The Moral Theology of Kenneth Kirk,
Bishop of Oxford

Studies in its Development, Application and Influence

by George Garnsey, M.A.

Submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
November 2012
This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made to the text. I give consent to this copy of my thesis, when deposited in the University Library, being made available for loan and photocopying subject to the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968.

..........................
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis has benefited from formal supervision provided by Dr David Dockrill, Dr John Wright and Dr Joseph Mintoff. I am especially grateful to Dr Mintoff for his substantial assistance given to me in the latter stages of the completion of the thesis.

I am immensely grateful to my wife, Jan, who typed the thesis from my longhand script which is extremely difficult to read at the best of times.
CHAPTER 1
THE LIFE OF KIRK

For its entry on Kenneth Escott Kirk (1886–1954) the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography has drawn on the work of Kirk’s own biographer, the Revd Canon (subsequently The Rt Revd Bishop) Eric Kemp who knew Kirk personally as his pupil at Oxford, as a priest of the Diocese of Oxford, and as son-in-law.

Kirk was born on 21 February, 1886, the eldest child of Frank Herbert Kirk and his wife, Edith Escott. His grandfather John Kirk was a well-known Wesleyan Methodist minister in the neighbourhood and Kirk was baptised at the Wesley Chapel, Fulwood Road, Sheffield. When he was about twelve years old his family joined the Church of England and he was subsequently brought up as an Anglican.

Kirk was educated at the Royal Grammar School, Sheffield, and at St John’s College, Oxford, where he was a Cusberd scholar. He took first class in honour moderations (1906) and in literae humaniores (1908). In 1909 while working for the Student Christian Movement he was given responsibility for looking after oriental students in London. From 1910 to 1912 he was warden of the University College Hall at Ealing, and assistant to the Professor of Philosophy at University College, London. He was ordained deacon in 1912 and priest in 1913 and was curate of Denaby Main, Yorkshire from 1912 to 1914. In 1913 he was awarded the Denyer and Johnson scholarship and the following year was made tutor of Keble College, Oxford, although the outbreak of the First World War prevented him from coming into residence until 1919. During the war he served as a chaplain to the forces in France and Flanders, and his experiences led to the publication of his first book, A Study of Silent Minds, in 1918, and directed his thoughts to the subject of moral theology.

After the war Kirk returned to Oxford, and in 1919 was elected a prize fellow of Magdalen, which office he held, together with his tutorship at Keble, until he was appointed fellow and chaplain of Trinity in 1922. In 1920 he

---

3 E.W. Kemp, op.cit., p.9.
4 E.W. Kemp, op.cit., pp 12-32.
published *Some Principles of Moral Theology*, to be followed in 1925 and 1927 by its two sequels, *Ignorance, Faith and Conformity*, and *Conscience and its Problems*. The study of moral theology which flourished in England in the seventeenth century had in the two succeeding centuries been much neglected; in Canon Kemp’s view, Kirk’s three books were pioneer works which did much to revive interest in the subject in the Church of England. Kirk became Reader in Moral Theology in 1927 and succeeded R.L. Ottley as Regius Professor of Moral and Pastoral Theology and Canon of Christ Church, to which titles he succeeded in 1933.⁵ Kirk believed that Christian ethics and moral theology necessarily are based on Christian faith expressed in Christian doctrine. “The first business of Christian ethics is to enumerate the main duties of a Christian in normal circumstances”⁶.

In 1928 Kirk delivered the Bampton Lectures which were published in 1931 under the title *The Vision of God*. This is generally considered his greatest book and is a work of immensely wide learning and insight. What “drives” Kirk is his passionate desire to affirm that the Christian Gospel is good news for all people, and that Christian faith and life taken together amount to a way of freedom and promise, not of law, available and accessible to all people. This is an essential theme of his work, *The Vision of God*, subtitled The Christian Doctrine of the *summum bonum*, (the greatest, or highest, good). He also contributed essays on subjects of dogmatic theology to the volumes *Essays Catholic and Critical* (1926) and *Essays on the Trinity and the Incarnation* (1928) and in 1935 published a volume of highly characteristic sermons under the title of *The Fourth River*. He took the degrees of B.D. in 1922 and D.D. in 1926.⁷

In 1921 Kirk married Beatrice Caynton Yonge Radcliffe, (d. 1934), daughter of Francis Reynolds Yonge Radcliffe, county court judge of the Oxfordshire circuit. They had three daughters and two sons; their elder son was Sir Peter Michael Kirk (1928–1977), a Conservative politician.⁸

---

⁷ E.W. Kemp, op.cit., p.59.
⁸ E.W. Kemp, op.cit., p.48.
In addition to his academic distinctions Kirk was an active and influential tutor and college chaplain, and also played an important part in university administration. In 1921 he was appointed controller of lodgings in the university and in the course of the next few years he built up this office into a system of supervising and licensing lodgings which was of great benefit to the undergraduates.\(^9\)

On the resignation of T.B. Strong, Kirk was appointed Bishop of Oxford. He was consecrated in St Paul’s Cathedral on 30 November 1937, and enthroned at Christ Church on 8 December. The exceptionally large diocese taxed his powers of administration to the full. It covered the three counties of Oxfordshire, Buckinghamshire and Berkshire. So that permanent Episcopal care might be provided for each of the three counties, Kirk secured the appointment of a suffragan bishop in each county. Kirk had inherited his father’s business ability and he gave particular attention to the finances of the diocese.\(^10\)

As Bishop of Oxford, Kirk managed to retain a much closer touch with the life of the university than had any of his recent predecessors. He was a delegate of Oxford University Press, honorary fellow of St John’s and Trinity Colleges, president of the Oxford University Church Union and a much sought-after preacher in the University Church, college chapels and other churches frequented by undergraduates. During the latter part of his episcopate he held every term a simple and informal confirmation service for members of the university, at which his characteristically original and carefully thought-out addresses always made a deep impression. Shortly before becoming a bishop he published a valuable *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (1937); in 1939 he edited and contributed to the volume called *The Study of Theology* and in 1946 he published a small book on the *Church Dedications of the Oxford Diocese*.\(^11\)

