I find that in the Dictionary of Christian Ethics there is no article on Protestant Ethics. Nor is this surprising. There is no single Protestant Ethic but several of them. Moreover, it is not possible to write about their future without some reflection on their past, as it appears to us as we look back on it from our understanding of the present. It is on this basis that we can attempt to look to the future, realising that to do so is a hazardous business, not least because the future is likely to surprise us. Thinking about the future is rather a conservative activity, because we can only extrapolate upon what we grasp of the present, and the experience of recent centuries suggests that we are likely to be surprised by novelties; indeed, one feature of the Christian faith is that it should prepare us to live with, expect, and evaluate new features in human life.

One of the characteristics of all forms of Protestant ethics (as indeed of Catholic ethics) is that they came into being in a time of relative cultural stability, at least as compared with what has come since. Of course there was social change, but it was not so rapid that the son did not live in a substantially similar world to his father. This is no longer so. The great intellectual change between the modern world and its predecessors began with the foundation in Britain in 1662 of the Royal Society for the Advancement of Science (with its motto nullius in verba). A century later the technological and social fruits of this began to be seen with the advances in agricultural techniques which, in turn, made the Industrial Revolution possible, again beginning in the British Isles. Ever since then their effects have become more and more global, the rate of technical and social change has become faster, and there are no signs of this ending (short of the mass destruction brought about by a nuclear war).

Not only have all forms of Christian Ethics to cope with this, but they have also seen the critical intellectual movements which

1 A lecture delivered in the John Rylands University Library on Wednesday, 8 February 1984.
have accompanied them pose serious challenges to hitherto accepted Christian positions. Scientific methods of an appropriate kind came to be applied to the study of the human past, and history as the discipline we know to-day came into existence. Sacred books, like the Bible, and sacred institutions, like the Church, could not be exempt from critical study. The result has been the breakdown of traditional authorities in Christian ethics as they have been appealed to in the past; the Bible (which particularly affects Protestants), the Church (which particularly affects Roman Catholics), and Natural Law (which affects Protestants least, Anglicans next, and Roman Catholics the most). Added to this, the old ‘Christendom’ position has broken down also. The result is that all traditional confessional traditions are in some disarray, and it is precisely out of this situation that the Ecumenical Movement has developed. We must not fall into the trap of discussing traditional Protestant ethical positions as if they could any longer be thought of as being able to proceed self-sufficiently within their confessional boundaries.

It is against this broad perspective that I turn to consider various expressions of Protestant ethics, on which I need hardly say there is an immense literature.

I

The Lutheran ethic has been particularly associated with the doctrine of the Two Realms or Kingdoms, that of God’s right hand and his left hand. Of course this was not in essence a new idea. Its roots are in the two ages or aeons of the New Testament, developed in the two Cities of St. Augustine, and in the medieval notion of the two swords. Luther wrote of two realms, two governments and two laws; and fine distinctions can be made between them but, with respect to all, he wrote of true Christians who do not need the governments or laws of this world, but become subject to temporal authority and accept callings in civil government, solely for the sake of their neighbour, to restrain wickedness by Wrath. Luther takes no account of the fact of sinful Christians even though he admits true Christians are rare. He goes on to make a distinction between an office and a person holding it, and thinks a Christian rule can be only by love and is therefore
impossible. Justice is not considered as a direct concern of Christians.\(^2\)

The importance of Luther's conception was that it attacked the ideas of the omnicompetent Church which in the last resort claimed to control both realms, and confused spiritual and political powers. It allowed for the legitimate autonomy of different academic disciplines studying different areas of human life, as the medieval synthesis broke up. No longer could ecclesiastical persons tell scholars what to think and men of affairs what to do. Conclusions could not be prescribed in advance. This has been of importance as the natural and human sciences have developed in the centuries since the Reformation. There has been a price to pay, it is true. The sciences have become more and more specialised and sub-divided, so that we have experts who are in command of a small field and can hardly talk to each other, much less to the general public. Worse, they can be so uninformed about the common affairs of men that they are gullible outside their expertise, and a potential menace as citizens. Also there are often implicit (and sometimes explicit) value assumptions in the work of scientists in both the natural and human sciences which are not necessary to the discipline and may be gravely defective from a human, and particularly a Christian, point of view. Too rigid an adherence to a Two Realms position can lead to the lack of a critique of these disciplines just where it is needed. But these dangers can be corrected without abandoning the important and liberating contribution of the Two Realms' doctrine to Christian Ethics.

Luther himself lived at the beginning of a new intellectual and social ferment of which he had little knowledge. His own attitude in economic and social matters, for instance, was for the most part medieval. He had no understanding of the crumbling feudal economic order of his time, nor of the reasons for the rapid

\(^2\) For Luther's doctrine of the Two Realms see, "The Two Kingdoms and Two Regiments: Some Problems of Luther's Zwei-Reiche-Lehre", W.J. Cargill Thompson in his Studies in the Reformation: Luther to Hooker (1980). Convenient discussions of Luther's ethics are found in The Ethics of Martin Luther, Paul Althaus (E.T. 1972) and Luther's Doctrine of Two Kingdoms, Heinrich Bornkamm (Philadelphia, 1966). A selection on ethics from the writings of Lutheran theologians is contained in Two Kingdoms and One World, K.H. Hertz (Minneapolis, 1976).

