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UNDERSTANDING EARLY CHRISTIAN ETHICS*

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In my first year of teaching, I offered a course called "New Testament Ethics." The students who enrolled were bright and interested, and they plunged with verve into our analysis of several difficult texts. Nevertheless, by the end of term it was clear to them as to me that none of us had a clear conception what New Testament ethics was. I have not repeated the experiment, and if, more than twenty years later, I return to what may seem the same topic, it is not because of nostalgia. Rather, it is because my reading in the interim has persuaded me that I am not alone in being both confused and confusing on this topic, and therefore my reflections on the reasons for confusion may be of general interest. Moreover, certain developments in the study of early Christianity as well as in ethics make this an opportune moment to take a rather different approach to the subject.

Some of the sources of confusion we can put aside simply by making several elementary choices. The first is the choice between a historical description of early Christian ethics and proposals about using early Christian writings normatively in ethical discourse of later times. Both are valid and important fields of inquiry; the essential thing is that we not mix them up. The present essay is a proposal about the historical inquiry only.[1] As a further aid to clearing our minds, I propose to abandon the phrase "New Testament ethics," for that is a category not susceptible of *historical* inquiry, except insofar as historians of modern Christian thought may be interested in the use of the concept. Instead, I wish to limit our attention to the ethics of the Christian movement in its formative stage, before, say, Irenaeus. Since those Christians did not yet have a "New Testament," the question of a New Testament ethics does not arise.

The second choice has to do with the kind of history we write: a history of ideas or a history of communities? It will surprise no one that I choose

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[1] The recent book by Thomas W. Ogletree, *The Use of the Bible in Christian Ethics* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), addresses the other set of issues, with a good sense of the division of labor, as his title indicates. For a sample of the variety of NT ethics, see Pheme Perkins, "New Testament Ethics: Questions and Contexts," *RelSRev* 10 (1984) 321–27.

the latter. One reason is simply that, despite the current popularity of social history, the moral formation of the early Christian movement remains virtually unexplored in comparison with the venerable tradition of histories of its theological ideas. More important, this is a choice about what constitutes an adequate description of people's morals. I believe that we cannot claim to understand the morality of a group until we can describe the world of meaning and of relationships, special to that group in its own time and place, within which behavior is evaluated. The moral admonition I remember as most frequent in my childhood was simply "Behave yourself!" Although this phrase seems on its face semantically empty, parents in my neighborhood universally assumed its effectiveness. The use of such a command or plea takes for granted that one knows what behavior is expected. When Paul exhorts recent converts "to walk worthily of the God who called you into his own kingdom and glory" (1 Thess 2:12), the appeal is more elaborate, but not much more precise. In both cases the persons addressed must have learned what is proper, what is worthy. It is this shaping of moral knowledge, sensibility, and intuition—the necessary ground and context of all specific moral discourse—which usually runs through our defining sieves. Hence, I propose that we focus our historical inquiry on the moral formation of communities.

The third choice I propose is to try to *understand* rather than to *explain* the moral universe of the first Christian groups. By that I mean to consider the early Christian movement as a cultural entity and to adopt that mode of cultural analysis, Weberian in its roots, which construes culture as a system of communication. Accordingly, the task of the investigator is to understand this system for itself, as one would try to understand a foreign language, rather than to reduce it to the results or mask of something else.[2] Of course, that does not mean that the student of culture will ignore those ways in which the cultural system is connected with the material and structural aspects of the society, nor the roles that masking and indirection play in every human mode of communication. The point is that all these factors are to be understood as part of a system of meaning. For example, the economic factor: money is money only by means of social conventions. It is of cultural significance insofar as "money talks."

