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Bill Cosgrave

Understanding Christian Morality

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In July last year (2017) I was present in Kiltegan on the sad occasion of the wake of renowned Irish moral theologian Vincent MacNamara. He was a priest of St Patrick's Missionary Society, Kiltegan, Co. Wicklow and had made an outstanding contribution to the Irish and international Catholic Church by his writing and lecturing over many years in numerous publications and in many colleges and lecture halls, supplemented by his work as editor (with Enda McDonagh) of notable volumes gathering the work of Irish moral theologians over the last 50 years. He was also well known as a retreat-giver of note.

It was his work in moral theology, however, that appealed most to me and informed and influenced my efforts to understand the Christian moral life and write some articles about it. I will be forever grateful to this most readable, up to date, informative and frequently challenging theologian for bringing to my and everyone's attention the significant and often ground-breaking writings of many leading moral theologians from around the world and adding to them his own insightful reflections on Christian morality.[1]

APPROACHES TO CHRISTIAN MORALITY

In the course of the renewal of moral theology before and after Vatican II many Catholic moralists had written books and articles beginning from one or other of the sources of Christian teaching. So Vincent writes: 'Books appeared with titles like *The Law of Christ*, *The Following of Christ*, *The Mystical Body and Morality*, *The Master Calls.* These were attempts to build a morality on the sacraments or on the centrality of charity or on Christ as norm.'[2]

1 We look forward eagerly to his great friend and equally distinguished colleague, Enda McDonagh, presenting us with the 'enriching content and detail' of Vincent's writing on Christian and Human Ethics in the near future, as promised by Enda in *The Furrow*, November 2017, p 591, in his *Letter to a Friend – Remembering Vincent MacNamara*.

2 Vincent MacNamara, 'Approaching Christian Morality' in Patrick Hannon, Editor, *Moral Theology – A Reader*. Veritas, Dublin, 2006, p 73. See James F. Keenan, *A History of Catholic Moral Theology in the Twentieth Century – From Confessing Sins to Liberating Consciences.* Continuum, London, 2010, chapters 4 & 5.

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These volumes were accounts of the Christian moral life that were themselves reactions against the Manuals of Moral Theology which had been the main sources of teaching and learning in the seminaries and presbyteries of the Church since about the year 1600 in the wake of the Council of Trent (1545-63). These Manuals were being subjected to major criticisms pointing out that they were no more than text books of philosophical ethics or moral philosophy with a good helping of canon law and that, consequently, they neglected the central Christian themes of God's love for us in Christ, the twofold commandment to love God and our neighbour and the distinctive character of the Christian vocation. In addition, they were basically manuals for confessors and so were negative and minimalistic and were often referred to as being concerned largely with the science of sin.[3]

The books named above were part of the renewal of moral theology that got under way in the years around the Council. They were an attempt to present a more adequate understanding of Christian morality than the Manuals offered. In this regard they were indeed a step forward and they had a main focus on the Bible and especially the New Testament. They, therefore, dwelt in detail on the mystery of Christ and the salvation he brought and its implications for Christian moral living. Vatican II endorsed the general approach or method of these authors in reflecting on Christian morality. It stated about moral theology that 'Its scientific exposition should be more thoroughly nourished by scriptural teaching', show the nobility of the Christian vocation of the faithful, and also that the study of sacred Scripture ought to be the soul of all theology.[4]

It soon became apparent, however, that basing moral theology on the Bible, despite its values, had significant disadvantages and weaknesses. As MacNamara says, the result of this approach was 'some confusion about method, especially about the justification of moral positions and of moral obligation.' In addition, it was generally asserted that 'a reasonably clear and well-tried natural law morality had been replaced by something much more woolly … the old moral theology … had a considerable advantage over the new moral theology in the clarity of its concepts and in the precision and consistency of its argument.[5]

It was not long, then, as one might expect, before another reaction set in and some Catholic moralists moved away from the mainly scriptural emphasis in their reflections on the Christian

3 Vincent MacNamara, *Faith and Ethics – Recent Roman Catholicism.* Gill & Macmillan, Dublin, Georgetown University Press, Washington D.C., 1985, p 15. See also Keenan, chapter 2.