As well as being an administrator and a figure in academic life, Kirk was very much a pastoral bishop. He had a singular gift for adapting his style of preaching to widely differing congregations; at parochial gatherings he made a point of speaking individually to as many people as he could, and all to whom he

---

\(^10\) E.W. Kemp, op.cit., p.75.
\(^11\) E.W. Kemp, op.cit., p134f.
spoke felt that he was interested in them as persons. He liked to attend clerical gatherings not as Bishop of Oxford but as Dr Kirk who had come to discuss common problems with fellow priests. Throughout the whole diocese he inspired a deep affection.\textsuperscript{12}

In the church at large Kirk’s episcopate was remarkable in a number of ways. In 1938 he became chairman of the advisory council on religious communities in the Church of England which had been set up a few years before to help the bishops and the communities in a variety of problems which arose in their relationships. The communities trusted him deeply, and he was able to perform a unique work of integrating them into the general life of the Church of England. The Directory of the Religious Life which was first published in 1943 was compiled under his immediate supervision.\textsuperscript{13}

Kirk’s connection with the Woodard schools dated from 1924, and he had shown his usefulness to such an extent that early in 1937, before his nomination as Bishop of Oxford, he was elected provost of the southern division. He felt obliged, on account of other work, to resign this office in 1944, but two years later he became the first president of the entire Woodard corporation. His knowledge of the schools was close and intimate and he did much to place the finances of the corporation on a sound basis. In 1937 he wrote The Story of the Woodard Schools (new edition, 1952).\textsuperscript{14}

Theologically, Kirk was always associated with the Anglo-Catholic wing of the church and, although his administration of the diocese was wholly free from partisanship and he was trusted and served by Anglo-Catholics and Evangelicals alike, it was inevitable that in the church at large he should be regarded by High Churchmen as their natural leader. Current schemes of reunion (particularly the Church of South India Scheme) led him into the position of spokesman for Anglo-Catholics in Convocation and at the 1948 Lambeth Conference. The volume The Apostolic Ministry, edited and contributed to by him in 1946, was concerned very much with this subject. He took a strict view in matters relating to divorce and his position was expounded in a book Marriage and Divorce, originally published in

\textsuperscript{12} E.W. Kemp, The Life and Letters of Kenneth Escott Kirk, p.105.  
\textsuperscript{13} E.W. Kemp, op.cit., pp 187-190.  
\textsuperscript{14} E.W. Kemp, op.cit., pp 190-193.
1933, but completely revised in 1948 in the light of developments in church and
state and of his own experience as a bishop.\textsuperscript{15}

For Kirk, the purpose of moral theology is “a new investigation into the
principles of human action, the nature of conscience, and sin; and a reassertion of
whatever certainties can be discovered as the nature and rules of Christian life”.\textsuperscript{16}
Kirk believed that such an investigation needed to begin with the record of the life
and teaching of Jesus Christ and the experience of the Church. It would need to be
corroborated by any principles of natural cause and effect agreed to by scientists.
Theologians would need to attend to any points of difference between religion and
science. Kirk believed that these points would eventually be reconciled.

After Kirk’s death some critics claimed that he was not willing to consider
sufficiently the views of psychologists or Christian rationalists. But in the
Principles he warned against too much being credited to revelation on the part of
theologians and certainty being expressed by scientists if the evidence did not
justify it.

Kirk wanted moral theology to be exact enough to give the priest clear
guidance in dealing with the problems of human conduct without giving him any
arrogance or obstinacy stemming from a sense of rightness. Moral theology
needed to emphasise the value of revealed truth and substantiated experience
without denying the possibility of further revelation or new experience. By this
statement Kirk laid the foundation for Anglican contributions to the study of moral
theology and Christian ethics for over half a century.

Kirk followed Aquinas in giving a central place in his moral theology to
revelation. The following passage is reminiscent of the sections in the Summa that
envisage the ultimate end of humanity as happiness found in the eventually
successful search for God, namely, the vision of God as the sumnum bonum:

“It is assumed that the soul has a natural tendency to seek God . . .
and that it is free to seek God and to find Him and in finding
Him to ensure the perfection of its own nature. Such a good-will
– or tendency to reject what is lower for what is higher – is
demanded as a postulate not merely by Christian ethics, but by

\textsuperscript{16} K.E. Kirk, Principles, pp 6-7.
any system of ethics whatever except the most frankly hedonistic.”\textsuperscript{17}

Kirk’s search for certainties and absolutes leads him to the Ten Commandments and the teaching of Jesus as starting points.

Kirk did not go as far as the thinking of the Malvern Conference on the matter of private ownership of Britain’s industrial resources\textsuperscript{18}. But in 1940 his sermon entitled \textit{The Menace to Faith} was published by Oxford University Press. In it he was no less urgent than Temple in describing the menace posed by Hitler as a crisis facing civilisation as a whole and the Christian faith in particular. Further study of Kirk’s writings will show that he was critical of Temple on the matter of rationalism (as in his work \textit{The Crisis of Christian Rationalism}). Kirk believed that Temple was too accommodating of rationalism; Kirk saw it as a threat to traditional Christian theology. Temple died before the inauguration of the Church of South India in 1947-1948, but he and Kirk differed on the proposals for the ordained ministry of that Church. Kirk believed that a truly apostolic ministry was safeguarded only by the episcopacy as conveyed by the line of bishops through the centuries since the foundation of the church (as upheld in the book which he edited, \textit{The Apostolic Ministry}). He believed that the proposals put forward for the ministry of the Church of South India before its inauguration were flawed as they involved the authorisation of ministers who were not episcopally ordained; Temple did not share Kirk’s concerns to a similar extent, but accepted the scheme as an opportunity for ecumenical co-operation on the part of several historic churches which should not be missed.