(In writings referred to in these Notes the place of publication is London unless otherwise stated).
inflation which was upsetting established social structures and making social change faster than was customary, though not particularly fast by our standards. He wrote and said a lot about it, but the upshot was what R.H. Tawney called "the occasional explosions of a capricious volcano". However, another of his contributions was of permanent importance, his bringing of the notion of Vocation or Calling (Beruf) out from the monasteries and nunneries into the market place. No longer were monks and nuns to be called Religious with a capital R, as those called to a special vocation to follow Counsels of Perfection (poverty, chastity and obedience) as against the Precepts binding on all Christians. This has been of quite fundamental importance, not least in the development of the "Protestant Work Ethic" (now increasingly called in question). It has led to a much better theology of the laity; and especially of human sexuality and marriage as no longer an inferior way of life to that of the celibate. The full harvest of this is only now being gathered. Only in the last decades has a renewed theology of marriage thoroughly worked this out, and only since Vatican 2 has the Roman Catholic Church practically abandoned the double standard understanding of the call to join a Religious Order.

Unfortunately, however, the doctrine of Vocation in the world has been perverted in much of Protestantism by equating it with professional and bourgeois occupations, and not with skilled—still less unskilled—labour in manufacturing and commerce. But this cannot be blamed on Luther, who saw clearly that if one is a cobbler and a Christian one is a Christ to one's neighbour if one cobbles his shoes efficiently, and that there is no higher vocation than that. Also, the notion of vocation has been interpreted in an individualistic sense from Luther's time onwards. However, in principle it is a flexible and profound understanding of man in society, which has potential fruitfulness in our advanced industrial societies which are moving to a narrower and more productive manufacturing base on which a more service type of economy can be built. Vocation must not be identified with one particular type of job for each person for life; much greater flexibility will be required. What the doctrine of Vocation did not do was to provide a theological basis for leisure and the contemplative side of life.

4 On Luther's doctrine of the Calling and the Office see The Christian's Calling: Luther on Vocation, Gustav Wingren (E.T. 1958).
The only role of leisure was to fit one for work by a necessary rest. Resources from Catholic tradition are needed to correct this.

Lutheran ethics is also always associated with the phrase simul iustus et peccator, which certainly frees the Christian to live boldly amid the moral perplexities of life, with the freedom of one who knows he is held in the gracious love of God. It is a recovery of the gospel from a distortion of it as it came to be perceived in the later Middle Ages, when the exhortation to Christian living seemed to amount to (1) try hard to be good, (2) do penance when you sin, (3) depend on the merits of the saints, which can be appropriated by Masses with the required intentions. It is vital that the doctrine of justification by grace through faith be brought to bear on ethics as well as doctrine. However, there has been a serious underplaying of sanctification in the Lutheran tradition, as generally received, arising from a horror of returning to a religion of works, of earning one’s acceptance by God. Theologically this horror can end in de-humanising man, as when persons are compared to tubes or channels through which God’s grace can flow to the neighbour (as in Anders Nygren, going back to Luther). Something has gone seriously wrong when human beings are compared to tubes. The fear of a religion of works shows itself in the difficulty ethical writers in the Lutheran tradition have had with the problem of working at how to implement the Christian ethic in particular cases, or casuistry. To this I shall return.

The Calvinist ethic has shared many of the characteristics of the Lutheran in its departure from medieval doctrine and ethics, but it has proved much more dynamic in practice. One reason has

---

5 Agape and Eros (revised E.T. 1953), p. 735; and p. 740 "(Man) becomes a 'tube' which by faith receives everything from God's love and then allows the Divine love to stream out over the world".

6 Recent Lutheran attempts to deal with this include the substantial Theological Ethics of Helmut Thielicke, Vol. 1 Foundations (E.T. 1968); Vol. 2, Politics (E.T. 1969); also The Ethics of Sex (E.T. 1964). There is also Supplement No. 2 to the Lutheran World (1966) on “Faith and Society”; and several essays in one of the volumes issued in connection with the World Council of Church’s Conference in Geneva in 1966 on “Christians in the Technical and Social Revolutions of our Time”, Christian Ethics in a Changing World (ed. John C. Bennett)—“Luther’s ‘Two Kingdoms’ Ethics Reconsidered” by H.D. Wendland, and ‘Natural Law and Social Ethics’ by N.H. Sæ. See also “La Doctrine Luthérienne des deux Règnes” in the journal Istia (April-June 1972). The general tendency is to revise the doctrine of the Two Kingdoms by putting them under an eschatological critique, or by establishing social justice as a proper theological concern.
been its stress on the third use of law as a guide to personal and civic righteousness. Luther had stressed only two uses of law, political (to ensure order in human life) and theological (to convict men of sin).

Perhaps, too, the stress on the sovereignty of God allowed the Calvinist to be less afraid of sanctification, of stressing good works; these might be a means of making one's calling and election sure, but it could not be thought to be trying to influence God's changeless decrees. To Calvin the two kingdoms or governments both have a positive meaning. The temporal, political realm is a gift of God's providence, apart from the Fall, for Christians have need of civil government which educates man for the duties of humanity and citizenship. God rules the outward order through the civil rulers, but on the model of the absolute sixteenth-century French state, so political action is not for the private citizen—he is to leave it to the magistrates. At all events Calvinism has had a profound effect on both the political and economic realms.

