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Shirley R. Quinn

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Christian Ethics. II

John Shaver

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Does Christianity imply a Coherent System of Ethics
Applicable to Present Conditions?

Cherishing the high hopes that we will not be accused of using an outmoded homiletical method we will attack the question under discussion one segment at a time. Although it is misguidedly doubted by many, the fact remains that the primary concern of Christianity is ethical. Herein lies the essential difference between the religion of Christ and any other religion. Many religions have world views of one kind or another. Several are monotheistic. All have their rituals. Christianity is unique in the quality of its world view. This is it presents an interpretation of the meaning of life in the terms of moral significance. Ethics is the central core of the Christian religion. He who would deny this either misunderstands ethics or has a misconception of Christianity.

Thus there is in Christianity an ethical system of some kind. The system itself is not worked out in any comprehensive form (unless one was prepared to accept the ethic of the Orthodox Church following its acceptance of the Thomistic system.) However in the Gospels and in the Early Epistles a complete system of ethics is never presented. Certainly an all-inclusive ethical code is never presented. Each injunction is relative to some situation. Even the "Sermon on the Mount" which is forbidding on its formal must be taken with reference to the whole picture presented by the Gospels. Nevertheless a system of ethics is at all times implied throughout the New Testament scriptures. Certain conceptions of the individual personality are perfectly evident. Certainly a world view with a very definite conception of ^{ultimate} reality is presented. This nature of ultimate reality as has already been suggested has inescapable moral significance. Ethics is implied on every hand. And this ethic can be reconstructed in a comprehensive form. It can be systematized without doing violence to the teachings from which it is taken.

Any system of Christian ethics faces the accusation that nothing is known directly of the teachings of Jesus. We will never discover what the ideas of Jesus himself were. Are we to believe the interpretation given us by the Pauline epistles or the synoptics? How much credence is to be given to the Johannine literature? What is to be done with the

great Hebrew Prophetic Heritage upon which Jesus undoubtedly depended a great deal. Are we to accept the decisions of the traditional Church as it attempted to adopt the Christian ideology to the current thought pattern? At what point do any of these sources depart from the truly Christian conception? Under these circumstances it will be easy for any interpreter to read in his own ideas and desires with opposing conceptions by blaming them on some early innovator. His approach must be critical certainly. It must also be sympathetic but his system deny something essential to the Christian view. He must not permit his interpreting mind to arrive at something unrecognizable.

This paper will endeavor to show there can be a systematic interpretation of Christian ethics made. Whatever were the exact teachings of Jesus, there is still recorded for us the influence his ideas had on some of his later contemporaries. Perhaps this interpretation will be more sound because it is viewed from a distance than if it was based directly on memory. It is likely that such an interpretation will prove to be more sympathetic than one whose interest is recording rather than analysis. At least we can say that the views of these men are those who had come to be called Christians. With a sympathetic approach to these sources let us see what system of ethics can be discovered.

It cannot be denied, that in that body of literature, which later came to be recognized as the canon of the New Testament, the individual personality is given a place of supreme importance. Jesus is shown to be at all times sensitive to human need. His whole healing ministry which is an important part of his life implies this conception. In his indictment of the scribes and Pharisees one of his chief accusations is that they are indifferent to the needs of humanity. "Woe unto you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye devour widows houses and for a pretence make long prayer." ¹ Those miracles recorded to him other than healing all find their occasion in the recognition of some human need. The universally known parables of the Good Samaritan and countless others illustrate the fact that the ministry unto the needs of people was uppermost in the mind of Jesus. It is the spirit of the whole gospel story.

High value is placed on the individual in Christian teaching.

