclusions of great fragility and provisionality, hardly vigorous enough to support practical decisions. On the other hand, moral decisions can be reached rapidly and with a much higher degree of certainty by reference to the appropriate moral laws of a community such as the Church (particularly in those offices and institutions which embody 'authority'), and consequently a sure and strong ground can be provided for moral decision of a practical kind, without much expenditure of effort.

This works all right provided you are prepared to accept a notion of the Church which sees her as already in possession of complete moral insight or in such direct contact with a divine law-giver as to be in a position no longer to be engaged in moral search and enquiry but able to dispense through its various channels of communication, with more or less binding force, the decisions of a divine mind. In recent years, however, this model of the Church's reception and mediation of revelation has been open to considerable questioning and by now it seems it would need either a fool or a knave to support such a position without immense qualification. Gradually we are coming to understand the Church as not simply made up of teaching and taught but as a community dedicated to listening, searching and enquiring communally for the full measure of the moral demands of the gospel, aware both of its own traditions of morality and of the special ministries in the Church for the co-ordination and support of this endeavour, yet at the same time still searching for a fuller and more complete understanding of Christian moral demands.

There is here certainly something specifically Christian: listening to the gospel, dedication to communal enquiry, hope for enlightenment and so on; but these, it seems, do not alter the fundamental structure of moral enquiry and the process needed to come to an adult and responsible moral decision. For the Christian the special social context of his decision, namely his membership of the Church, does not in any way relieve him of accepting full responsibility for his own decisions nor consequently of the freedom to make them. His Christian faith is to be seen as committing him to, rather than relieving him of, both freedom and personal responsibility. This clearly demands, though it does not come within the scope of this

essay, a constant reappraisal of the social structure of the Church with a view to seeing that this community provides people with the necessary framework for free and responsible decision.

On the other hand it is wrong to think of those who have no formal religious affiliation as being either absolved or deprived of a social and communal setting for moral decision. Interplay between Church and society generally might be a good deal more fruitful if the Church could offer a better example of how a community can offer a context for moral decision without the discouraging spectacle of authoritarianism, moral coercion, intolerance and the tendency to exclude those who do not subscribe to the party line. Moral pluralism does not have to mean 'permissiveness' which, as popularly understood, is simply a feature of reaction against authoritarian patterns, not their necessary alternative.¹

I should perhaps add a word of correction before moving on to the next section of the essay. It might appear from the preceding discussion that I advocate personal agonizing over every decision of a moral kind. Clearly a great number of our moral decisions are pre-critical ones which rely simply on the inherited moral wisdom of society, summarized in moral rules, accepted standards, codes of law, public opinion and so on. For the Christian this background will be further enriched by the traditions, moral rules and laws of the Church. But if the Christian is committed to the search for moral awareness and sensitivity then there will also be a constant critical interplay between himself and the accepted norms and standards. This interplay will in turn contribute towards the improvement of such moral summaries.

II. 'Objective morality'—a case of distended analogy

These notions of moral pluralism and progressive morality inevitably invite such questions as: 'But is there no objective moral law, no absolute standard?' Again I feel that the ground of a number of discussions of this kind needs to be cleared a bit and some analysis of what we think we mean by objective morality or moral law is called for.

In its plain and ordinary use 'objectivity' is a quality of factual reports, statements and descriptions. Even here there are important and tricky philosophical questions, but for the most part we negotiate the concept fairly successfully in these contexts. Actual events or objects in their physical and historical givenness are the standard against which accounts or descriptions are measured and corrected. When such statements are invaded by the personal interests of the observer to such an extent that this correspondence

¹I have had to limit the scope of this essay to the field of personal morality. The separation of such moral questions from those of social morality becomes increasingly difficult and it is here used purely methodologically to treat certain limited questions. In fact it is in the study of community responsibility that the most important developments are likely to take place in the coming years with important consequences for questions of personal morality.

is attenuated, we rightly say that an element of 'subjectivity' has entered into the process and these statements have become unsuitable for certain purposes.

When however we transfer the concept of objectivity from factual or descriptive statements and make it a quality of moral judgments, what can we mean? Do we mean that in listing the data of experience, alongside houses, men and heroic deeds, there is also morals? There would need to be if we were to use objectivity in the same sense. Since no one I know has ever seen a moral against which moral decisions might be measured for objectivity, we must at least be using the concept analogically or metaphorically. Such transference certainly seems acceptable in the field of legal or law-regarding statements. The decision to act in a certain way can be measured against known laws regarding the proposed course of action. So, for example, decisions of courts of law can be studied for objectivity in this sense and we can complain of 'subjective interpretation of the law or of evidence' in a perfectly understandable way, where personal bias, partiality or animosity distort the verdict. The analogy or metaphor is here working successfully and usefully.