It has often been pointed out that the seeds of modern western political democracy are found in the century after Calvin in the intense debates in England after the execution of Charles I, in the army, in Parliament, and in the left wing radical groups—all of them in the Calvinist tradition. It seems that stress on Christians as the people of God, and on the sovereignty of the people of God under the sovereignty of God, led to an assertion of the equality of each member of the elected people of God, since God might have a word to say to his people through any one of them, and so all must be listened to. Of course it was not worked out neatly, quickly and consistently but the radical seed was there. In the end it proved impossible to concede liberty to the 'saint', especially in the gathered congregation, without conceding it to the 'sinner' too in a wider context, and so by several secularising steps we arrive at the outlook behind the constitution of the USA, with all that has flowed from that, and at the 'one person, one vote' of western political democracy. I am aware, of course, of other ingredients in this, such as the thought of the French Enlightenment in

7 See Puritanism and Liberty, A.S.P. Woodhouse (1938), which deals with the Army debates of 1647-9.
8 Cf. The Essentials of Democracy (1932) and The Churches and Democracy (1934) by A.D. Lindsay; and note the remark of R.H. Tawney "... it is probable that democracy owes more to Non-conformity than any other single movement" (op. cit., p. 272).
addition to the Calvinist contribution to it. Neo-Calvinism also fostered voluntary associations in the middle area between the family and the state, which are indispensable in our western type of democracy; they are a major means of self-giving, providing psychotherapy and sociotherapy vital for the common good of persons in community.9

In economic life we come to the famous thesis of Max Weber concerning the relation of the Protestant ethic (particularly the Calvinist) to the spirit of capitalism.10 The immense discussion provoked by this does not die down, and it has become difficult to recover what exactly Weber maintained. Putting it briefly, it was that there was an “elective affinity” (to use his phrase) between some leading Calvinist ideas and the motivation needed to make the new, dynamic capitalist system work. The hard work, thrift (to save and acquire capital and put it to use), and sustained pursuit of wealth, combined with restraint in consumption, all required an asceticism of the market place which was new in human history. Weber never crudely maintained that Calvinism caused capitalism; in fact he was trying to assess the variety of factors which led to this startling change in economic life in the western world. One of them was some aspects of the Calvinist ethic. I think he made his point.11 The upshot is that both in politics and economics Calvinism has had a dynamic effect, and in ways which would have seemed strange to Calvin himself.

Anglican and Puritan ethics continued until the end of the seventeenth century in the style of Catholic Moral Theology, though modified in some particulars, when the tradition died out for reasons which have never been fully explained. It had certainly become somewhat archaic and unable to keep up with economic


10 The debate provoked by Max Weber’s The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism (E.T. 1930) is so great that what he said has been lost in the subsequent discussion. It is best to read Weber himself. An exposition, comment and bibliography is in A Sociology of Religion, Michael Hill (1973), chap. 5, “The Theoretical Background to the ‘Weber Thesis’”, and chap. 6, “Protestantism and Capitalism”; and an appraisal in Calvinism and the Capitalist Spirit, Gianfranco Poggi (1983).

11 On Calvin’s ethics see La Pensée Economique et Sociale de Calvin (Geneva, 1959) and The Social Humanism of Calvin (Richmond, Virginia, 1964), both by Andre Bieler, and on Calvinist ethics the chapter on that theme in The Experiment Hope, Jürgen Moltmann (1975).
changes. Perhaps the eighteenth century was so pleased with itself that it had no time for serious reflection on cases of conscience, and was happy to let Protestant individualism run riot, tempered by innumerable appeals to individual charity in the Charity Sermons which were a feature of the age. However, the previous century saw some notable moralists, Perkins, Hall, Ames, Sanderson, Taylor, Baxter and Sharp, to name seven. They rejected three elements in the Catholic tradition of moral theology: (1) It was no longer tied to the confessional; (2) the distinction between Precepts and Counsels of Perfection was denied; every Christian is called to the perfection of holiness; (3) the distinction between mortal and venial sin was denied; all sin is serious. The result was to link moral theology closely with ascetical theology, and to give it a distinctly rigorist note. The call to holiness was taken very seriously. There was a danger that a religion of works could develop, that growth in holiness would be required before we could be sure of divine acceptance, but this was to a large extent avoided by the style of devotion taught along with the moral theology, where the note of justification by faith is strong. Worship and ethics were held closely together. Within this framework the English moralists were ready to discuss in detail cases of conscience in the whole range of personal, domestic and public issues. Baxter, the Presbyterian, was almost the last. In