¹ Matt 23:14.

not only are his needs served but he himself is to be held in high regard. One cannot find explicitly stated anywhere in the Gospels that "man is to be treated always as an end, never as a means," but that conception is certainly implied on every hand. Jesus takes a great interest in every individual, for his own sake. Men like Zacchaeus and the rich young ruler and women like the woman at Jacob's well all interest him as people each with special problems. The parables of the lost coin and the lost sheep and especially of the Prodigal son are all picturesque ways of putting the same thing - a doctrine of the immense value of the individual. Perhaps there is a more powerful presentation of this doctrine than Jesus' timely information: "It were better for him that a mill-stone were hanged about his neck and he cast into the sea than that he should offend one of these little ones." ②

Another element that can be clearly observed is that this doctrine of the value of the individual is universalized. The Johannine writer has Jesus speak of "other sheep - not of this fold" - "Them also I must bring and they shall hear my voice and thus shall be one fold and one shepherd." ③ The Synoptic writers seem to suggest that this was not an idea in the mind of Jesus from the beginning. They all close however at a point where racial prejudice and exclusiveness is now abandoned. Certainly the Christian movement had abandoned such conceptions by the time of the Pauline epistles. "There is neither bond nor free, there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither male nor female for we are all one in Christ Jesus." ④ No sociology or ethical system that includes any kind of racial exclusiveness can call itself Christian.

Another undeniable evidence of Christian interest in the value of the individual is its anti-legalism. "The Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath." ⑤ Human personality is to be served, not laws for their own sakes. The personality is the end and law is the means. To some extent the whole Pauline stand was an opposition to any legalizing efforts which he considered as being unchristian. Constantly in the Gospels we have the inadequacy of legalistic ethics discredited. Even in the Sermon on the Mount, the most formalistic of all the teaching associated with Jesus, the emphasis is upon the inward motive, rather than the external act alone. Inwardness is emphasized constantly. The Pharisees which "strain a gnat and swallow a camel" are derisively denounced by Jesus. - - -

"Woe unto you - for ye make clean the outside of the cup and of the platter but within they are full of extortion and excess. Thou blind

② Luke 17:2

③ John 10:16

④ Gal 3:28

⑤ Mark 2:27

The comparison
with the Pharisees
whose fall is
not mentioned

"Pharisees -- cleanse first that which is within the cup and platter
 -- that the outside of them may be clean also. Woe unto you -- for ye
 -- are like unto whitened sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful
 -- outward, but are within full of dead men's bones." ⁽⁶⁾

At no time is a code of laws given which are to apply to all men in all times.
 The important and basic thing is that the attitude be right. Where the
 heart is and its nature determines the virtues of a person. An act, to be
 a good act must arise out of a good character.

"A good man out of the treasure of his heart bringeth forth that which
 is good: and an evil man out of the evil treasure of his heart
 bringeth forth that which is evil: for out of the abundance of the heart
 the mouth speaketh." ⁽⁷⁾

Doubtless there is implied here something very like the dictum "There is
 nothing good but a good will. Nevertheless it can be easily seen that the
 primary Christian interest is in the character of the individual.

This indicates what shall be the second point of our discussing.
 It has been established that the Christian religion is interested in the
 individual personality. It intends to fulfill his needs. Let us now attempt
 to reconstruct its notions of the nature of that personality.

Christianity not only is consistent in its conception of the self as
 valuable, but also is comprehensive in its notion of the nature of the self.
 According to the Christian view, the self is in a high realm. Valid as are
 the appetites, the real significance of the self is not found there. That passage
 is very familiar whose Jesus is warning against a preoccupation of the self
 in securing food and clothing. There are more worthy things that the self
 can seek. -- things more deserving of service of such noble an element.
 When there comes a clash between this higher realm and the realm of the
 appetites and senses, one must forgo the latter. ---

"Wherefore if thy hand offend thee -- cut it off and cast it from thee."

And... "if thine eye offend thee pluck it out and cast it from thee" ⁽⁸⁾

The value and true significance of the self is placed in the spiritual realm.
 To truly realize itself it must sacrifice the lower physical values in the
 interests of the more significant spiritual values.

The central doctrine then of the Christian way is one of self
 sacrifice. "If any man will come after me let him deny himself, and
 take up his cross and follow me" ⁽⁹⁾ However this does not mean that the

⁽⁶⁾ Matt 23: 25-27.

⁽⁷⁾ Luke 6: 45

⁽⁸⁾ Matt 18: 8-9.