To add to the previously mentioned comparison with Temple: although both Kirk and Temple could be described as Liberal Catholics very much influenced by

\textsuperscript{17} K.E. Kirk, \textit{Principles}, p.18-19

\textsuperscript{18} The Anglican Conference which met at Malvern in 1941 under the presidency of Archbishop William Temple (1881-1944) to consider in the light of the Christian faith the crises confronting civilisation. The speakers included R. Acland, V.A. Demant, T.S. Eliot, H.A. Hodges, D.M. Mackinnon, J.M. Murry, and Miss D.L. Sayers. In its findings, which were especially concerned with the relation of the church to economic life, the conference asserted that the continued private ownership of the industrial resources of Britain imperilled the Christian doctrine of man, and it urged that the Church of England should radically reform its own economic and administrative system. The doctrine of man held that as human beings are all made in the image of God, they are all entitled to be treated with dignity and respect. In practice, this entitled them to be provided with adequate food, housing, clothing, education and employment. (Thomas Wood, entry on “Anglicanism” in \textit{The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Ethics}, ed. John Macquarrie and James F. Childers, The Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1986, pp 22-28).
the Student Christian Movement and the development of ecumenism in the first half of the twentieth century, Kemp notes a sharp disagreement between the two, both over the matters of education and the Church of South India. Kirk was convinced of the vital importance, for Christian witness in British society, of the development of denominational schools, and felt that Temple as Archbishop of York and of Canterbury did not stand up strongly enough for this against the Governments of the nineteen-thirties and -forties. He saw him as making too many concessions to secularisation.\textsuperscript{19}

Canon Kemp’s biography is a valuable asset for a study of his major writings in the field of moral theology which attempts to trace that theology’s development, application and influence. Kemp pays tribute, not only to Kirk’s capacity for “sustained mental effort” evidenced by the books, lectures and sermons produced as theologian and bishop, but to his intense interest in and love for people in a great variety of contexts, whether in local congregations, groups of undergraduates, or among clergy. Clearly he was deeply appreciated in all of these contexts, and held in great affection by many. At his funeral three hundred clergy lined Tom Quad at Christ Church and crowds lined St Aldates\textsuperscript{20}.

We now turn to a more detailed discussion of Kirk’s first major work, \textit{Some Principles of Moral Theology}.

\textsuperscript{19} E.W. Kemp, \textit{Life and Letters of Kenneth Escott Kirk}, p. 122.
\textsuperscript{20} E.W. Kemp, \textit{op.cit.} 195.
CHAPTER 2

THE DEVELOPMENT OF KIRK’S MORAL THEOLOGY

SOME PRINCIPLES OF MORAL THEOLOGY (1920)

(i)

Some Principles of Moral Theology was published out of a sense that Church members, clergy and lay, greatly needed help and guidance in Christian faith and life after the shattering experience of the First World War - and the whole of British society needed such help and guidance. Traditional Christian belief needed re-stating. There is a line of thinking which leads from the Principles through Conscience and its Problems and Ignorance, Faith and Conformity to his greatest work, The Vision of God.

In the Principles, the basis is a restatement and definition for the early twentieth century of the theological virtues, faith, hope and love, and the importance of the sacraments in the life of prayer and worship. There is guidance for clergy in helping lay people with problems of conscience and pastoral care. Kirk follows Aquinas especially on the central issue of the ultimate purpose and end of human life, the summum bonum, the vision of God, to be attained by living the Gospel based on the virtues, in the regular pattern of sacramental worship, devotion and fellowship supplied by the Church.

In the Principles Kirk writes as follows: “The problems of religion are manifold, but the greatest of them, perhaps, are those which lie around the shepherding of individual souls; the calling of them into the fold; the tending, feeding, healing them once they are there. This, in St Gregory’s words, is ‘the art of arts’ ”.1 Kirk then quotes the words addressed to priests at their ordination found in the Book of Common Prayer reminding them of this responsibility of theirs.

The whole book may be seen as a handbook of practical advice to clergy for their moral and pastoral work. But it is far more than that. It is an address to the England of Kirk’s day, both to church and nation. First, his aim is to shake the view of many clergy and lay people, as he perceived it,

---

1 Principles, p.1.
that the primary duty of Christians was Sunday worship and that the remainder of Christian life was a matter of conforming to the conventions of polite society. Then he seeks to remind England, church and nation, of the reality of the existence of evil both personal and social, and of its power, and of the remedy which Christian faith and life offers both through the Church and outside the Church.

To this end he writes a treatise based on thorough and careful scholarship, showing abundant familiarity with the biblical writers, Greek and Latin classics, the Christian Fathers especially St Augustine, St Gregory I, and St Thomas Aquinas. He is well abreast of his immediate predecessors and contemporaries in the field of moral and pastoral theology, Christian ethics and psychology, and his bibliography is extensive. He draws heavily on the writings of the Caroline Divines of the seventeenth century, Lancelot Andrewes, Robert Sanderson and Jeremy Taylor.

He uses traditional terms and categories in a detailed and closely argued analysis of human beings (body, mind, soul), the reality of spiritual experience, human life as a journey the goal of which is spiritual growth and development towards the ultimate destiny, the “vision of God”, and union with God. The chief barrier to such progress is human sin, but through the love of God (grace) shown in Christ’s death on the cross and resurrection to new life and the continuing and effective presence of the Holy Spirit of God in the life of the individual, the Church and the world, the ultimate goal is attainable through the use by the individual of God’s gifts of free will and conscience exercised through penitence, faith and zeal (loving service of God and other people).

(ii)

The biblical basis for the assumption that the soul has a natural tendency to seek God is found first in the creation story (Genesis 1: 26-27: *So God created humankind in his image . . . male and female he created them*). The biblical writers themselves assume that God is the source of all
that is good\textsuperscript{2}, and Kirk accepts that assumption. Again, “on the general basis of Christian doctrine”, he states that moral theology also assumes that we cannot achieve our ideal (whether we express that in terms of finding God, perfecting character, or achieving truth, beauty and goodness) by our own unaided effort. Moral theology, in his view, accepts a certain doctrine of “original sin”. This is based on biblical writings such as the Letter to the Romans, Chapter 5, where Jesus Christ is seen as the one who by God’s grace seen as generous, unmerited love, saves humanity from its tendency to choose evil rather than good.

Therefore among the principal rules of life advocated by Christian ethics are some which have no place in other systems – “rules directed towards obtaining, preserving and developing that grace without which the normal rules of conduct cannot be observed”\textsuperscript{3}.