But the 'legality' of a decision and its 'morality' are by no means precisely the same thing. Courts of law exist primarily to judge and determine the legal status of actions, etc. But they do also, in the name of justice, concern themselves with considerations of 'culpability', 'responsibility' and so on. Here we are concerned with concepts which span the legal and the moral fields and the discourse is now much closer to and more difficult to distinguish from moral discourse. It is perhaps for this reason and at this point that we can slip in a further transference of the notion of 'objectivity' into moral discourse. In this subtle move we have almost unnoticeably implied the existence somewhere of a comprehensive and determinate *moral* law in terms of which objectivity might be measured. But the legitimacy of this move and the extension of the analogy are questionable: Does moral demand or obligation in fact arise from the prior givenness of certain moral 'laws' or does it arise immediately out of the coexistence and relatedness of people within a single world? (For the Christian this would in no way militate against the source of moral obligation in God: it would only question the adequacy of conceiving God as standing over against the world of human affairs as a transcendent legislator.)

Law or relatedness

I shall again want to argue that the thrust of New Testament moral teaching is a concern with moral obligation seen in its deepest source: the confrontation of man with other men and so with God. The twofold commandment of love transcends and surpasses all moral laws precisely because it reaches to and uncovers

the real source of moral obligation: personal relatedness which lies deeper than law. Moral laws or rules are then seen as useful and important summaries of the kinds of obligation that arise more immediately and directly out of personal relationship of every kind. Nor, I think, is this to fall into the naturalistic fallacy which, though a logically false move at the level of abstract discourse, is not necessarily so at the more basic level of concrete or phenomenological discourse. The more abstract discussion of morals is useful only in so far as it helps to elucidate, analyse and summarize the more basic discourse. When its constructs are reified, it leads to misconceptions such as the existence of moral laws as such. It may be true that moral evaluation becomes more difficult when moral laws are thus seen as useful analytical constructs and provisional generalizations, but, by analogy, scientists are not allowed to dictate orderliness and ease of classification to physical phenomena in the name of the laws of nature which they construct.

If we accept the thesis that moral obligation arises not out of the prior existence of moral laws but directly out of the problems of inter-personal relationship of every kind in the same world, then one may go on to ask what becomes of the quality of 'absoluteness' and 'inviolability' which we rightly associate with certain moral demands? This is a vital question because I think that here we are at the heart of something specific to Christian morality which is easily lost sight of where legal considerations are over-emphasized. Compare 'good is to be done and evil avoided' (abstract general ethic) with 'love God above all things and your neighbour as yourself' (concrete Christian general ethic). Neither general statement is particularly helpful about what is to be done specifically; but whereas in the first abstract statement the source of moral demand is not clear and could be interpreted as making law an end and people means, the second clearly indicates that people are not means but in some sense ends in themselves. It is people, not laws, who are inviolable and in some sense have absolute value. Any other more specific determination of Christian moral obligation which does not locate absolute value in human beings (in their total interrelationship and in their history) and displaces people by law cannot be accounted as Christian.

Only a moral theory which recognizes this priority can hope to do justice to man's historical existence. When law is made an end then human progress and growth is limited by the unchanging confines of established law. But when human beings and their need to grow and develop in a shared human history are clearly the source and focus of moral obligation, then laws, rules, etc., can play their proper role because they are continually open to critical reappraisal and adaptation to new needs. Human history obviously reveals the frequency with which the vigour of human growth breaks through the confines of rigid law; my point is that

the demand of Christian faith is for clear recognition of this proper priority in the inevitable tension between law and morality.

It must be admitted at once that in this case, evaluation of progress and regress in morality becomes more problematic and difficult to assess than in the case where we presume a series of 'given' moral laws against which the standard of morality can be assessed and progress or decline estimated. At the same time it offers a new and unlimited horizon for moral progress which is no insignificant gain against the price paid in terms of precision, exactitude and tidiness.

If we return to the question of 'objectivity' we shall have to admit that whereas the move from descriptive to legal objectivity could be easily negotiated and usefully justified, in the sphere of morality it is difficult to find anything clearly corresponding to an object. It would now have to be something like 'the hypothetical goal of an ideal state of affairs to be realized among people who share a common world and a common history'. At this point one begins to feel that the analogy of objectivity may have become so stretched as to be inhibiting and uncomfortable to a degree and perhaps in need of a dose of critical salts.

III. *Christian morality: dynamic rather than programmatic specification*

Christians sometimes feel insecure if they can no longer point to the specific tenets which differentiate their position from that of humanists, etc. This is reasonable and necessary: it is difficult to subscribe to a belief with no content. But what is specific may not be 'x number of moral propositions' which no one else subscribes to. Just as Christian belief in God is not just any kind of theism but specific recognition of God's power and purpose revealed in Jesus Christ, so Christian morality is essentially focussed on the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. What I should here want to argue is that this revelation is not primarily a revelation of new detailed moral rules but more basically a critique of those moral attitudes which in any way limit vision of what is of absolute value, or close down the frontiers of moral progress by statements delimiting prematurely the field of moral obligation.