In order to understand the subculture of the early Christians, what we have to do is not to abstract from it their ideas, ideals, or principles, nor to divine some mysterious inner world behind their world of symbols— their feelings, attitudes, dispositions, or self-understanding. Rather, we ask how their symbolic universe worked. The culture of people does not only express who they are; it is constitutive of who they are. We become members

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[2] On "understanding" and "explanation," see Reinhard Bendix, "Two Sociological Traditions," in *Scholarship and Partisanship: Essays on Max Weber* (ed. Reinhard Bendix and Guenther Roth; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971) 282–98.

of a community by the same process by which we become selves, and that is a cultural, communicative process.[3]

The model I suggest for the historian of early Christian morality is thus not the jelly maker or distiller, but the detective. What we must do with the scattered fragments of evidence we glean from our sources is not to boil them down to obtain their essence, however we might define that— the code of moral rules, the moral principles, the logic of ethical argument, the ideals and goals of moral perfection. Rather, we must reconstruct, must imagine the world in which these fragments made sense—like Eco's William of Baskerville, from tracks in the snow and running monks deducing the abbot's runaway horse named Brunellus. Like him, more problematically, we must divine from the world as known the labyrinth in the subcultural microcosm, from the labyrinth an imagined world, from the imagined world the springs of action.[4] Like Baskerville's, our reconstructed worlds will almost certainly be mistaken in many particulars, and the mistakes may have unforeseen consequences. Such flaws belong to the nature of history and to the human condition; they do not negate the importance of the quest.

It will by now be obvious that the approach I am proposing is not novel. The "cultural-linguistic" model of religion, as George Lindbeck calls it,[5] has been pressed into service by many members of this Society, including New Testament scholars and historians of early Christianity. Some ethicists, too, are turning their attention to the social context of ethics. George Forell complains that histories of Christian ethics are too "cognitivist"; he wants rather to describe the "new life-style in its polymorphous development."[6] Eric Osborn appears to agree, for following Iris Murdoch he wants to describe the "patterns or pictures" that shaped the moral vision of early Christianity. Yet the patterns he describes—righteousness, discipleship, faith, and love—are, as he says, patterns of *thought*.[7] Allen Verhey is more helpful in his fine new book on ethics and the New Testament, in which he adopts James Gustafson's description of the church as "a community of

[3] Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), esp. chap. 3. See also Werner Stark, *The Social Bond: An Investigation into the Bases of Law-abidingness* (4 vols.; New York: Fordham University Press, 1976–1983). I am grateful to David J. Lull for calling the latter to my attention.

[4] Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose* (trans. William Weaver; San Diego/New York/ London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983).

[5] George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984) 32–41.

[6] George W. Forell, *A History of Christian Ethics*. Vol. 1, *From the New Testament to Augustine* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1979) 12. He appeals to Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*.

[7] Eric Osborn, *Ethical Patterns in Early Christian Thought* (Cambridge: University Press, 1976).

moral discourse" and goes a step further to ask what kind of "community of moral discernment" is represented by each of the New Testament documents.[8] Above all, however, it is that improbable triumvirate, Alasdair MacIntyre, John Yoder, and Stanley Hauerwas, who have insisted that we pay attention to what MacIntyre calls "the social embodiment of ethics."[9]

Both MacIntyre and Hauerwas develop a conception of "character" that seems to entail a theory of culture something like that I am suggesting. However, they condense their cultural analysis into a description of the controlling "narratives" that shape the paradigmatic characters of a society. Perhaps it is because of MacIntyre's knowing and sober judgments about the limits of the social sciences that he prefers to express his thesis in literary rather than sociological terms.[10] Yet if we understand "narrative" in its usual sense, it seems too narrow for the purpose. The moral formation of a community surely requires other means besides telling stories: for example, ritual and liturgy, which do have narrative components, but which cannot simply be subsumed under that category. If, on the other hand, "narrative" becomes merely shorthand for the manifold ways in which a community presents and represents to its members those fundamental categories, pictures, and patterns by which their social world is constituted, then the word loses precision, and the employment of the literary tools that critics have forged for the analysis of narratives in the narrow sense loses its legitimacy. We would do better to adopt the cultural-linguistic model more self-consciously and, accordingly, to cast our descriptive net more broadly.[11]

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[8] Allen Verhey, *The Great Reversal: Ethics and the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984).