The whole book is an exploration and exposition of such fundamental statements as these. Its major themes are the Christian character, penitence, faith, zeal, the education of the soul, conscience, law and casuistry taken together, the healing of the soul, sin and its treatment. Throughout, Kirk shows great respect for the content and structure of the \textit{Summa Theologica} of Aquinas. While, therefore, the ideal for Christian character is found in the person of Jesus Christ, the “outward” signs of the Christian life include the “cardinal virtues”. Through the medium of Cicero’s \textit{De Officiis}, St Ambrose and his successors drew from Plato and Aristotle the “cardinal virtues” of prudence, justice, temperance and fortitude\textsuperscript{4}. To these Kirk adds, following St Paul in \textit{1 Corinthians 13}, as “internal” characteristics of the Christian life, the “theological” virtues of faith, hope and love. The Christian life is to be a progressive dedication of intellect, desire and will to the service of God; this calls for the realisation, implementation and embodying of the virtues in a person’s everyday life; for this God’s love in the form of grace is both essential and readily available and accessible through the sacraments of the Church, traditionally described as “the means

\textsuperscript{2} When the question is asked: Is something good because God decrees it or does God decree it because it is good? Kirk’s answer is the former.

\textsuperscript{3} \textit{Principles} pp 18-19.

\textsuperscript{4} \textit{Principles} p.33.
of grace”. But for such spiritual progress to take place, a person needs to adopt and practise a rule of life that includes regular prayer and worship both private and public or corporate within the life of the Church.

Penitence, faith and zeal are essential ingredients of such a rule of life and practice. Kirk treats all three in considerable detail. In both the sections on penitence and those on sin, Kirk is positive. While calling for an honest and sincere assessment of the reality of the seriousness of evil in ourselves and others, and for consequent repentance, he warns against over-scrupulosity, morbid self-preoccupation and excessive feelings of guilt. Evil is real; no less real is God’s love, compassion and forgiveness. For Christians the evidence for this is found in the New Testament narratives of the life, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the experience of the presence of God in the life, worship and fellowship of the Church, supported by personal experience. Nor can Kirk be accused of an excessively intellectual approach to religion. While “feeling” is not the most important factor in religion, it has real value as means of expressing love of others, which Jesus expected of his followers. And while he analyses in detail the notion of sinful acts and habits and the importance of dealing with them in a manner appropriate both to the circumstances and the character of the people concerned, for him sin is primarily a matter of attitude, stance and orientation of a person towards God. He sometimes describes sin as “rebellion” against God; our own observation and experience tells us that this is true in many cases; and for Kirk the most seriously offensive element in that broken relationship is that it is a rebellion against a God eternally loving, compassionate and forgiving.

A great part of the task of moral theologians and of all who seek to facilitate spiritual growth in themselves and others is with all gentleness, sympathy, understanding and tact, to awaken the realisation of this love of God for all persons; to Kirk love towards God, in response to this realisation, with gratitude, is the foundation of true penitence. Forgiveness can then breathe new life into those who seek to undertake the spiritual journey.
Faith, among the theological virtues, is the spring and source of this spiritual journey. It occupies a central place in Kirk’s treatise. Here again he takes intellectual factors seriously, including questions arising from criticism, scepticism and the findings of such scientists as Darwin and Huxley. Following Aquinas who in his turn followed Plato and Aristotle, the relation of faith and reason is given close attention. With his predecessors in the Oxford Movement he offers an Anglican view of Christian thought, faith and life solidly based on the pillars of Scripture, Tradition and Reason. Belief needs must be reasonable, but in his view faith transcends reason in many particulars. “Evidence and argument, so far as they will go, must be adduced for the matter of faith; but it is unlikely that to any one Christian at any given time they will wholly establish the truth of what is offered to him as the intellectual implications of the full spiritual life”\(^5\). It is not possible either to prove or disprove the existence of God; like the later Anglican theologian John Macquarrie, Kirk gives a high place to personal experience of encounters with God, as one necessary factor for arriving at an adequate theology, along with scripture, tradition, reason and revelation.

And so faith is “unformed” without “works”; his chapter on *Zeal* illustrates how the Christian’s spiritual progress, based on faith, issues in visible evidence in the form of actions of loving service to God, other people and society.

For Kirk, true progress is based on the education of the soul through union with the Christ who loves and forgives, thus strengthening and renewing faith and zeal. This section and the concluding chapters on sin and its treatment are full of judicious advice to clergy for their work of caring, discerning obstacles to progress, healing the effects of wrongful attitudes, actions and habits, and generally assisting the progress of human beings to what he sees as their ultimate destiny, the vision of God and union with God. Kirk offers a close analysis of the variety of human types, characters and temperaments with which clergy are called on to deal, taking note of the

---

\(^5\) *Principles* p. 94.
variety of circumstances in which ethical and moral issues arise. He follows the traditional Roman Catholic classification of sins, mortal and venial. While he finds this useful, as clearly some wrongful attitudes, thoughts, actions and habits are more serious than others, he is critical of some Roman Catholic casuistry. Rome he faults when moralists take either a too lenient view or a too dogmatic or authoritarian stance. By contrast, while he never underestimates the seriousness of evil in the human heart and mind and soul, he urges caution in dealing with even the most serious circumstances. The priest is called on to be father, shepherd, guide, philosopher, counsellor and friend. (He is writing before the church began to ordain women!) So the priest is never to appear shocked or to give the impression that the problem with which he is dealing is so grave as to be irremediable. Kirk deals in detail with the seven “capital” or “root” sins and the so-called “unforgivable” sin of “blasphemy against the Holy Spirit”. Here he is urging that such “mortal” sin be seen as requiring a revolutionary change in the agent, while offering the view of God, true to the New Testament, as one who always is the reconciler, willing to forgive and welcome and restore, holding the door open.

There is a unity of theme in Kirk’s work as a moral theologian. Kirk follows Aquinas in believing and affirming that the highest good that human beings can attain is identified with the ultimate purpose of human life, specifically, the vision of God. This is not something which can be fully enjoyed and experienced in this life. But the Christian gospel is a gospel of promise that such fulfilment is granted by God in the life that follows life on earth, the fulfilment that is the goal of spiritual progress.

This journey begins in this world when human beings respond to the experience of the presence of God who can be encountered in nature; in the life, worship and sacraments of the Church whose scriptures are a record of God’s self-revelation; in the enjoyment of human love and friendship; and in the appreciation of the beauty of art, music and literature.