The reply of Jesus to Peter on the subject of forgiving one's brother is illuminating (Matt. 18, 21-22). Peter's question looks for a new, specific (though more 'liberal') answer. 'Not seven but seventy times seven' indicates not a greatly expanded version of the earlier demand, but rather an impatient dismissal of such assessments and the statement of an unlimited demand. Similarly, in replying to the lawyer who had got the first answer right about the basic moral demand (Luke 10, 25-37), Jesus refuses to offer a definition or categorization of one's 'neighbour' for purposes of legal estimation and simply offers an illuminating parable. The point of the parable is not: whenever you meet a person in these

circumstances you should class him as your neighbour, but rather: learn to recognize and respond to the needs of other people. It is, and this seems to be why most of Jesus's teaching is in parabolic form, a call to look beyond the prescriptions of law to the real source from which the demand arises—a call to pull aside the 'grid' of legal assessment and meet and recognize other men as men to be loved 'as oneself'. It is a call to insight, awareness, sensitivity: 'he that has ears to hear let him hear'.

Abolishing or Completing the Law?

There is clearly not room here to embark on a full-scale discussion of New Testament moral teaching, but it may be helpful to look briefly at that tradition about the teaching of Jesus embodied in the Sermon on the Mount which might appear to offer an opposite 'legalistic' attitude. It is most strongly expressed in Matt. 5, 17-18: 'Do not imagine that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets. I have come not to abolish but to complete them. I tell you solemnly, till heaven and earth disappear, not one dot, not one little stroke shall disappear from the Law *until its purpose is achieved.*' It may be true that there were parties among the early Christians who understood this saying simply as a reinforcement of the Jewish law or as a further extension of the same kind, and this might explain the following explanatory verse in Matthew: 'Therefore the man who infringes . . .'. Nevertheless, given the whole 'kingdom' context of the Sermon and the demand for 'fulfilment, completion, achievement of purpose' which are New Testament keys to Christ's 'transforming' interpretation of the Old Testament, it does not seem that this text or similar ones can overturn the case for interpreting the moral teaching of Jesus as primarily concerned not with detailed laws or precepts but with a dynamic of morality whose focus has decisively shifted from law to person. Similarly the more specific instances in the sermon about murder, adultery, etc., may be understood as concerned not with closer legal specification, but rather with taking off the limits of moral demand inherent in specific laws and rules.

A final instance may be useful. Sacred times and places like the sabbath and the temple were important focuses of Jewish legal prescriptions; and here again the movement indicated is not towards more sacred sabbaths or bigger and better temples, but a transforming reversal of priorities: 'The sabbath is made for man . . .', 'Destroy this temple . . . another not made by hands'.

Along with this 'taking off of the limits' goes a removal of coercion and enforcement, the concomitants of legalistic morals. Jesus's willingness to lose all his disciples for the sake of truth, his actual letting-go of the rich young man, and most eloquent of all his self-destroying (both to himself and Judas) release of Judas Iscariot, all suggest an insistence on freedom as the necessary condition of moral

maturity: an insistence which can hardly be interpreted, though some might be tempted that way, as 'mere permissiveness'.

Death and Resurrection

My final remarks in trying to assess what is specific in Christian moral attitudes need, more than the rest of this very schematic essay, a degree of expansion which is not possible here. We have already found certain qualities as specifying 'Christian' morality, such as inalienability of conscience, dedication to communal moral enquiry and endeavour, a movement from law-regarding to person-regarding morality with its associated search for progress and accordance of freedom from coercion, an understanding of history. If we have tried to ground these specific qualities in the person and teaching of Jesus, however inadequately, it is important not to fail to identify this Jesus as the subject of death and resurrection. The death and resurrection of Jesus constitute a paradox rather than an escapism, since we have not yet come to experience the resurrection of the man who really and historically died. The death constitutes a precondition of a truly Christian morality: acceptance of death flows back over life as the condition of discipleship, and self-abnegation rightly understood is inescapable in Christian morality. But this acceptance is not a stoical one; rather an absurdly optimistic one, because it is the ground for hope in the real possibility of human fulfilment in unlimited moral progress, which is what is meant by believing in the saving resurrection of Jesus. So perhaps after all the foregoing discussion is not simply an essay in reduction but leaves fairly adequate scope for faith in a transcendent God.

Atheism and The Avant-Garde by Brian Wicker

Defence or Sell-out?

On the face of it, the 'neo-modernist' aesthetic is radically atheistic. (I borrow the term from Frank Kermode's essay *Modernisms*, in *Innovations*, edited by Bernard Bergonzi.) For example Jean Alter has pointed out that in Robbe-Grillet's world everything is meticulously present except that which is associated with God. Wallas, in *Les Gommés*, on the lookout for ways of finding his correct route without giving himself away, asks for the post office but not the cathedral: for the town has none. The island in *Le Voyeur* has a cinema, a café, a garage and a hotel, but no church. In *L'Immortelle*