[9] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (2d ed.; Notre Dame and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984); John Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel* (Notre Dame and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985); Stanley Hauerwas, *Character and the Christian Life* (San Antonio, TX: Trinity University Press, 1975) and *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984).

[10] *After Virtue*, 84–102; an excellent antidote against the overenthusiasm for social theory and sociological "laws" that occasionally threatens the good sense of exegetes.

[11] See the fine survey and penetrating but sympathetic critique of these and related proposals by Paul T. Nelson, "Narrative and Morality: A Theological Inquiry" (Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 1984). Norman Petersen's recent book, *Rediscovering Paul: Philemon and the Sociology of Paul's Narrative World* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), is an impressive attempt to combine the insights of precisely the kind of sociology of knowledge I am talking about with literary-critical (semiotic) studies of narrative. The result of the combination, however, is an ambiguity of central categories that is more confusing than helpful. Is the "sociology of Paul's narrative world" simply an analysis of the social context that enables the story implied by the letter to work as fiction, or is it the description of a "real" world, in which this letter of Paul is only one of a large number of factors that will affect the way a Philemon who is not only a character in Paul's story will act? If the former, then the reader can supply whatever ending seems right ("the lady or the tiger?"), and Petersen's elaborate analysis has nothing at all to do with early Christian ethics. If the latter, then we need to know more

It is fairly easy to list steps by which we could begin to explore the culture of early Christian ethics. Alas, the list entails a range of research too vast for any individual to accomplish. Nevertheless, it may be useful to indicate some areas in which pertinent work is already at hand and some others in which our ignorance is nearly total, yet corrigible.

We know that the Christian communities of the first century did not exist in a vacuum, even though they often seem to do so in our books about them. The first Christians had to deal with their cousins and inlaws in their villages, and the concern for honor or shame of their extended families was as much a part of their world as the smell of the village dung heap. Such ties were weaker in the cities, no doubt, but one has only to consider the plan of residential streets excavated in places like Dura Europos or Ostia or Delos to see that most people, living in small spaces chockablock with their neighbors, would not have much choice about sharing those neighbors' world, metaphorically as well as physically.

Understanding the ethics of the early Christians must therefore begin with a rigorous attempt to describe the ethos of the larger culture—with its various local permutations—within which the Christian movement began and spread. What we would like to know, if it were possible, is what every morally competent person then knew simply by being part of that culture.

I propose that we begin by distinguishing between "great traditions" and "little traditions." By the great traditions, I mean primarily those which are borne by corpora of literature, by more or less definite "canons." For our purposes, it will be important to consider both the great traditions of Greece and Rome, which can for the period of the principate be lumped together, and the great traditions of Israel. In both cases, although the historical development of each tradition is important for understanding it, we are focally interested in the shape that the tradition had attained in the early Roman Empire. Practically, it is Plato as read by Philo and Plutarch, not Plato as read by, say, W. Jaeger, whom we must understand. So, too, it is neither the Isaiah of the eighth century nor the Isaiah of B. Duhm or G. von Rad, but the Isaiah of the Qumran *pesher* that is closest to our subject.

We are fortunate to have available a number of excellent studies of the various schools and of what is called "the philosophical koine" of the Roman period. Nevertheless, a great deal remains to be done before we can understand the social world of the literati and how it was connected with the social worlds of the majority. Furthermore, discussions of philosophical and rhetorical ethics only rarely consider the effects upon the functions and nature of ethical discourse which must have resulted when the power of the

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about the social world of both Philemon and Paul than Petersen tells us, but the analysis would have everything to do with the ethics of Paul's communities.