It is Kirk’s conviction that the promise and the journey are available and accessible to all people. The task of moral theology, and of those
entrusted by the Church to care both for its members and for society, is to provide a ministry of care and guidance that will enable all people to discern and choose what is good and right, and to act accordingly. As a moral theologian Kirk intended his major works to assist clergy in their work of teaching and caring for their people by providing them with an adequate theology, both theoretical and practical.

Later, as a bishop he was directly involved with many clergy and lay people in the role, as he perceived it, of their chief teacher and pastor, charged with the task of equipping the Church’s members for their mission of offering the Christian gospel to their communities in a way that made its promise both credible, cogent and compelling.

From the Preface and the first chapter of Kirk’s *Principles* it is possible to see what drives him to take up his work as a writer and speaker on moral theology; what he conceives to be the nature, purpose and scope of moral theology; and what is distinctive about Anglican moral theology. The Preface begins:

The present book is an attempt to bring together, from the Bible and from Christian experience, the principles which have guided the Church in dealing with individual souls; to test these principles by the light of modern knowledge; and to apply them to present-day conditions and needs.\(^6\)

Kirk sees that there is a need to be met, as the three works which had appeared since 1870 were all out of print.\(^7\)

In the Preface to the *Principles* Kirk states a basis which underlies much of his writing:

“The standing problem of all ethics is the reconciliation of two apparently opposed principles, the principles of law and liberty, or of authority and individualism. Particularly is this the case with Christian ethics. A society which has its roots in a divine revelation . . . (a society) of

---


which it is a fundamental principle that no member lives to himself alone – cannot dispense with authority and law. Limits must be set to the freedom of the individual. Yet they must not interfere with his true freedom; he must be free to develop every part of his personality to its utmost in the service of God and his neighbour. Christian theology, then, above all other thought, is called to the task of solving this problem – the reconciliation of authority and freedom”.

Kirk believed that St Thomas Aquinas attempted such a reconciliation. From Aristotle he drew the twin conceptions of free speculative thought and of conduct based upon the principle of the fullest self-expression; from the Church that of an authority and revelation beyond whose limits such conduct and speculation – to remain Christian – must not step. Believing that the two could be combined without loss to either, he attempted to hold them in combination.

Further Kirk held that among the successors of Aquinas those who attempted most successfully to carry out this ideal of combining the principle of authority with that of freedom were the Anglican theologians of the seventeenth century – Hooker, Jeremy Taylor, Sanderson, and Hall. They upheld the authority and divine commission of the church, but did not push that authority to extremes.

Herein are contained important insights into Kirk’s reasons for undertaking his work and the direction it was to take. He next defends his inclusion in a book of moral theology a great deal of ascetic theology – “The science . . . of the methods and rules of Christian progress . . . it is important in this matter to emphasise that theory and practice are very closely allied.”

Kirk continues:

“… it is the principles of moral theology and their general application, not the detailed systems of ecclesiastical law which . . . have

---

8 Principles, p. ix.
9 op.cit. pp ix-xi.
10 op.cit. pp xi-xii.
been built upon this foundation by different branches of the Church that form the subject of this book”.11 Kirk is not attempting the task of compiling “a *manual* of moral theology (but) to enunciate principles based solely upon the great Biblical and Catholic doctrines which the Church has proclaimed throughout history. . . Such doctrines will always be the mainstay of moral theology”.12 This last point lies at the heart of his lecture entitled *The Coherence of Christian Doctrine* (1949), evidence of a consistent line in Kirk’s thought.

Kirk concludes his preface by stating that one purpose of the *Principles* is to show the extent of agreement between “modern psychological practice – as evidenced, for example in educational methods – and the ‘ascetic’ principles of the church”.13 Kirk cites the establishment of the following principles as arising from a comparison of psychological practice (psychotherapy) with spiritual direction:

- the need to regard sin as a disease to be cured rather than as a fault to be punished;
- the Catholic principle of sacramental confession as enabling the penitent to regard his sin as something which has been forgiven rather than as something which involves punishment and estrangement from God;
- the emphasis in Catholic teaching upon the importance of *conscious effort* in the formation of character;
- the close relation between spiritual and nervous disorders;
- the tracing of disorders to the misdirection of one of the basic instincts, and the healing of them by redirection of the instinct into beneficial channels;

---

11 *Principles*. p. xiii.
• The possibility of a forgotten emotional shock or crisis being the root cause of mental and spiritual disorder, and the value of analysis in bringing to light such complexes.

Kirk acknowledges that his observations on the relation of psychotherapy to spiritual direction are the outcome of a private conference between Canon B.H. Streeter, the Revd S.F. Hawkes, the Revd A.E. J. Rawlinson, Dr J.A. Hadfield and Kirk himself.14 Kirk quotes Dr Hadfield, an experienced psychoanalyst, as observing one difference between the methods of the confessor and the psychoanalyst as this: the psychoanalyst deals mainly with unconscious complexes, the confessor with conscious troubles.15

Kirk ends his preface by upholding the habit of sacramental confession as a sound method of “regulating the spiritual life in general (as well as) of remedying specially serious falls from grace”.16 Where such confession has sometimes had a deleterious effect upon character, Kirk concedes, he attributes this to faulty direction rather than to the habit itself.

(iii)

The Purpose of Moral Theology

Kirk sees the greatest problems of religion as those which lie around the shepherding of individual souls; the calling of them into the fold; and the tending, feeding, healing of them once they are there. This in St Gregory’s words is the ‘art of arts’.17 So Kirk begins his account of the purpose of moral theology. The task of practising the ‘art of arts’ is chiefly in the hands of the clergy, and the terms of their charge at their ordination as priests are parallel: “See that you never cease your labour, your care and diligence, until you have done all that lieth in you, according to your bounden duty, to bring all such as are or shall be committed to your charge, unto that agreement in the faith and knowledge of God, and to that ripeness and

14 supra, c.1, p.7.
16 op.cit. p. xvi.
17 op.cit. p.1.
perfections of age in Christ, that there be no place left among you, either for error in religion, or for viciousness in life."\(^{18}\)