4 *Decree on Priestly Formation*, n.16.

5 *Faith and Ethics*, p 35.

moral life. Their aim was to construct what came to be called an autonomous ethic. Here the emphasis is not on God as the revealer of morality but on the human being as the discoverer of it, not on the specific morality of Christians but on the common morality of all people.[6] As a result of taking this starting point this approach holds that the principles and commands of moral conduct are the same for a truly human morality as for Christian morality. The content of this morality is 'human', not distinctively Christian. What Christians call morality is available to the reason of the non-believer. In this context the word autonomous is used in reference to morality. This autonomous ethic position was held by a number of Catholic moralists in the 1970s.

However, some Catholic moralists were far from happy with this approach to and method of doing Christian ethics. These thinkers set out, then, to construct what came to be called the faith-ethic. The main elements of this approach to and understanding of Christian morality, as summarised by MacNamara, were as follows: a) Christian morality is not to be discovered simply by unaided reason; b) its content cannot be identified with philosophical ethics, and c) its specific character cannot be limited to consideration of context and motivation.[7] It is of interest to note that two of the strong advocates of this faith-ethic were Joseph Ratzinger and Hans van Balthasar.

This very summary look at the various approaches to Christian morality and the different methods of studying it during the decades of its renewal has as its aim simply to illustrate the struggle that this renewal has involved and the diversity of viewpoints among Catholic moralists that are to be found as the renewal unfolded. No wonder, then, that Vincent MacNamara can quote Enda McDonagh, who wrote in 1979: 'After some twenty years of intense activity by the professionals, the quest for a renewed moral theology remains unfinished and confused.'[8]

THE APPROACH FROM MORAL EXPERIENCE

In more recent decades there has emerged a trend in moral theology, which takes as its starting point the reality of human experience. In the 1970s both Enda McDonagh and Vincent MacNamara adopted this approach, thus being concerned with universal human experience considered from the aspect of morality, of ought or ought not, of right and wrong.[9] So McDonagh says: 'an examination

6 Ibid., p 38.
7 Ibid., p 57.
8 Ibid., p 220, footnote 162. This quotation is from McDonagh's book, *Doing the Truth – The Quest for Moral Theology.* Gill & Macmillan, Dublin, 1979, p 14.
9 Enda McDonagh, *Gift and Call – Towards a Christian Theology of Morality*. Gill & Macmillan, Dublin, 1975, p 5.

of the meaning of morality must start from humans experience'[10] and the method he adopts is one of direct personal reflection on moral experience.[11] As he adopts this same approach MacNamara says: 'One begins with morality as a human phenomenon and subsequently seeks to understand or illuminate it theologically. The human phenomenon has to be given its full value before any attempt is made to interpret it in Christian fashion.[12]

Starting from our moral experience helps us to be clear on what morality actually is. We come to see that morality is an important and basic part of our human experience and an essential element in human living. It is part of our humanity and without it human life is impossible. So, we begin from below, as it were, from our experience of morality in our daily lives. This approach has the added advantage that it makes it clear that morality is independent of religion and has its own validity and autonomy, something that is made obvious by the fact that many people are very moral but are not religious.

In the present article this approach to and method of studying Christian morality will be adopted. It has the advantage of connecting immediately with what we experience in our moral lives at the basic level and of enabling us to understand the reality that morality is in a direct and immediate way. We will, then, go on to reflect on the Christian understanding of this human phenomenon we call morality.[13]

THE NATURE OF MORALITY

All of us have extensive experience of morality in our daily lives; this is our moral experience. The language we use as we go about our ordinary activities and especially in our relationships with other people is full of moral words and it could not be otherwise. Examples are plentiful: injustice is a great evil, you ought to be just, you ought to attend more to your family responsibilities, my duty is to do a good day's work, we all have a right to privacy, John XXIII was a good man, Hitler and Stalin were evil men.