12 William Perkins, 1558-1602, A Discourse of Conscience (1597); The Whole Treatise of the Cases of Conscience (1611).
Joseph Hall, 1574-1656, Resolutions and Decisions of Divers Practical Cases of Conscience in Continual Use Amongst Men, in Four Decades (1650).
William Ames 1576-1633, De Conscientia, eius Juris et Casibus (Amsterdam, 1630) (E.T. Conscience with the Power and Cases thereof; 1643).
Robert Sanderson, 1587-1663, De Obligatione Conscientia. (1647; E.T. 1877); Bishop Sanderson’s Lectures on Conscience and Human Law, edited by Christopher Wordsworth); Eight Cases of Conscience Occasionally Determined (1674).
Jeremy Taylor, 1613-1667, The most considerable treatment of moral theology in his numerous writings is Ductor Dubitantium (1660).
John Sharp, 1645-1714, A Discourse Concerning Conscience (1684); The Case of a Doubling Conscience (1685).
There is a broad survey of this whole area in English Casuistical Divinity During the Seventeenth Century, Thomas Wood (1952).

them conscience is broadly understood as it was in Aquinas, as man using his reasoning powers on moral issues.

For the next two centuries England was left to the ethics of Protestant individualism, and these were the crucial centuries of the development of industrialism. The church has not yet recovered the lost ground. When moral theology was taken up again later in the nineteenth century, it was under the influence of the Oxford Movement. It was related once more to the 'cure of souls' in the confessional; post-tridentine Roman Catholic manuals were adapted for Anglican use. It was not until after the first world war that Kenneth Kirk set out to broaden the whole approach, but he did not get far beyond more personal and churchly issues. He had not much to say on the economic and political questions which several centuries before were freely discussed, putting them under the heading "cases of doubt". But his method was potentially liberating. Anglican ethical thinking since then has (with one or two exceptions) been taken up into that of the Ecumenical Movement.

There remains to mention the ethics of the Protestant Sects, the left wing of the Reformation, who had their precursors in the previous centuries and have had many and varied successors since. Both Luther and Calvin formed their ideas partly against the Anabaptists' rejection of Christian involvement in civil government. Sects have fascinated sociologists of religion. Bryan Wilson of Oxford University has produced a seven-fold typology of them. They vary from the 'respectable' Quakers to bizarre communes. Most are pre-occupied with an ethic of perfection and not an ethic of responsibility. Most of them are transitory. The enduring ones have been the historic peace churches, best expressed in thought to-day by the USA Mennonite, J.H. Yoder. Indeed, the question of whether pacifism is a literal rule required

14 The best known was Synopsis of Moral and Ascetical Theology, John Skinner (1882).
15 Some Principles of Moral Theology (1921); Ignorance, Faith and Conformity (1925); and Conscience and its Problems (1927). The Vision of God (1931) has a wider theme.
16 Confessionist (e.g. Salvationists), Revolutionist (e.g. Jehovah's Witnesses), Introversionist (e.g. Exclusive Brethren), Manipulationist (e.g. Christian Science), Thaumaturgical (e.g. Spiritualists), Reformist (e.g. Quakers) and Utopians (e.g. the Bruderhof). See his Sects and Society (1961) and Religious Sects (1970).
by the Gospel in the behaviour of Christians and, still more, of states epitomises the issues raised for Christian ethics by Protestant sectarianisms. There is no sign of their position gaining any more general theological assent than it has ever done, though perhaps mainstream churches are more open to possible initiatives from them, and more ready to defend a space in which the public authorities will allow them to operate.

II

As I have mentioned, all the classical Christian ethical positions, those of Protestantism included, were worked out against what was assumed to be a relatively stable order, at least as compared with anything we have known in the last two centuries. And with the exception of some forms of sectarian ethics there has been a marked tendency basically to accept the social order as found. Luther thought it far on in the history of the world; it would be impious to try to change it radically, only heroes bring about change and only then by special divine guidance, and the best we can hope for is that God’s providential care will prevent disintegration. There has been a marked tendency to see criticism of the authorities as a politicisation of the church and the acceptance of them as being suitably unpolitical.

Moreover, I repeat that discussing Protestant ethics solely within traditional confessional divisions can be misleading. All have changes in common because of social changes. In particular Liberal Protestantism and Pietist Protestantism have developed in all three of them, whilst the shock of the French Revolution reinforced a doctrinal conservatism to defend the old order. Liberal Protestantism was a theological expression of the social and cultural confidence of the nineteenth century, the Protestant century. In its immediately optimistic form it canonised the philosophy and institutions of laissez-faire capitalism; in its penultimately optimistic form it criticised these institutions in the name of social justice, particularly in the ‘social gospel’ movement in the USA, but saw no reason why society should not progressively evolve into the Kingdom of God seen as a kind of co-operative commonwealth.18 Pietist Protestantism developed

in eighteenth-century Lutheranism and Moravianism, through which it influenced Methodism and subsequently spread in many directions, notably various Holiness Churches, but affecting large numbers of ministers and laity in all the main Protestant confessions. Charles Wesley wrote more than 6,000 hymns. They explore almost every facet of the relation of the individual to God but have nothing on the public and corporate aspects of human life and Christian responsibility; and Methodist hymns have had an enormous influence on Anglo-Saxon Protestantism. However, much the same can be said of the most used Anglican Hymn book, *Hymns Ancient and Modern* (1861), which predominantly represents mid-Victorian individualist piety with monastic overtones. Moreover, pietist ethics was often allied to a Fundamentalism which was a mistaken response to the rise of critical and historical studies of the Bible; and much of what is now called the 'conservative evangelical' position is a mixture of doctrine and ethics of this individualist type, which appeals to the Protestant Reformation but which is quite alien to what either Luther or Calvin stood for. (One of the more encouraging signs in the UK at the moment is the break-up of this monolithic position, so that there is now no issue on which evangelicals all agree, and in addition there is the beginnings of a serious social theology among them. There is a similar situation in the USA, but the experience of three 'born again' presidential candidates in the 1980 election, and the activities of the 'Moral Majority', is not encouraging).