Kirk says that the “art of arts” needs to have its science, which in the past was called Moral Theology, and it formed an essential part of Christian doctrine. “It gave the priest . . . the ideal of Christian character for which he was to work . . . the internal dispositions of that character without which its virtues cannot flower . . . the means and motives by which its growth can best be fostered . . . and the hindrances that threaten to spoil the work, and the ways in which they can be met and neutralised.”\(^{19}\)

Kirk’s purpose in writing the *Principles* was to meet the need for definition in spiritual matters. “This *failure to define* . . . finds its natural outcome in a prevailing indifference both as to the truths of doctrine . . . and to those of morals. It has resulted in a widespread abandonment of any ideals of absolute truth or of absolute goodness; in an individualism according to which each man may believe what he likes and do what he likes without reference to any external criterion except a vague social convention that is entirely unable to justify its own standards. That this is the prevailing tone of mind of the English laity . . . cannot be denied. ‘It doesn’t much matter what a man believes’, and ‘Every man must decide for himself what is right for him to do and what is wrong’, are the only rules commonly regarded as final in faith and morals; and the result is . . that neither truth nor morality is . . . considered a matter in which God has revealed, or man can discover, an absolute standard.”\(^{20}\)

This conviction drives Kirk to say that the only remedy for such vagueness in the matter of conduct – which is his concern – is “a new investigation into the principles of human action, the nature of conscience, the character of divine law, the distinction between virtue and sin; and a reassertion of whatever certainties can be discovered as to the nature and


\(^{19}\) op.cit. p.2.

\(^{20}\) op.cit. p.6.
rules of Christian life”. Kirk offers the Principles as the beginning of such a new investigation.

(iv)

The Scope of the Principles

Kirk did not believe that it was possible to cover the whole ground of moral theology in the Principles. His purpose was to confine his discussion to the points which were the most necessary to the priest in the normal cases which came to his notice for advice or help. Kirk acknowledged that there was a need for investigation of appropriate Christian action on the problems of labour and wages; of temperance and total abstinence; of gambling and betting; of literature and the drama; of birth control; of the Christian conception of marriage and of the relation of the individual to the community. But he saw these as beyond the immediate purpose of the Principles.

By contrast his contemporary, William Temple, showed by his convening of the Malvern Conference in 1941 that for him the problem of labour and wages was a matter of prime concern as he sought to address the question of building a new society when the second world war should end. Kirk’s intention in the Principles was to describe the ideal of Christian character; “the stages through which the soul approaches that ideal; the methods by which the priest can foster its progress; the hindrances of temperament and sin, and the means to be employed for their removal. These questions are no more important than the others which we have chosen to disregard; but at least they touch on the majority of those points which present practical difficulties to the priest in his work.”

(v)

The Postulates of Moral Theology

Kirk introduces his discussion of the “postulates” by stating that “moral theology does not approach its task with an absolutely open mind; it

21 Principles, p.7.
22 op.cit. p.15.
starts from certain *assumptions* the validity of which it does not question as it receives them on the warrant of Christian dogma.”

These assumptions include, first, the objective reality of spiritual experience. Kirk considers that if it be true that there is no God except a man’s subliminal self, moral theology is a myth. But he accepts “the fundamental Christian propositions that God exists, that He was Incarnate in Jesus Christ, that He gives to men grace and power by the Holy Spirit.”

It follows that “religious experience . . . is genuine intercourse on the part of man with ‘another Being greater than himself’.”

Secondly, the co-operation of the Holy Spirit may be confidently expected and unhesitatingly recognised in the work of reconciling souls to God.

Thirdly, as noted in my first chapter, Kirk assumes that the soul has a natural tendency to seek God.

Fourthly, however, in Kirk’s view moral theology assumes on the basis of Christian doctrine that human beings cannot achieve this ideal (whether it be described as finding God, or perfecting character, or achieving truth, beauty or goodness) by their own unaided effort. Kirk accepts a doctrine of “original sin” that has great importance for his view of Christian ethics.

This doctrine can be traced to St Paul’s interpretation of the Genesis story of Adam’s disobedience to God’s command. St Paul uses this story to explain humanity’s tendency to choose evil rather than good. He describes Jesus Christ as the agent of God’s grace that saves humanity from this tendency.

Kirk acknowledges that Christian ethics, like other systems of ethics, provides rules for the guidance of conduct. For him, the principal rules of life advocated by Christian ethics are directed towards obtaining, preserving

---

23 *Principles*, p.16.
24 *ibid.*
25 *ibid.*
26 supra, Chapter 1, p.7.
and developing that grace without which the normal rules of conduct cannot be observed. He believes that human beings can so rule and order their lives as to be open to God’s grace, defined as generous, forgiving love, and to give that grace the fullest possible scope when once it has been received.\(^{27}\)

Kirk notes the criticism of Christianity that it puts personal holiness before the service of God and our neighbour. He answered the criticism by claiming that the service of others and the observance of the normal rules of conduct can only be truly performed by those aspiring to personal holiness. By that he meant that Christ supplied the power necessary for the service of others; and that in order to receive that power human beings needed to observe the rules which most enabled their lives to be opened to its influence. One such rule was to seek God in order to serve him: and such seeking follows from obedience to the two commandments endorsed by Christ in the New Testament: “Ye shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind, and your neighbour as yourself”.\(^{28}\)

Fifthly, for Kirk it follows that Christian ethics deprecates any rules of life or conduct which might divert the soul’s attention from Christ to itself. “The soul which is occupied exclusively . . . with rules of conduct is a soul in danger of losing its hold on spiritual reality. Excellence of character will be attained, not by following rules but by following Christ.”\(^{29}\)

Furthermore, Christian ethics sets before Christians not only a picture of Christ on which to meditate, but the hope of a mystic personal union with him. For Kirk this is the vision of God which to the theologians is the ultimate goal of human life. In this opening chapter of the *Principles*, then, Kirk is foreshadowing the theme he was to develop at length in *The Vision of God*.

On the need to reconcile authority with freedom, law with liberty, Kirk believes that in the early states of the soul’s spiritual progress rules and law are essential, but as the soul reaches spiritual maturity, growing in

\(^{28}\) Luke 10: 27.
\(^{29}\) op.cit. p.20.
communion with Christ, they can be gradually discarded, provided that antinomianism is avoided. Some law will always be necessary to the Christian freedom which is part of the gospel.  