We know too that this language is *value language*, i.e., it involves making *moral judgments* and pointing to *moral obligations.* These moral obligations present themselves as absolutely binding or unconditional, e.g., be just, tell the truth, respect human dignity

10 Ibid., p 6.
11 Ibid., p 10.
12 *Faith and Ethics*, p 225, footnote 87, quoting McDonagh. See *Gift and Call*, p.3.
13 For a fuller exposition of what morality itself is see Enda McDonagh, *Gift and Call,* chapters 2 and 3 and Vincent MacNamara, *The Call to be Human – Making Sense of Morality*. Veritas, Dublin, 2010, chapters 1 & 2. Also Vincent MacNamara, 'Approaching Christian Morality' in Patrick Hannon, Editor, *Moral Theology – A Reader.* Veritas, Dublin, 2006, pp 72-81.

and human life. As for moral judgments about right and wrong, good and bad, they imply a standard one is meeting or not. This standard is the welfare of persons and is about doing or failing to do what promotes that welfare. In other words, it is about doing what is in accordance with our human nature as persons-in-community, persons who are called to be rational and to act freely.[14]

Morality is, then, about how human life should be lived, i.e., how we should relate to others and our community so as to promote their welfare as persons and thus to make life flourish and become more human. We can say, also, that living morally makes us more human, it humanises us, while immoral living does the opposite; it diminishes us as human persons. In other words, we may add that living morally is *the art of right relationship* with each other and the world and indeed with oneself.

All this makes it clear that to be human is to do morality; human existence is moral existence. Obviously then, *morality is a human thing*, part of our humanity, of what it is to be human.

It follows from what has been said here that *morality is not something imposed on us* as human beings by some outside agency, whether the church, the state, society or God. It is a basic and essential element of our humanity; it has its source in that humanity itself, in our nature as persons in relationship with other persons and in community.

BASIC ELEMENTS OF MORALITY

We may briefly spell out these elements or aspects of human morality here. Some have been mentioned already, others are implicit in the above reflections.

a) Moral judgment: By this we judge or assess morally human actions, attitudes, situations and persons and decide if they are right or wrong, or, in relation to persons, good or bad. Such judgments are a normal part of human living, even if we don't often advert to the fact that they are moral. It is necessary for us as human beings to make such judgments, so that we can live humanly and promote human flourishing, our own and that of others.

b) Moral obligations: Experience tells us that these obligations are part and parcel of human living, some calling us to action, others forbidding certain actions, that is, to do good and avoid evil. Such moral obligations present themselves as unconditional, that is, we feel bound to fulfil them with no ifs or buts or reference to circumstances, e.g., be honest, be generous, be temperate, be chaste.

c) Moral freedom: We experience ourselves as being free to do

14 Patrick Hannon, *Making Moral Decisions.* Veritas, Dublin, 2005, p 37.

good or evil, right or wrong. We are people who can choose either of these courses. This is *moral* freedom and it is a basic reality or element in our human living and action. Of course it is a freedom that is limited by many factors, internal and external. Examples are: one's family background, the society one lives in, peer pressure, one's education or lack of it, emotional maturity or immaturity. Some of these circumstances may enhance one's ability to make moral choices, others may lessen it. Either way, moral freedom is essential in order that one's actions have any moral quality at all. All agree: no freedom, no morality. We may express this point in other words and say that, because we are free as human beings, we have *moral responsibility* for what we do and don't do and also for the kind of person we have made ourselves morally in the course of our lives, e.g., generous, kind, courageous, lazy, selfish, dishonest. This implies that we are *free to change* and that we have a responsibility to do so morally, growing all we can in virtue and leaving our vices aside.

d) Knowledge/awareness/understanding: For a choice to be truly moral one must have some real knowledge and understanding of the situation and especially of the values in it. Without this in some real degree there will be no *moral* choice. So a child or a person lacking the use of reason can't make *moral* choices, that is, choices with a moral quality whether positive or negative. One's understanding will be increased or lessened by one's background and education, e.g., if one comes from a broken home, from unemployment or a privileged upbringing.