In recent years some Protestants have been much influenced by existentialist thought, for instance Barth and Bultmann in their different ways, and this has re-inforced tendencies to think of the Christian life as a moment-by-moment existence, living like an extemporary speaker under the command of God, and thus to give little or no attention to ongoing thought on the content, as distinct from the motive, of ethical decision. For instance, the sum total of Bultmann's contribution to Christian ethics seems to be that in order to love our neighbours as ourselves we should put ourselves

---

Social Gospel was Walter Rauschenbusch; see *Christianising the Social Order* (New York, 1912) and *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (New York, 1917).

19 There is no substantial treatment of Protestant Pietist ethics, partly because there is not much to say. Traditional "conservative evangelical" ethics can be studied in *Principles of Conduct*, John Murray (1957); and an example of the many books indicating new strains in evangelical social theology is *A Christian Social Perspective*, Alan Storkey (1979).
in our neighbour’s position and then we shall simply know what to do.\textsuperscript{20} A position like this has deep Protestant roots. Calvin, for instance, seems to have assumed that Christians would just know what to do to fulfil the law.

It is these individualist strains in Protestant ethics which had led to the continual polarising of the question whether Christians should set out to change persons or systems. Individualistic Protestantism has said that all that is necessary is to produce ‘converted’ or ‘consecrated’ persons; ‘changed’ in the vocabulary of Moral Rearmament; they will then behave in a Christian way and social problems will be solved. Catholic ethics has never made this mistake. This position was nicely illustrated in England in 1975 when, owing to an initiative from Donald Coggan, the Archbishops of Canterbury and York issued an appeal to the nation which focused on two questions, ‘What sort of society do we want?’ and ‘What sort of people do we need to be in order to achieve it?’, and omitted a third question, ‘What sort of social structures do we need to help people to be what we need them to be?’ In reaction to all this Protestantism has thrown up a minority of politically radical Christians who have seen the fundamental question as the overthrow of unjust social structures, and often tacitly assumed that it is only because of these structures that people behave badly. The polarisation of the issue as one of changing persons or changing structures is a false one; both need changing. And it is a serious deformation of Christian understanding to assume that the church and the Christian are only concerned with the first.

There are, in fact, two aspects of Christian ethics. The first is to act from the right motive. This is a basic matter of Christian formation. How is Christ to be formed in us? How are we to build up one another to our full stature in him so that Christ-like graces, the gifts of his Spirit, multiply in the world? This is what our drawing upon the resources of Christian faith in prayer and worship and fellowship together can hope to foster. It is concerned with the development of ongoing Christian character with a deepening capacity for moral discernment. The second aspect is to achieve the right content in action. This is where so much Protestant ethic has been so weak in virtually abandoning this side

of the moral life, half of it in fact. It will not do to dismiss this whole aspect as 'legalism' and talk disparagingly of casuistry. Casuistry got a bad name at the time of the Counter-Reformation because of its misuse. But we cannot avoid the necessity of systematically bringing to bear fundamental moral insight in particular cases. Traditional moral theology on the other hand has operated through the centuries in too a priori a manner, deducing rules from alleged self-evident premises, and then developing subtle arguments to resolve difficulties when in particular cases rules conflicted or were uncertain in their application. The intention was noble, to be certain that one could find the Christian way to act in any circumstances (as Jewish casuistry in New Testament times tried to bring Torah to bear on every detail of life), but it wanted to be too secure in the inevitable complexities of moral decision and was not willing to live by faith and not by sight. However, there has been a remarkable revolution in Roman Catholic moral theology in the last twenty-five years; the old manuals are cast out and a new, far better, moral theology has been born. Let Bernard Häring's recent three-volume moral theology, *Free and Faithful in Christ*, stand as an example. It is true that the magisterium has not yet caught up with all of it, particularly in sex ethics, but that is another matter.

The point is that bad casuistry must be replaced by good. The problem of bringing a general understanding of Christian ethics to bear on particular cases involves all the questions of the formation of conscience. How to use the Bible? What are the resources and what are the mistakes in the Christian tradition? What relevant 'secular' knowledge is needed? Are experts needed? What are the limits of their competence? How to evaluate when experts differ? Is relevant lay experience being drawn upon? What kind of group reflection is the best help towards clarifying ethical decision making? All these questions require expansion; suffice it here to say that the aim is to bring the qualities of Christian discernment

---

21 In Protestant circles it never lived down Pascal's attack in *Lettres Provinciales* (1657).

to bear upon particular issues, calling upon all relevant help from any source, to answer the question 'What is going on now?' Only then can possible courses of action be explored. Quite often it will be seen that some courses of action are ruled out; sometimes a broad agreement will emerge as to the general direction at which to aim, even if there are differences about the detailed route; sometimes there will be agreement on details (the General Synod of the Church of England in 1981 condemned details of the Government's Nationality Bill by 198 votes to 1); sometimes there is no agreement, and in that case Christians who take any one particular position can be faced by searching questions put to them by Christians who take a different one. (This has happened in the debate in the World Council of Churches on violence, non-violence and the struggle for social justice).\(^{23}\) Certainty cannot be promised. Moral judgement is the art of discernment. But a lot of positive help to moral discernment, and removal of obstacles to it, can be provided; and we can be helped to learn from experience. To repeat, we walk by faith and not by sight in ethics as in doctrine.