⁽⁹⁾ " 16: 24

Christian ethic is here denying all the value of the self. It does not demand the abolition of self in the interests of some impersonal unqualified nirvana. The seed that falls to the ground dies -- yes -- but in order that it might live to realize its potentialities. "Whoever shall lose his life for my sake shall find it." The Christian ethic does not abrogate the self, it fulfills it. It finds in the realm of the spirit its true significance, its soul. And "what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?" Nothing. Everything is given in exchange for it. By becoming identified with spiritual values the self realizes itself. It finds reality for its highest self in this realm.

Thus in Christian doctrine there is a view of the individual personality as all important and a conception of the value of his personality as being of a spiritual nature. There must naturally be included a realm where these spiritual values are significant. That is to say such a view of man must include a view of ultimate reality consistent with it.

This realm in which personality values are significant is of course the kingdom of God. Jesus is always talking of it. Most of his parables are about the kingdom. The Human being finds its highest life by partaking of that realm. What a great number of people fail to realize however is that the significance of this realm is moral. Many misunderstand the gospel message in this respect. The kingdom is some place where entities continue in a believed state of continued existence. There is evidence to show that the early church troubled with just that type of people. Those who saw in the cult of Jesus just a refined mystic religion. According to their belief, the Christian through some mystic process became partakers of an ethereal existence called salvation. This experience was mostly feeling and had little or no content. People who misunderstand the gospel thus forget that Jesus was not teaching in a vacuum. If they find in his teachings evidence to support their contention they forget that as to him self says he came to fulfill the law not to destroy it. That is to say Jesus was the spiritual heir of the prophetic tradition. The early church rightly went back to the prophetic writings. Now the emphasis was definitely on ethics. The basis of their criticisms were moral. So Paul and in the same spirit the author of first John feels that he must oppose this "spiritualizing" tendency in the early church. "If we live in the spirit, let us also walk in the spirit.

"---The fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance." "The Kingdom of God is significant in a qualitative sense. The realm of the spirit is an ethical realm."

In Christian doctrine this realm is transcendent. It is spoken of as eternal life. As well as transcending space and time however it transcends human possibilities. Thus it came early to take on the character of eschatology. It served itself well to the eschatological teaching of the prophets. So called Pauline Christianity included a kind of immediate eschatology. It was overdone and had to be refined as the church progressed, but it was nevertheless essentially in the same spirit as the Christian genius. The life demanded by Christian ethics is in one respect in the realm of impossible human attainment.

Our search for a Christian ethic has so far discovered the following elements. A conception of the human individual as a being which finds its significance of partaking in an ethical realm. The individual is all important and his essential reality is as an ethical being. His ideal community is a realm of values that transcends space and time and his abilities.

At this point a great many so-called Christians become victims of another misunderstanding. As the early Christian church with its doctrine expanded into the Hellenistic world it became coloured by the thought forms of its environment. It lent itself to this process. However that movement which sees in Christian doctrine an absolute dualism was entirely mistaken. The Christian cosmos is not a dualism. We are not simply to endure the present, being satisfied with that calling which is ours, in the hope of better things to come. Any dualism of flesh and spirit came to Christianity from the neo-Platonism of its environment. It is not a Hebrew element at all, and Jesus' rightful heritage was Hebrew not Greek. No one would deny that the Christian religion owes much to Greek metaphysics. However its contribution was to the form Christian ethics took. The content was largely gleaned from the Hebrew prophetic movement. Certainly when it comes to a last balance two opposing ideas it is safer to trust the Hebrew judgment above the Greek.

The Christian religion is certainly not dualistic. Its central doctrine is the incarnation. The whole meaning of the Christian movement is that

"God became flesh." It was very natural that in its doctrinal disputes the early church should most concerned about its Christology. Christ is the central figure and the central thing about him is that he is man and God.