MORALITY HAS A COMMUNITY ASPECT

There are three aspects of this that we may outline very briefly.[15]

Morality is *learned in* community/society: by being members of a community or society we are socialised into those groups and so learn and make our own the values, principles, attitudes and rules of morality that are held and practised there. This applies also to those of us who belong to the Christian Church and make our own the moral teaching that the Church provides for its members.

Morality is *lived in* community/society: It is in society or community or the church community that we make our choices for good and for ill, depending on the values and attitudes we have made part of our moral character.

Morality is *lived for* community/society: In other words, we are called and obliged to work for the common good and so to help

15 See Enda McDonagh, *Invitation and Response – Essays in Christian Moral Theology*. Gill & Macmillan, Dublin, 1972, chapter 3: The Christian Ethic: A Community Ethic.

build up the quality of life in our society and communities and the Church.

WHY BE MORAL?

We in the Catholic Church have often heard that we Catholics should be good and moral because God commands it; it is his will for us. In other words, our reason for being moral is that it is our way of loving God. This is true, of course, for us Christians and for other religious people. It provides a religious reason for living a morally good life. However, for the non-religious person we need a different reason and for ourselves as well, this time, a moral reason. From what was said earlier we can say that being moral is the human thing to do, because doing so promotes human welfare; it humanises us; it is through being moral that we become truly human and it also promotes the common good. This is the basic reason for living a good moral life and it holds true for everyone.[16]

THE AUTONOMY OF MORALITY

It will also be clear from our earlier remarks on the nature of morality that it is a different aspect or element of our human experience than religion. We know from abundant experiences, especially at the present time, that many people are very good moral people but are not at all religious. This indicates that these two dimensions of our experience of life are independent of each other. So scholars speak of the autonomy of morality in relation to religion.[17] Later, however, we will discuss how these two can be related, in particular in the Christian religion.

We may add here that morality is also autonomous in relation to reward and punishment, whether it is heaven or hell that one has in mind. The old saying 'virtue is its own reward' expresses this point quite accurately. In other words, we should be morally good because it is the right thing to do, the human thing to do. Doing good makes us better persons, better human beings, doing evil does the opposite. The categories 'reward' and 'punishment' are not needed here and are in fact better avoided.[18]

MORALITY AND RELIGION

While morality and religion are separate and independent areas or aspects of our experience as human beings, it seems true to

16 See Patrick Hannon, *Moral Decision Making*. Veritas, Dublin, 2005, chapter 2. Vincent MacNamara, *The Call to be Human*, pp 122-5 and also his article 'Christian Moral Life' in *An Irish Reader in Moral Theology – The Legacy of the Last Fifty Years*, Volume I: Foundations. Edited by Enda McDonagh & Vincent MacNamara. Columba Press, Dublin 2009, p 203.

17 MacNamara, in Hannon, *Moral Theology – A Reader*, p 78.

18 Ibid, p 79-80.

say that the analysis of moral experience raises questions that one cannot answer from within that experience or analysis. Rather they point one towards one's fundamental beliefs about the nature of us humans and our world. Enda McDonagh spells out what is involved here.[19]

If we experience good people and good situations as enriching, *as gifts,* and we *feel thankful* for them, the question arises, is there a giver? If we feel morally bound to respect others *unconditionally*, how do we explain this unconditionality? The answer is to be found only in one's fundamental beliefs about humanity and the world.

Religion is very difficult to define or even describe. We may say in relation to religion that it is all that is involved in our coming to terms with and expressing our most fundamental relationship with Reality, i.e., God and the world.[20] As such religion has to do with our ultimate concern about the meaning of human existence. It seeks to meet our deep need to find meaning in life. MacNamara says: 'The central issue is that of ultimacy: religion gives us our ultimate, all-encompassing view of life. Because it does, it has its influence on culture, values and morals.'[21] So religion and religious faith, which is basic to religion, are, therefore, concerned with the ultimate questions of life. These questions are: Who am I? Where did I and others come from ultimately? What ultimate meaning has my and other people's lives? Where are we going ultimately? Is death the end? Is there an ultimate reality, a god? If so, what is he/she like? How does he/she relate to us humans?[22]

One can say, then, that religion gives us our basic vision of life, how we understand what life is about, what its ultimate meaning is and how we view and understand other people, the world and ourselves. We can, then, say that religion and especially the Christian religion 'gives our lives their fundamental character and direction. It shapes our understanding and vision, our sense of ourselves and our world, our meanings, our hopes, fears and aspirations. It informs our consciousness, affections and loyalties.'[23]

In the light of this description of religion and what it is concerned

19 *Gift and Call*, pp 67-72.