These various forms of the Protestant ethic can be brought alongside Richard Niebuhr's well-known five-fold typology in his *Christ and Culture*, since it is another way of relating Gospel and Law or Grace and Nature.\(^{24}\) Of the five positions only the fifth, Christ the Transformer of Culture, is adequate to times of rapid social change (which is not to say that the other four have nothing to contribute). The Christ against Culture position is represented by pietist Protestantism and can come into its own in an alien environment, but even then should not be applied woodenly, as the history of the church in the different Communist countries shows. The Christ of Culture position of Liberal Protestantism—and the Byzantine position of classical Anglicanism—is not critical enough of its milieu, but there is often a case for it, for instance, in helping newly political independent African states to achieve a sense of nationhood as against tribalism. The Christ above Culture position of medieval Catholicism is only possible in a Christendom situation, which is decaying everywhere it existed, leaving impressive but misleading outward remains behind. The


\(^{24}\) The UK edition was 1952.
Christ and Culture in Paradox position of Lutheranism has creative potentials but makes too sharp a separation between the two Kingdoms. There remains the Christ the Transformer of Culture position, towards which the various elements in the traditions of Protestant ethic need to make their contribution.

III

What is to characterise an adequate moral theology or Christian ethic, whether Protestant or Catholic? (There is no agreed difference in meaning between these two terms; if a distinction has to be made, I take Christian ethics to be concerned with the general character of the Christian way of life, and moral theology with relating this to particular circumstances, but I am not making anything of this distinction at the moment). I mention three elements:

1. Moral theology must be rooted in the Christian tradition whilst being creatively selective amid the varying expressions of it. Its basis should be the words of the gospel, “Freely you have received, freely give”,26 or, in other words, “live in thankfulness for the graciousness of God you have already known through Jesus Christ”. Realise that because you are justified by faith you are free to live boldly and joyfully, knowing that you cannot fall outside God’s grace, not because of his power but because of his love. In bringing this gospel to bear on particular circumstances the traditional sources of authority, Scripture, Natural Law and the Church have all to be re-thought. There is no direct step from any one of them to a detailed ethical decision in the modern world; quoting general rules derived from any one of them (e.g., “the sanctity of life”) will not by itself resolve an ethical issue.27 The

25 The problem of how precisely to make this contribution amidst the technicalities and uncertainties of a rapidly changing social order are many, both as regards individual Christians and churches as corporate bodies. I have discussed a central issue which arises in Appendix 2, “Middle Axions in Christian Social Ethics”, in Church and Society in the Late Twentieth Century (1983).

26 Matthew 10 v. 8.

27 e.g., the moral issues raised by abortion or by living as a Christian under an atheist government; on the latter see Discretion and Valour, Trevor Beeson (second and revised edition 1982), which deals with the position of Christians in the Marxist countries of Europe. I discussed problems in using the Bible as a
conclusions on specific issues arrived at in the past, from the New Testament onwards, have all been to some extent conditioned, or ‘time-bound’ to use Barth’s useful phrase. The simple type of Protestant appeal to Scripture, sola Scriptura, will not do; and there is some danger that just as many Protestants have become aware of the complex hermeneutical problems in the use of Scripture, Roman Catholics in their new and welcome zeal for Biblical study may fall into traps of which Protestants are now aware. Natural Law cannot any longer be used in the non-historical, physicalist way that was customary (contrary to the flexibility of Aquinas), but must be used to stress the dignity of the person, and that the realm of the moral is natural to man, and the basis on which he should operate in it. Official church teaching has to be set against the context in which it was given, including the knowledge available at the time.

2. Moral theology must be related to human experience in general. This is the more necessary because of the pluralism of most modern societies and the necessity that men of different faiths and ideologies find a way of living together in the world without destroying themselves. This re-inforces the necessity for taking human moral life seriously, and persons as moral agents; and for shewing how persons should make moral choices. This brings us into the realm of moral philosophy. It is important to remember that the methods and procedures of Christian ethics are no different from the methods and procedures of ethics as analysed by moral philosophy. Here there is a deficiency in a good deal of recent Protestant ethics, which has not taken seriously the fact that though the Bible does not argue about these matters it pre-supposes them (as indeed it does God). In considering questions of ethics Christians do not come to alien territory but to one already inhabited. There is a close connection between morals and religion, but they are not identical, and it is necessary to relate to, build upon, and deepen the moral understanding which is part of human life as given. It is not good enough if Protestant ethicists think it necessary to demolish the realm of the moral as the quintessence of sin. Brunner will tell us that “in the last resort it

