

## DOCTRINAL SECTION

### IS CHRISTIAN ETHICS OUT-MODED?\*

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The world of today is very much confused about many things. It is confused about its youth, it is confused about its own development, it is confused about its ideologies and the conflicting solutions that are offered for its ills. Voices are raised all over, loud certainly, but not always clear, about injustices and inequalities that should have disappeared decades ago. Protests are issued, demonstrations are formed, and riots not infrequent. Modern man hardly knows where to turn — there is confusion all over. And not the least of these areas of confusion is the field of ethics and of morality. Even here, it is as if man has lost his moorings and has been set adrift.

That the confusion exists about almost everything should not surprise us. Mankind has suddenly entered in a world of rapid change and the circumstances of stability and permanence that used to surround mankind in the ages past have gone — perhaps forever. Man's psychology has not yet quite adjusted to the new world of change he now lives in — a world of transient trends and of disposables, world where new discoveries are obsolete before they can even filter down to the majority of mankind, a world for which the moon was once "a vaneer of sheerest Venus in the planks of time", but for which the moon is now a next-door neighbor, twice visited and explored, and now subjected to the intensest scientific scrutiny.

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### Change: Today's By-Word

Change is the by-word of the world today, for practically everything we come in touch with changes. There is little need to emphasize this to you, as scientific professionals since you are more acutely aware of it than I could ever be. And with this constant change has come a certain and inevitable disrespect and suspicion of authority — at least as it existed in the academic and scientific circles of some decades past, and for centuries before. After all, it was not really eons ago that the authority of a Galen was so strong he was the only recognized medical authority for close to ten centuries and where to deviate from his thinking was simply unthinkable. And yet, today, the only authority left, say in the medical profession, is the authority of scientific demonstration, the authority of validly collected statistics, the authority of frequency curves, the authority of an experimentally reproducible fact.

Mankind has been shaken to its very roots by this overwhelming revolution of the world he inhabits. And psychologically, he has come to accept the idea that all things change, that there is nothing immutable, that what does not change is necessarily obsolete, that what has been there for some time is no longer applicable or useful, that there is no longer any real authority, least of all, infallible authority.

It is with this psychology and with this expectation that we react to the norms of morality, to the ethics of Christianity, which have guided our actions from our earliest youth. We expect to see change there too, in the ethical rules as well as in the official proponent of those ethical norms, the Church. We expect to see this change — we sometimes call it by another name and say we expect adaptation — not only in the externals of the Church, but also in its fundamental doctrines, just as we have seen the changes transform our most cherished notions of physiology and pathology into complex and ever expanding ideas of biology and disease. For ages past, churches have been built in a traditional form, the liturgy of the Mass has been consultant, the ceremonials of the church unchanging. Suddenly our church buildings are circular, or triangular, the Mass is in the vernacular, the vestments are changed, and the ceremonials evolving so rapidly we may be having difficulty keeping up with the latest innovations. All these changes, with reason, perhaps,

in a desire to adapt to the changing patterns of life and society. But the trouble is, we somehow expect these changes too, in the doctrines of the church, and expect the church to modify its stand on moral issues to make them more consonant with the present conditions of mankind — in short, to get the church to adapt to the world, not the world to adapt to the Church.

The psychological frame of mind that leads us to this expectation goes beyond this mere expectation. We tend to apply to ethics and to morality all the adaptations we have made in our own lives and minds to cope with the changes that have engulfed us. We begin, for instance, to confuse statistics with morality, and to think that the moral norm can be found and established, and be made to conform, to the statistically determined behavior of mankind. Because we are conditioned to think of what is moral in the physical world in terms of the statistically established normals, we expect the norms of morality to be established also in consonance with the statistically established pattern of human behavior. The reasoning process goes: If everybody does such a thing, then there could not possibly be anything wrong with such a thing.