20 See John Macquarrie, *In Search of Humanity – A Theological and Philosophical Approach*. SCM Press, London, 1982, chapter XVI 'Religion', especially pp 207-212 on religious experience and its two complementary types or streams, negative and positive. The former arises from our experience of finitude, sinfulness and the possible threat of absurdity, the latter from our natural drive to go beyond any given state and our dynamic openness towards God as the 'whither' of transcendence.

21 In his 'On Having a Religious Morality' in *Contemporary Irish Moral Discourse – Essays in Honour of Patrick Hannon.* Edited by Amelia Fleming. The Columba Press, Dublin, 2007, chapter 7 at p 90.

22 See MacNamara, *The Call to be Human*, pp 80-84.

23 Vincent MacNamara, *The Truth in Love – Reflections on Christian Morality.* Gill & Macmillan, Dublin, 1988, pp 2 & 3.

with, we come to the question that is our primary concern here: how does religion relate to morality? How does it affect or shape the morality that is part of it? In particular, how does our Christian religion and our Christian faith influence and shape our morality, our moral lives as Christians?

HOW DOES CHRISTIAN FAITH INFLUENCE CHRISTIAN MORALITY?

Our faith and moral lives are clearly intertwined in important ways, e.g., we use the word 'sin' for moral faults and we have confession to bring us forgiveness. This is clear also in the Bible, e.g., in the teaching of the prophets, the Decalogue, the Sermon on the Mount, etc.

But two links between the Christian religion and Christian morality that can be misunderstood need to be mentioned here.[24]

Morality as the law of God: This is a valid and traditional way of speaking of our Christian moral duties. But it can be misleading. It implies that morality is imposed on us Christians from outside by God and is not intrinsic to human life. So, for example, the story of the giving of the Decalogue on Mt Sinai seems to fit into this category and, in addition, it implies that there were no moral principles previous to this event. Also this legal manner of describing morality implies that the binding force of morality comes from outside our humanity, from God. The implication here would seem to be: if God did not exist, anything goes! But, as we have seen earlier, this is not the case.

Morality as the will of God: Morality is God's will for us but not in the sense that God arbitrarily decides what is right and wrong. Rather is it the case that, when we have discerned what is right in a particular situation, then we have discovered the will of God.

More positively, though our religious faith does influence our moral life, it does so indirectly, not by giving us precise moral rules but by *shaping our outlook* on the world and life and providing us with attitudes, values and motives which will condition how we see particular situations and respond to them. In a word *it gives us a context* in which we see and set our moral lives and this fact gives added significance to our moral living. Also our religious faith *conditions and shapes our moral character* and so influences our moral discernment and our moral judgments. For example, to see *God as Creator* fosters a sense of dependence on God and promotes a sense of appreciation of the created world and a care for it as well as an attitude of acceptance of life with its blessings and limitations. To understand *God as loving* calls us to gratitude and to be loving in return. To believe in *God as our final destiny*

24 Vincent MacNamara, *The Call to be Human – Making Sense of Morality*, pp 88–94, and his article 'Christian Moral Life' in *An Irish Reader in Moral Thology*, Volume I, pp 191-194.

gives a sense of direction and coherence to our moral living. *The example of Jesus* forms many attitudes in our moral living, e.g., to care for the poor, to repent and forgive, to trust God's providence, to love our neighbour, ourselves and God, etc.[25]