The teaching attributed to Jesus suggests a doctrine of immanence rather than deism. He is always making use of natural phenomena to show the character of God. The coming of the rain and sun on just and unjust alike; the beauty of natural life reflecting the goodness of God; most of Jesus' parables have to do with simple natural life. His interests were surely connected with this world, as well as nature Jesus was interested in the homely things of life. Home relationships, country weddings, banquets and the like were all interests of his. His whole approach was to take natural instincts and use them for higher purposes. That has been the history of his church; - the redemption of natural instincts and human traditions by using them for higher places. It is a process of redemption rather than rejection.

In another way the Christian movement loses its meaning if it is considered as an absolutely deism. Jesus said "Not every one that saith unto me Lord! Lord! shall enter into the Kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven" ⁽¹⁾. When Jesus wishes to describe the man who is building the house of life on a sure foundation he speaks of one who hears his words and does them. The good tree is known by its fruits. That is to say, for men the real meaning of this realm of values is that they should realize them in life. The aim of any Christian is the embodiment in the life of man of the values Jesus represented. In essence it is an attempt to incarnate in individual and social life the will of God. The Christian is to make real in existence the vision of ultimate reality he holds. In that sense the Kingdom of God is within him. It is immanent in the world and in history. It is not actual but in process. It is a tension towards an ideal.

One must not be misled by this doctrine of immanence into accepting for the Christian outlook, a complacent sort of pantheism. Christianity inherited from its Hebrew heritage a vigorous belief in the reality of sin. The optimistic belief in the inevitability of progress did not belong to it. The early church adopted the Hebrew version of the fall of man.

Life is not the simple process of the growing manifestation of God in nature. Rebellion is always possible. Rebellion is the interpretation given to sin in the genesis story. Any attempt on the part of a thing that is inadequate to meet growth is sin. Life is terribly complex and often the greatest enemy of the best is the good. Sin is goodness that looks upon itself as the best. It is man wanting to be God. Thus it is something malicious in history. It is an active element not simply passive. It stops the process of development and adds the zeal of self righteousness to life that is incomplete. Sin is an ever present and terrible possibility. It is a power in the world working for the destruction of man.

Thus the Christian Ethos is one which recognizes the tremendous worth of the individual and his tragic limitations. And it is true that no comprehensive ethic can realize one without realizing the other. Christianity sees the highest significance of the individual in the realm of the aesthetic, intellectual and social values. It recognizes man's weakness, his tendency to see himself and his way of life as better than it is; to be satisfied with an inadequate ideal. Its reply to this situation is the doctrine of love. Humility and forgiveness is the Christian reply to the sin of rebellion. Thus perhaps the highest expression of Christian ethics is the new commandment. "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart with all thy soul and with all thy mind -- and thy neighbor as thyself" (13)

It has been suggested that because of its ethical emphasis Christianity was unique among the religions of the world. Nor must we forget that the Christian ethic is unique, as is its Jewish Parent, in the fact that it gives religious sanctions to its morality. The Christian ethic does not only say that love, truth and unselfishness are socially prudent, but also declares that they are the will of God. The uniqueness itself and its guiding spirit demands this behavior. Not only is it good to love, but "God is love: and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God and God in him" (14)

The Christian ethos presents a paradox. It is the paradox of human life. It is at the same time an absolute and a relative ethic. It conceives of a realm of absolute values and at the same time demands that these values be actualized in the life of man. It is both transcendent and immanent. The Kingdom of God is beyond the

(13) Matt 23: 37-39

(14) I John 4: 16b

realization of finite man and yet he is called upon to increasingly realize it in history. There is absolute truth, yet for man's life there is only increasing comprehending. The Christian ethic is an ethic of growth, of tension towards an ideal, of a continuous process and yet rightfully it includes a consummation.