### Morality By Consensus

We tend to think that we can arrive at morality by consensus. This is, of course, an outgrowth of the democratic system and of government by consensus. What laws are established in society for the governance of its citizens is arrived at by consensus, or by agreement of the majority. Subconsciously we seek the same process in the establishment of the norms of conduct in the moral sphere, so that for instance, if a sufficient majority of Catholics opt for the use of contraception, then contraception should be accepted within the licit means allowed by the Church. And when one man stands alone to proclaim the doctrine, even if he be vested with all the authority of the Heavens, he is questioned if he enunciates rules which the majority or not even a majority, but only a sufficiently vocal minority that is loud enough to make it sound like a majority — do not accept or even only wish could be disregarded. And because the rules do not conform to what we want, we denounce as out-moded, out-dated, obsolete, antique, or what-have-you, whatever it is we do not want to accept.

Furthermore, we tend to confuse expediency with morality. We are faced today with situations we have never had to face before, either because the situations are new, or because the technology of our times have brought the situations into bold relief and given us an awareness of them we have not had before. The urgency of these problems demand immediate attention, they cry out for solutions—and we envisage disaster if we fail to meet the challenges they provide. When solutions are proposed, they are necessarily considered in terms of the urgency of the problems faced, and the most expedient are given the primary consideration. If a moral issue arises, and ethical objections present themselves to the implementation of a solution, we expect a change again, not in the solutions offered, but in the ethical rules that should govern our actions. We expect the rules to bend so that we might utilize the means we find most expedient. We present the Church with all the economic, political, psychological, medical, sociological, etc., reasons why one particular line of action should be taken, and expect her to modify her ethical rules to make that possible. In short, we ask the Church to draw moral conclusions from non-moral premises, a feat at the same time impossible and ridiculous. This is what is happening in the problem of the population explosion.

### **Natural Law: Its Notion**

We also tend to ignore and disregard what we find difficult to understand, as if by disregarding it, the thing would go away by itself. Few of us have the preparation, or even the inclination and willingness, to understand the notion of the natural law and the application that the Church makes of the natural law in the area of ethical behavior. And because we find difficulty in comprehending it, we disregard it as inapplicable and indemonstrable. Suddenly, it is no longer enough to be told that such a thing is as it is. Suddenly, we want to know why this is so, and if we do not understand it, we do not accept it. Again, this is an outgrowth of our modern system of so-called enlightened behavior. It is well and good to desire and expect that men should understand the why and the wherefore of things, and whenever possible we should strive for this understanding. But we cannot draw from this

the conclusion that what we fail to understand does not hold, particularly when we do not have the time, inclination or means to really understand.

Unfortunately, in this modern world of professionalization, there are professionals whose capacity we question. We question them not as individuals but as a group, while paradoxically, we accept implicitly whatever another group of professionals maintain. No one could dream, in our day, of leaving the control and manipulation of atomic energy to the ordinary lay person who has had no specialized training in nuclear physics. Only the most unenlightened would go today for medical advice to the herb-doctor — most of us would insist on a qualified physician, perhaps even on a specialist. No one would dream of establishing large corporations without experienced and trained businessmen at the helm. We do realize that as the world becomes more complex and sophisticated, the more specialized the preparation required of the professional involved. In most things, that is, except religion and politics. Just as we all tend to consider ourselves experts in politics, we also consider ourselves self-sufficient in matters of religion. In these two areas, and perhaps in a few others, we have reached the point where we tend to look upon one opinion as good as the next one. We do not require — or even acknowledge the need for — the specialization, the scholarship, the training, of the professional theologian and philosopher whose entire life has been dedicated to the study of these matters. In religion and ethics, the boundary-line between the amateur and the professional is blurred in the minds of many, and all opinions and ideas are just as valid.