Diadochoi and then of Rome were superimposed upon the autonomous polis.[12]

The same is true, *mutatis mutandis*, of the situation of the Jewish interpreters of their tradition. We speak, for example, of "the wisdom tradition," but who were the wise? Who paid them or otherwise supported them? In what institutional setting did they ply their wisdom? From what circles and for what purposes did their students come? Was there only one wisdom tradition, or were there several, with discrete social settings? Or, to take a different kind of example, we can see that in Jewish moral discourse Israel is the dominating context for evaluating behavior as the polis is for Aristotle. "Israel," however, does not mean the same concrete social entity for the member of the Qumran community as it does for Philo of Alexandria. In the kind of account of the great traditions I am suggesting, a central question would be about the dialectic between social structure and the shape of the moral tradition.

To describe the little traditions is more difficult, both because such meager specific information remains from that vast majority of the population who did not write books and about whom no precise records survive—and because no one has done it. Almost nothing has been written about popular morality in the period of the Roman principate which could be compared with Kenneth Dover's account of Greek popular morality in the time of Plato and Aristotle.[13] Yet the resources for such a study of the Roman era are probably no less abundant nor more difficult to interpret than those of the earlier period. Much of Dover's lucid description of his own method could be adapted for our project. The Hellenistic and Roman novels, for example, could be mined in the same way as Dover draws from Athenian comedy a sense of what values the audience must have taken for granted. So could astrological and dream handbooks and some forms of popular rhetoric. Inscriptions and papyri also bring us closer to the ethos of common folk.[14] What is required, obviously, is a great deal of hard

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[12] The social changes entailed by the political have been the subject of a number of investigations, especially by some Eastern European scholars; see, for example, Elisabeth Charlotte Welskopf, ed., *Hellenische Poleis: Krise, Wandlung, Wirkung* (4 vols.; Berlin: Akademie, 1974).

[13] Kenneth J. Dover, *Greek Popular Morality in the Time of Plato and Aristotle* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press; Oxford: Blackwell, 1974). Willem den Boer embraces a wider span of time, but, lacking Dover's clear sense of method, offers only haphazard observations (*Private Morality in Greece and Rome: Some Historical Aspects* [Supplements to *Mnemosyne* 57; Leiden: Brill, 1979]).

[14] For example, see the interesting attempt to reconstruct the typical portrait of the virtuous man or woman from tombstones by Marcus N. Tod, "Laudatory Epithets in Greek Epitaphs," *Annual of the British School at Athens* 46 (1951) 186–87. Recent work on epistolography and on rhetoric of the Roman period may have brought us to the point at which we can begin to describe more precisely the social functions of letter writing and of various forms of rhetoric, as well as the social worlds implied by the writers and speakers. See Stanley K.

work by people with intuitions like Dover's.[15]

There is another reason why we need not despair of the task of describing popular morality in the world of early Christianity, nor even wait until that task is complete before we proceed with our inquiry into the Christian ethos itself. Several years ago the Roman historian E. A. Judge observed that, while the social history of the principate and especially of the eastern provinces had been largely neglected, there were many things about the early Christian movement and the documents it has preserved that make it a good case study around which to organize such a social history.[16] Similarly, one could argue that Christianity, as a special case within the larger culture of the Greco-Roman world, is an excellent starting point for investigating popular morality. Although the documents that are our primary sources for early Christian history were written by those whom we could call the elite of the church, most of them were by no means to be counted among the elite of the "great traditions," and the documents are therefore representative of a segment of the society other than that of the high culture. Thus, those documents, along with many of those produced by other groups of Jews in the same era, provide one quite exceptional body of evidence from people of social levels ordinarily voiceless in the surviving literature of antiquity. Our study of early Christian ethos and ethics may therefore make some contribution toward a more general description of everyday morality in the Roman provinces.