Kirk ends the chapter by noting the contrast between the status of Anglican and Roman Catholic clergy, which will necessitate the modification of the moral theology of the past. One fact which made modification essential was that most English church members did not regard the practice of sacramental confession as obligatory. Consequently, most of those committed to the priest’s care will not normally come to him for spiritual direction. Secondly, Kirk acknowledges that Anglican lay people do not recognize the authority of the clergy as final in matters of faith and conduct.

The upshot for Kirk, then, is that “to serve the widest possible purpose among clergy of the English church . . . moral theology must therefore be entirely rewritten; not indeed with a view to altering its eternal principles, but with the simple object of providing an instrument adapted in the fullest possible degree to the conditions normally obtaining among English Christians . . . So long as the fundamental truths of Christianity are not violated, the right of adapting teaching and usage to the needs of the moment is the peculiar prerogative of the Church of England; and in the matter . . . such adaptation is not merely legitimate but laudable”. This viewpoint is at the heart of Kirk’s thinking. However, some of the critics mentioned in the Introduction, Preston, Lehmann and Fletcher, judged that Kirk did not “rewrite” moral theology sufficiently himself.

The first chapter of the Principles contains much of the basis of Kirk’s thought and work. Kirk wanted to see the Church strike the right balance of authority and freedom, liberty and law. As we shall see, this theme is a unifying thread linking his major works, maintained to the concluding lecture of the Bampton Lectures of 1928, The Vision of God. The lecture is entitled Law and Promise. In it Kirk emphasises that the

30 Principles., p. 22.
31 op.cit. pp 24-25.
Christian Gospel is a Gospel of promise rather than a Gospel of law. The whole work is a determined effort to have the Church uphold the New Testament writers’ portrayal of Christ as the bringer of promise, hope, and the freedom from all that hinders human beings from reaching union with God and with each other, the freedom that is salvation. Kirk is driven to contrast law and promise because, as the eight lectures show, he finds from as early as the second century of Christian history evidence of attempts by the Church’s leaders, theologians, teachers and writers to turn the Gospel into law in the form of legalistic codes of rules and regulations. He wishes to set the Church free from this tendency.

(vi)

Christian Character

The following chapters of the *Principles* can be summarised more briefly. The second chapter presents a sketch of an ideal of the Christian character. The Christian ideal of character is found in the person of Christ. The task of Christian ethics is to set out an ideal of the Christian life. Kirk offers not only Biblical sources for such an ideal. He notes that through the medium of Cicero’s *De Officiis* (Duties) St Ambrose and his successors drew from Plato and Aristotle the Greek classification known as the *Cardinal Virtues* – prudence, justice, temperance, (self-control) and fortitude. Kirk describes these as the “outward” signs of the Christian life. For the Christian they have their source in the virtues listed by St Paul in 1 Corinthians 13 as faith, hope and love, called by Kirk the *Theological Virtues*. The development of the Christian character necessitates spiritual progress built on principles which Kirk offers as guides to leading to the transformation of human desire, intelligence and will into the image of Christ. The final sentence of this chapter points forward to the contents of the next three chapters:

“The Christian life . . . viewed either as by the theologian, or as by the mystic, or as by the psychologist, is simply the progressive purification

---

32 *Principles*, p.27.
33 op.cit. p.33.
34 op.cit. p.50.
of thought, desire and will into faith, penitence, zeal, showing fruit in the virtues of prudence, fortitude, temperance and justice, and the qualities that depend from them.”

Chapters III, IV and V are respectively entitled Penitence, Faith and Zeal. The third chapter raises the question whether penitence is necessary for all people. Kirk believes that repentance is necessary for the soul if we are to understand the meaning of Christ’s crucifixion. Christians need to share the rejection of evil and the love of the good of which Christ’s cross is the symbol. Kirk sees penitence as the main source of sympathy with others, of perseverance and communion with God, and of strength to resist sin. The reference to “sympathy with others” is in keeping with the attention Kirk pays to pastoral care for persons shown consistently throughout the book.

Kirk then cites the Biblical evidence for the character of true penitence and affirms love towards God as its foundation. Penitence involves confession of sin before God. Kirk offers Biblical evidence for confession of sin before fellow human beings. Of confession of sin before a priest, Kirk writes:

“... in general it cannot be doubted that definite confession of sin committed before man as well as before God, is a means of spiritual progress sanctioned and encouraged both by the Bible and the Church.”

Penitence also requires reparation and amendment of life.

In his fourth chapter, Kirk follows Jeremy Taylor in defining faith, the theological virtue, as “the consecration of the mind to the service of God.” He engages with questions that deal with the place of faith in Christian life, namely, the value of belief for conduct, the relation between faith and reason, and the place of “authority”, whether of a book, or of the

---

36 Ex. 22: 1, 1 Sam. 12: 3, 2 Sam. 12:6, Luke 19: 8, 1 Peter 4: 8, Jer. 7: 3, Dan. 4: 27.
37 op.cit. p.74.
38 op.cit. p.80.
Church, or of personal experience. Dealing with the intellectual factor in religion Kirk writes:

“... the spiritual life must have an intellectual side; that the activities of the mind must be brought into conformity with the purposes of God. God is a God of truth; the offering of the intellect to God means, therefore, that it must be directed by truth.” Christians will ask: “what do I believe about God – about Christ – about the Sacraments? Do I accept propositions presented to me by the Church as true?” Doubt may ensue; it may recur for many Christians throughout their spiritual life. But it is also possible that some will eventually be able to say “this is what I believe”. Kirk holds as a fundamental postulate of moral theology that such a state of mind is an essential element in the spiritual life.

Other important points follow:

“the Church has always insisted upon works as the necessary outcome of faith.” He notes the popular opinion which he has encountered: “It doesn’t matter what a man believes so long as his life is all right.” He finds that the reasons for the opinion include the deficiencies of professing Christians and the apparent remoteness of Christian doctrine from life. He counters this by referring to New Testament texts such as St John’s Gospel (8: 32) in which Jesus Christ promises that the truth shall make us free. He concludes that it is the priest’s task to impress upon professing Christians the “supreme importance of testifying to the value of their beliefs by increased purity and unselfishness of life... and the relevance of each point of Christian doctrine for conduct. Wherever the priest meets with anyone who has an honest doubt as to truth of what Christianity teaches, he should urge him to test the truth of the doctrines by practical experience.”