### **Ethical Principles**

Not only do we tend to disregard what we find difficult to understand in religion, we also tend to misunderstand many of the ethical principles that are meant to govern our behavior. Two outstanding examples of this lack of understanding and perspective that has thrown the rules out of context are the question of the Christian conscience and the doctrine of love. We are saturated today with the doctrine that the ultimate guideline for ethical action is the Christian conscience, and

well it is. And we might add, the catechism has always taught this in the past. But in the emphasis that is given to the individual conscience as the ultimate guide, the imperative of a well-formed conscience is obscured. The emphasis is rather on the reliance that must be, or can be given to the individual conscience. Conscience is a reasoned judgment on the goodness or badness of an individual action about to be performed, and how fallible, we are known, our reason can be at times. The great Jesuit Karl Rahner chides confessors who are fond of telling their penitents to follow their own conscience with the thought that they are doing so "as if the penitent were not precisely asking, and rightly asking, which of the thousand voices of his conscience is the authentic voice of God." After all, as he points out, it is not before our consciences, but before God, that we are ultimately responsible. He added the following very pertinent observation: "and when is the voice of God more easy to recognize than when He speaks through the mouth of His Church? It is indeed only when the judgment of conscience coincides with this word that one can be sure of hearing truly the voice of conscience rather than the voice of one's own culpable self-deception."

The fallibility of the human mind, particularly when it must consider something which involves the person himself is well known. It was this fallibility that the great poet and Christian T.S. Eliot referred when he wrote his "Thoughts after Lambeth," and commanded on the resolution on contraception adapted by the Anglican Church. He wrote, "I regret . . . that the bishops have placed so much reliance on the individual conscience. Certainly, anyone who is sincere and pure in heart may seek for guidance from the Holy Spirit; but who of us is always sincere, especially where the most imperative of instincts may be strong enough to simulate to perfection the voice of the Holy Spirit?" Unperturbed by those warnings, we continue to proclaim today the dominance of the individual conscience and underscore the explicit teaching of the Church.

### **Doctrine of Love**

The other fallacy we have run into is a certain emotionalism expressed as the doctrine of Christian love. This thinking has been

expressed by many in different forms. One says: "There is a decisive norm that is valid for all human conduct—the norm of open and generous love." Love of God and love of fellow-men for the love of God is sufficient, it is said, as an ultimate guideline for moral action. Perhaps the idea is well summarized in a dictum of St. Augustine taken out of context. He says: "Love, and do what you will." Translated to concrete and contemporary human situations, this is what led one priest to say of the poverty and destitution of the slums: "Surely, God did not mean to have his creatures live this way." If they have nowhere else to turn, let them turn on contraception."

Unfortunately, this expression of the doctrine of Christian love is out of context. It is incomplete without bearing in mind what Christ Himself said about the love for Him and for His Father. "If you love Me, keep My commandments," the Gospel relates. And St. Paul himself completes this by adding: "Love is the fulfillment of the law." It is only in this sense, in this context, that the love of God as a guideline for moral action can have meaning and can be understood. If there is love, that love is expressed in the fulfillment of the commandments. There can be no fulfillment outside of these norms.

### Questions on Authority

And finally, the truly regrettable fact is that we have contributed to our own confusion, because the Church itself does not present the solidarity, the unanimity that might be expected of it, and that one might hope for. There are elements of dissent within the very Church. There are questions raised concerning authority. There is defiance of doctrine and of the magisterium, in proportions that might well constitute a crisis. And what is the layman to think and to do if he does not see in his own pastors the example of union and submission that is expected of him? He is told one thing, and he sees another. And his confusion is compounded all the more.

It is not surprising, therefore, that man today is confused concerning the moral principles that must guide his action. It is not surprising that he finds himself lost, without a sense of direction, without a point of

reference, without an ethical foot-hold on which to stand. He has been dizzied by the heights to which he has attained, and it will be a little while before the world stops spinning around him and he recovers his sense of perspective.

Man has to come to the realization that there are things that do not change, just as he has had to move from the position that nothing changes to accept the fact that some things do. He must draw the distinction in his mind between physics and metaphysics, and learn to accept both things for what they are. He must realize that just as the physical world around him is in a process of constant change, and that just as his own physical being is in constant change the spiritual world around him does not and cannot really change, just as his own spiritual being is permanent. Only through this recognition and acceptance of both worlds will he be able once more to re-establish his own direction in this life towards the next.

The problem is, in the last analysis, not whether Christian ethics is out-moded. The problem is, rather, whether man has somehow lost his way. When he finds himself again, the original question will appear for what it is: a contradiction in terms.