Proceeding thus by successively smaller concentric circles of culture, we come finally to our central question, How can we effectively go about describing the ethos and ethics of the emergent Christian movement itself? First, we need to gather the scattered but not negligible information that we have about the social structure of each of the various forms of the early Christian movement, and to see how far we can go in correlating them with specific constellations in the symbolic universe exhibited by our sources. I have in mind something like Gerd Theissen's observations about the "socio-ecology" of different missionary strategies, although his implicit biological

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Stowers, "The Social Contexts of Epistolary Types" (paper presented at the SBL Annual Meeting, Chicago, 1984) and his forthcoming book, *Letter-Writing in Greco-Roman Antiquity* (Library of Early Christianity; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986). Petersen's section "On the Sociology of Letters" (*Rediscovering Paul*, 53–65), on the other hand, does not get beyond theory.

[15] Certain aspects of Dover's project, however, may serve as a cautionary example against our perhaps inescapable tendency to assume that the definition of morality at home in our own social world is, unlike all the others, not historically contingent but culturally neutral. Thus, the conception of morality that he assumes throughout, and which, partly by virtue of his lucid style, seems so perfectly commonsensical, is none other than that "emotivism" which MacIntyre has so devastatingly criticized as the embodiment of a peculiarly narrow and special academic subculture (*After Virtue*, chaps. 2 and 3).

[16] Edwin A. Judge, "St Paul and Classical Society," *JAC* 15 (1972) 23.

model of adaptation may encourage a one-sidedness against which we should be on guard. As one example, his speculations about the ideology of "itinerant radicals" among Jesus' immediate followers, while justly criticized in several particulars, raise questions that can be productively pursued, and they trench on important issues about the emergence of an ascetic ethos in several places in early Christianity.[17] For another example, we have learned from several recent studies that there is much to be learned about the early Christian ethos from an exploration of the moral world of the Greco-Roman household.[18]

The final major step to be taken in the approach to early Christian ethics that I am recommending is an analysis of what one might call the grammar of the movement's morals. I do not mean merely a description of the linguistic structures of our texts, although that is our natural starting point, especially if we construe that description broadly enough to include what George Kennedy calls "the rhetorical situation." [19] An analysis of Paul's rhetorical strategies in 1 Corinthians, for example, will lead us into our only direct access to the moral world of the Christian communities he addressed. That analysis, however, is only preliminary to the immensely more difficult task: to analyze the logic of the interactive world that Paul and his readers shared, the meaningful structure of the process in which they were engaged before and after the writing of the letter.[20] That is what I mean by "the grammar of morals," and it should be clear that in using this metaphor I do not have in mind the old-fashioned grammar book which consisted of neatly organized sets of rules. Just as modern linguists debate whether it is even theoretically possible to capture in the form of rules the complex nuances of a natural language which the competent native speaker knows intuitively, so we may doubt whether that is the best way to describe the direction and texture of a community's moral formation.

Finally, a "cultural-linguistic" inquiry may help us to escape the temptation to think that only what is unusual or unique about the Christian moral universe is important. The "essence" of Christianity is not some residue that remains after we have boiled away everything they "borrowed" from the impure world around them. The linguistic model of culture helps us to see how silly such a notion is, for it would be like saying that the real language of a first-generation immigrant to America consisted only of those special expressions coined in the ethnic community, excluding all words

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[17] Gerd Theissen's *Sociology of Early Palestinian Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978) brings together the substance of his articles on this subject.

[18] See, for example, Abraham J. Malherbe, *Social Aspects of Early Christianity* (2d ed.; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), chaps. 3 and 4 and the further literature cited on pp. 121–22.

[19] George A. Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation through Rhetorical Criticism* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1984) 34–35.

[20] At points in his book mentioned above, Petersen seems to be pursuing exactly this same goal, but he collapses this shared world ultimately into the "narrative world" of the writer.

retained from the country of origin as well as all standard English. What was Christian about the ethos and ethics of those early communities we will discover not by abstraction but by confronting their involvement in the culture of their time and place and seeking to trace the new patterns they made of old forms, to hear the new songs they composed from old melodies.[21]

[21] I have undertaken a fuller, but still provisional, exploration on the lines here set forth in a book to be published in the Library of Early Christianity (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986[?]).