---


is precisely morality which is evil”,\(^2^9\) that the sense of ‘ought’ is a by-product of sin because it means ‘I can’t’, that conscience is to be interpreted purely as an experience of the wrath of God. Bonhoeffer will say that “the knowledge of good and evil is separation from God”,\(^3^0\) and Barth that “the general conception of ethics coincides exactly with the conception of sin”.\(^3^1\) It is even said that the more a man desires God the more he must be evil since desire itself betokens a lack and is therefore bad. This is a foolish polemic. How perverse to see the sense of ‘ought’ as essentially a menace and not a vocation (though, of course, it can be a menace on occasions, especially in those suffering from what is traditionally known as a ‘scrupulous’ conscience). More attention needs to be paid to the strain in Reformation teaching concerning civic righteousness in Lutheranism and common grace in Calvinism. There is, in fact, in man a capacity of moral judgement (which Christians, of course, think of as God-given, whether the human persons who possess it recognise its source or not), and it is salutary to realise that because of it those outside the Christian tradition can be quite capable of recognising and identifying a legalism and a self-righteousness in Christians when they see it.

The contribution of the Christian faith to the moral life is to disclose the nature of agape as that of God himself, to see this as the basis of Christian motivation and as the criterion by which possible moral rules are arrived at, or the consequences of possible lines of action in a particular situation are evaluated. Christianity does not solve the problem facing any normative ethics, whether to decide in a particular situation by rule (deontology) or by estimated consequences of possible actions (teleology); that is where the art of moral judgement comes in. (This was the point of the Situation Ethic debate).\(^3^2\) Moreover it is the Christian ethic itself which should lead us to seek for a common ground at the level of an understanding of the common good, with those of other faiths and ideologies.

3. Moral theology must be able to cope with rapid social change.

\(^3^0\) *Ethics* (re-arranged 6th edition of E.T. 1955), pp. 3 ff.
This has already been mentioned more than once. It is here that the Ecumenical Movement comes in. This has always been concerned not merely with the unity but also with the renewal of the church. If one looks at the fairly considerable minorities within the main confessional traditions who are anti-ecumenical they seem to be those who are anti-renewal, who are most satisfied with, and find security in, a received tradition from the past which in their view has nothing to learn from either the changing circumstances of the present or the experience of fellow Christians from a different confessional tradition.

In particular the Roman Catholic-Protestant division still has relevance, but much less than it had. How far are Protestants still merely reacting against Rome? The most substantial modern Lutheran ethic available in English is that of Thielicke. Much of his anti-Catholic, but temperate, discussion sets up a man of straw, though we must remember it was written before Vatican 2. In ethical matters the polemic against casuistry and legalism is misplaced, that against Natural Law is in danger of throwing the baby away with the bathwater, and that against the *magisterium* still has a point, but needs to realise how much is changing (as well as how much needs to change) in its practical working. The Political and Liberation theologians, and especially the latter, who have made an astonishing impact since about 1966, find the traditional Protestant-Catholic ethical and doctrinal divisions simply irrelevant. They get on together without them, and together call in question a great deal of customary politically ‘neutral’ church thinking and practice.

Roman Catholic moral theology is making great efforts to escape from previous strait-jackets and cope with change, just as Protestants have found it necessary to move from the existential occasionalism which has characterised much of its recent thinking by, e.g., appeals to phenomenology and cultural anthropology (David Little), character structure (Stanley Hauerwas), trust

---

33 See n. 5 above.

34 This is so much taken for granted that Catholic-Protestant divisions are scarcely mentioned in Liberation Theology. How much is at issue between them in ‘western’ theology is covered in *Protestant and Roman Catholic Ethics*, James M. Gustafson (1978).


36 Cf. *Vision and Virtue in Christian Ethical Reflection* (Indiana, 1974) by
(Knud Løgstrup) or responsibility (Richard Niebuhr) to name but a few.

To my mind there is in the Reformation doctrine of the Orders of Creation, never fully adumbrated, a source which could be developed to help Protestant ethics fulfil these tasks. Its strong point is that by showing how we are influenced as persons by the structures of life in which we find ourselves, without any choice on our part, long before we are able to make any critical response ourselves, it undermines the characteristic Protestant temptation to concentrate only on changing persons. Persons are not determined by the structures; in due course they can partially transcend them and try to change them, but long before that they have been conditioned by them from infancy. Structures mould persons before persons can mould structures. The notion of Orders of Creation came into disfavour because they were interpreted in a static and paternalistic fashion, and in particular because they were misused in the Nazi period. In response to the Barmen Declaration of the Confessing Church in 1934, stressing the lordship of Christ, there were the Ansbach Proposals, written by Paul Althaus and Werner Elert, stressing nation (Volk) and blood. On the Catholic side, although the extensive treatment of Justice in traditional Catholic moral theology did pay attention to structures, for the most part it tended to assume that the status quo was just.

The best account of the Orders is given by Brunner, who is quite clear that we do not find them as God intends them but as deformed because of human sin; we cannot escape from life in them but must also reform them; like the church they are semper reformanda. Different names for them are used by different theologians. Barth, in spite of theological reservations, talks of


Cf. The Ethical Demand, Knud E. Løgstrup (Philadelphia, 1971).