Some quotations from Vincent MacNamara will elaborate this understanding of how our Christian faith, truly if indirectly, shapes our outlook and perspectives on moral living. Our ' Christian vision subtly affects moral life. Vision gives rise to values. Values found attitudes, perspectives and dispositions. They, in turn, issue in and accompany action'.[26] 'One's world-view should enter into and does make a difference to judgment and action …The Christian should do morality in fidelity to his/her vision and ethos'[27] 'Faith is far from being a solvent for all our [moral] problems. But it has suggestive things to say about trust in God, about humble bearing, about passion for others, about forgetfulness of self, about tolerance, fidelity and enduring patience'.[28]

We can say, then, that 'for the person of faith the whole of morality receives a new context and significance.' In addition, 'faith gives to morality not only enlightenment but a structure of support and hope'. Also in regard to St Paul's cry in his weakness for help … our [Christian] story is meant to be a strength … our biblical tales are one source of help.[29] MacNamara also adds in another place, 'Christianity surrounds morality with a cluster of beliefs and stories that support and undergird the whole enterprise … to believe in a God who is moral, who has an intelligent purpose for the universe … who has power to bring good out of evil … is to have a powerful support for morality. To believe in a Savior who is the perfect moral one and whose mission it is to overcome sin and its effects is to live a story that is shot through with moral concern. To believe that God sends his Spirit into the world to spread abroad his love and that the outcome of the Spirit's action is charity, peace, patience is to have found a fusion of religious and moral ideas.'[30]

In these and other ways our religious faith and its vision of life shape and inspire ourselves, our moral lives and our activities and give us a vision of the moral life that is distinctively Christian.[31]

25 See Richard M. Gula, SS., *Reason Informed By Faith – Foundations of Catholic Morality*. Paulist Press, New York, Mahwah, 1989, chapter 4.
26 In Hannon, *Moral Theology – A Reade*r, p 97.
27 Ibid., p 98.
28 Ibid., pp 99-100.
29 Ibid., 101-2.
30 Vincent MacNamara, 'Moral Life, Christian', in *The New Dictionary of Theology*, Editors Joseph A. Komonchak, Mary Collins & Dermot A Lane. Gill & Macmillan, Dublin, 1987, pp 677-8, and *The Call to be Human*, pp 79-88.
31 See MacNamara's article 'The Distinctiveness of Christian Morality' in *Christian Ethics – An Introduction.* Edited by Bernard Hoose. Cassell, London, 1998, chapter 10.

CONCLUSION

It will be clear from the foregoing pages that approaching a study of the Christian moral life or Christian morality from the starting point of our ordinary experience as persons-in-relationship-and-in-community is not just a valid method of reflecting systematically on our moral lives as Christians but is also an approach that is illuminating and insightful as far as understanding that moral life is concerned.

To begin with, it enables us to come to a fuller understanding of the human phenomenon that is morality as we reflect on it through a direct effort to grasp its nature and its main elements and also to see how basic and essential it is for human living. In addition, this approach to Christian morality underlines the point that morality is an area or aspect of our human experience that is quite distinct from religion and, hence, helps to explain how a non-religious person can be very moral in his/her manner of living.

At the same time this distinction of morality and religion does not rule out a real and significant relationship between these two foundational dimensions of our humanity. This relationship has been our main concern in the later pages of this essay. There we have seen how a religious faith adds a whole new and deeper dimension and significance to our moral lives as Christians. This comes about because our Christian morality is set within and shaped by our Christian faith in God our loving Father, whose love for us human beings is revealed above all in Christ through the gift of the Holy Spirit.

And while the material content of Christian morality in terms of moral principles, values and rules is in great part the same as what reason on its own can discover, our Christian faith still has a profound influence on and significance for our moral lives. This extensive overlap or common ground between Christian morality and non-religious morality has the vital advantage of providing an openness for considerable and fruitful cooperation between these two moral positions in promoting their shared moral values and principles in the societies of today around the world, in relation, for example, to social and economic justice, rooting out human trafficking of persons, care of the earth, climate change, etc.

(This article is my little tribute to and in remembrance of Vincent MacNamara, an Irish moral theologian whom I admired and from whom I learned a great deal).