Let us now look at the practicality of this ethic. Can it be applied in the world of today? It was formulated a great many years ago in an altogether different society than we have now. How could anything taught at that time have reference to our age. Christianity might have reference to an agrarian society or one slightly commercialized, yet might be applicable in a confined society. However for the reason that it meets the needs of this kind of society it can have no reference for ours. A great industrial society interdependent throughout the world can gain nothing from teachings that appeal to farmers and traders. This attitude fails to realize the significance of the transcendent element in Christian Ethics. Because of this element it belongs to no age. Because it has not lost itself in a purely relative position it applies to all ages. Because it is satisfied with no accomplishment to be achieved in time, it is timeless. It is not a code of rules to be outwitted as society changes. It is an attitude which approaches the society of any age with this in mind; that it will remake it more according to the will of God; that it will remake it so that the individuals in it can have an opportunity of realizing their highest potentialities. It is a general attitude which judges actions on the basis of whether they aid in the realization of one's own intellectual, aesthetic and social capacities, and whether it would help to allow others to do the same. This is the Christian ethic and it can be applied by a Henry Ford or a John H. Lewis as well as a herdsman of Tekoa.

Other critics use this same element of transcendence to show that the Christian ethic cannot possibly be applied to this age. The type of life demanded of Christianity wouldn't be life. It couldn't last in our society. It might be lived in a community of perfect beings, perfectly organized, but the world of today isn't that. Try and live a completely honest life in our society and you will come to death. The old person might be able to live on "faith" but that kind of

faith is usually supplemented by the hard cash of some friend. It is not only the fact that life is lost but also the fact that by so doing the opportunity of realizing any values in this life is lost. Such an approach seems to defeat itself.

This paradox is especially evident in our present conditions. What has the Christian Ethic to say concerning war? Certainly any taking of human life is a denial of a kind of any personality values. Certainly to kill is not a loving act. Yet when faced with the situation where to fail to do these things means the extinction of the teachings of Jesus from the minds of all humanity, the Christian is faced with a problem. Force has never settled any problem but it can be used to gain time so that the problem can be settled. Although it has never settled a problem it certainly can be used to keep anyone from attacking the problem. That kind of force can be met with force to advantage. What is to be done? Ought the Christian to reject personality values for the time in order that personality values might permeate on the earth?

One answer that some Christian movements have given to the terribly perplexing problem of the Christian life in immoral society, is asceticism. This is of course no answer at all. It is a denial of principle that brotherhood should be a closed shop. The withdrawal from the responsibilities of life in the society which sustains one is dishonest and certainly unchristian. In this type of movement we have reaction, not progress.

The truly Christian conscience chooses that type of conduct which will be most likely to bring the realization to the highest self to the most people. It is not reactionary. It does not wish for the good old days. It is not satisfied with dreaming about the semi-communistic anarchy of the early church. It accepts modern society for what is and seeks to find in it the best available organization of it. Living within it the Christian seeks to realize his highest potentialities, nor is he satisfied with this. He seeks always to help society to become more and more the embodiment of the kingdom of God. The Christian conscience is never satisfied, never is of the opinion that it has arrived, but is militant in its insistence that society move in the direction of an ideal kingdom. The ideal Christian conscience is a regenerative conscience, and it is satisfied only as it is fulfilling its function. This type of ethics

applies to any age.

"Though we cannot form a positive or detailed conception of what human perfection would be, there is no difficulty at this stage of human progress in concerning an idea of a state nearer to perfection than the existing state."

Thus we have a criterion for any act and any institution.

I would like to end this little dissertation with this suggestion: not only is the Christian ethic applicable to present conditions, but it is the only ethic capable of meeting them. Because of the vast complexity of modern society there are tensions in many directions. Life is more confusing in this age than in any other. The marvelous successes of the physical sciences have lead mankind into a lazy complacency. This state is especially dangerous because collapses and catastrophes are so far-reaching and speedy in our technologically advanced society. It is a time when many inadequacies cause one calling for loyalty and a time when such loyalties have even more tragic consequences than usual. At such a time the need of the Christian ethic is great. An ethic with a great deal of tension is required to offset the complacency. An ethic that is crying out for physical embodiment. An ethic which claims as its sanction the heavens themselves. Also is needed an ethic which knows how to forgive. Which for all its fervor knows that as yet it is imperfect. An ethic that will not be guilty of the terrible crimes committed by ^{the zeal of} an inadequately righteousness, because it realizes its inadequacy. Such an ethic is needed for our present conditions. Until it comes and is applied we can expect ~~chaos~~.