For the Barmen Declaration and the Ansbach Proposals see Open Thy Mouth for the Dumb: The German Evangelical Church and the Jews, Richard Gutteridge (1976). There is an extract from both Paul Althaus and Werner Elert in Faith and Action, ed. H. Thielicke and H.H. Schrey (E.T. 1970); and for Paul Althaus on Volk see his Theologie der Ordnungen (Gütersloh, 1935).

'provinces', Bonhoeffer of 'mandates', Thielicke of 'orders of divine patience', Wendland of 'institutions' and Künneth of 'preservation', while earlier Troeltsch talked of areas of 'objective' as against ones of 'subjective' obligations.

What, and how many, are they and how are they established? Basically there appear to be four: (i) Some structure of marriage and family arising out of human sexuality; (ii) some structure of economic life arising out of basic human needs, and the division of labour; (iii) some structure of political authority because of the need for security; (iv) some community of culture because of human creativity. The first three are commonly mentioned but the fourth is often ignored. Brunner is good on it, and it is important because of the aggressive anti-culturalism of much Protestantism. It is impossible not to be cultural; even clothes, hair styles and household objects involve it. To ignore this is merely to arrive at poor cultural expressions, unworthy of humans. (Language, of course, is a cultural expression, and through it we express our whole perspective on life, including faiths and ideologies through which we interpret life in the Orders in its very different manifestations in the course of human history). These four Orders can be empirically established with reasonable certainty. One would expect the Bible either to pre-suppose them or to mention them explicitly. Exegetes move uncertainly at this point. Thielicke, for instance, makes an unfortunate distinction between Orders based on the Creation (marriage) and on the Fall (the state); all need to be seen from both angles. Note that nation and blood can neither be established empirically nor Biblically, contrary to what Christian nationalists in most countries assume. Bonhoeffer and Brunner also bring in the church, but that is surely an Order of Re-creation; only by a paradoxical extension of meaning can we say that everyone is born into it qua human being. But, once in it, it functions in the new creation in the same way and with the same stipulations as the Orders of Creation; that is the justification for infant baptism, and also for seeing the church as semper reformanda.

The doctrine of the Orders of Creation avoids both occassionalism (already mentioned) and the utopianism often found in sectarian Christian ethics, and also latent in a good deal of

41 Barth, Bonhoeffer, Thielicke and Troeltsch in the works already quoted. For Künneth see Faith and Action (note 39), pp. 282-292.
Liberation theology, where it derives from the utopianism latent in Marxism, whose claim to be a ‘science’ Liberation theologians accept too simply. The doctrine of the Orders does this by bringing home a sense of structure as necessarily involved if human life together is to be human and not anarchic. But it must be emphasised again that they need to be under constant critical scrutiny; they have not a fixed normative content, because human life and structures remain open to the future and we do not know all that they have it in them to be. It is in this connection that the theologians of hope rightly stress the importance of formulating goals for the humanisation of life and not passively accepting things as they are.42

Large questions face us in each of the realms of the Orders. In so far as the Christian sex ethic was expressed in negative universal prohibitions regarding masturbation, intercourse outside marriage, polygamy, contraception, sterilisation, abortion, divorce, and homosexuality, little remains of it; and new issues like artificial insemination from a donor have arisen. As I have said, there has been better theological thinking on sexuality in recent decades than perhaps ever before, centering on responsibility in sexual relationships. It needs developing and transmitting. In the area of economic life the Protestant work ethic is called into question through the productivity of modern technology and the disappearance of routine mental and physical ‘dead end’ jobs in which in the course of history most people have spent their working lives. A more corporate service society is needed, and the abandonment of the ethic of ‘possessive individualism’ which has had an unfortunate revival in this country and the USA recently.43 As far as the area of state authority is concerned, issues of the character and theological status of nationalism are far from resolved. And there is the growing questioning of the ‘established disorder’ and demands for rapid, revolutionary change, by violence, if necessary, as a last resort; the disorders of the contemporary world are making us consider much more urgently the ethical issues of civil disobedience and rebellion. In the order of Culture the cultural poverty of much church and

42 Theology of Hope, Jürgen Moltmann (E.T. 1967) was a herald of this emphasis.
43 I have discussed “possessive individualism” in Religion and the Persistence of Capitalism (1979) ch. 4, “Capitalism, Socialism, Personal Freedom and Individualism”.
contemporary life needs attention. There is much to work on in all these questions, and I do not see any reason for confining ourselves within Confessional boundaries in doing so.

I have omitted the Orthodox from this discussion, as marginal to it and presenting special problems, but I see no reason why Protestants and Catholics should not more and more work on ethics together. I regularly attend meetings of Roman Catholic Moral Theologians and find them very valuable. It seems to me, therefore, that the most promising future of Protestant ethics is tied to the most promising future of Catholic ethics, and that our theme might best become the future of Ecumenical Ethics.

44 There is little material, and still less of it good, available on Orthodox ethics; but see "Ethics in the Greek Orthodox Tradition", Stanley Harakas, in the Journal of Ecumenical Studies (Fall, 1976).