---

39 *Principles*, p.85
40 ibid.
41 op.cit. p.86.
42 quoted ibid.
43 op.cit. pp 90-92.
In this chapter then, as in chapters VI and VII, entitled *The Education of the Soul*, Kirk gives a central place to the work and role of the priest as pastor and teacher.

Kirk gives most of the rest of this chapter to the relation of faith to reason. He defines faith as the acceptance of the truths of Christian doctrine, and reason as “the acceptance of any truth . . . either by a process of argument (from premises to conclusion), or as the result of an intuitive apprehension of its self-evidence, or from a perception of its necessary coherence with the whole of truth as otherwise known to us – that is by one of the processes commonly known as rational.”\(^44\) He cites as the traditional attitude of the church the view that “faith and reason accord as far as they cover the same ground,” “faith transcends reason in some of its most important particulars.”\(^45\) Kirk takes note of the greater cogency of rationalist or scientific objections to Christian belief that have emerged in his own time. Part of Kirk’s response to this challenge is to quote R.C. Moberly: “acceptance of religious dogma is not essentially in contrast, but rather is parallel with that of scientific principles.”\(^46\) Kirk continues:

“Both (religious and) scientific principles rely . . . on authority; in both the proof of the position taken up is not final at the outset, . . but deepens with experience. In both . . there is contained an *act of faith*, . . by which the conclusion is accepted as a working hypothesis on a basis of accumulated or corroborative evidence, none of which can be said to amount to proof.”\(^47\) Kirk at this point appears to envisage science and religion as compatible partners. But, as we shall see, in his essay on *The Crisis of Christian Rationalism* he defends traditional Christian doctrine against Christian rationalism and his critics, such as Augustinus Pütz, hold that he did not take sufficient account of the psychology which in his day was “new”.

\(^{44}\) *Principles*, p.93.
\(^{45}\) op.cit. pp 93-94.
\(^{47}\) op.cit. p.99.
The thought of the fifth chapter of the *Principles*, entitled *Zeal*, follows from Kirk’s view of *works* as the necessary outcome of *faith*. An active religion goes out of its way to make opportunities of Christian service. He defines *zeal* as “dedication of the will . . . to the service of God . . . it is called into being by penitence and faith. It manifests itself, in the soul, as an overwhelming love of God and man. And its external character is that of justice – the giving . . . to God devotion, reverence and obedience: to man benevolence, sympathy or charity.”

This dedication is seen by Kirk as a necessary characteristic of the Christian life.

For Kirk this zeal of Christian love is aroused by penitence and faith, and a consequent sense of forgiveness. He cites the evidence of the writers of the Old Testament and the New Testament concerning the sense of forgiveness. As in all the other chapters of the *Principles*, this one is given a foundation in Biblical sources. But Kirk warns that forgiveness does not bring exemption from the consequences of sin, nor exemption from future temptation. However, the vital point is that there is no doubt of the reality of forgiveness. It is assured by the atonement effected by Christ’s death and resurrection and the penitent’s contrition.

For examples of Christian zeal marking spiritual progress Kirk offers the Anglican Church’s rites of confirmation, confession and penance. Kirk turns to Aquinas and Jeremy Taylor for the qualities required for a good confession and the characteristics of a wisely imposed penance. He advocates that priests conducting this ministry combine discipline with practicality, and firmness with gentleness.

The sixth and seventh chapters of the *Principles* are entitled *The Education of the Soul*. They continue the theme of the previous chapters of

---

48 *Principles*, p.105.
49 op.cit. p.106.
50 John 3: 3, Rom. 6: 4, 7: 6, 12: 2, 2 Cor. 5: 17, Eph. 4: 24, 1 Cor. 6: 11, Rom. 5: 11, 1 Peter 1: 8-9, Eph. 2: 10, Tit. 2: 14, Eph. 1: 9, 18.
51 op.cit. p.114.
52 op.cit. p.120.
53 Suppl.g.q. a.4 from Sent.iv.d.17, q.3.a.4, quoted *Principles*, p.121.
Christian faith and life as a journey of spiritual progress. Kirk declares that the goal of Christian life is union with Christ.\textsuperscript{55}

This is to be life not so much of following rules as of following Christ. The Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke tell the story of Jesus’ call to the fishermen Peter, Andrew, James and John to leave their trade: they immediately do so and follow him. Kirk’s view of “following Christ” means thinking of the character of Christ in relation to the thinker’s own character; thinking of Christ as an example of zeal, of practical altruism, of friendliness . . . “the soul must compare (Christ’s) perfections with its own imperfections and stir itself to emulate His greatness.”\textsuperscript{56}

Kirk’s theology assigns the principal agency in spiritual progress to the Holy Spirit. “It is He alone who mediates to men the experience of union with Christ, and through that experience moulds the desires, illuminates the mind, strengthens and directs the will and fuses all together in a life both of inward and outward virtue. It is He even, innate in every man, who first stimulates the soul to that unconscious striving after the beautiful, the true, the good, which we have previously called conscience, and have seen to be present in germ in every human consciousness.”\textsuperscript{57}

These definitions respectively of the role of the Spirit and of conscience are central to Kirk’s thought, not only in the \textit{Principles}, but in his subsequent major works. However, the priest has a necessary part to play, as director and educator. Kirk saw the conventional English view of the spiritual life as contrary to the spirit of the New Testament: a weekly sermon, occasional references to the Bible, a few memories of the catechism and Sunday School teaching, is all that a soul needs for guidance. The rest may be left to the individual conscience.\textsuperscript{58}

So Kirk, having stated the need for direction, offers practical suggestions for stimulating progress. At the heart of these suggestions is the

\textsuperscript{55} Kirk, \textit{Principles}, p.127.
\textsuperscript{56} op.cit. p.132.
\textsuperscript{57} op.cit. pp 132-133.
\textsuperscript{58} op.cit. p.134.
idea of the Cross of Christ, itself the centre of Christian belief, demonstrating the existence, power and love of God. Kirk envisages progress generated by Christians’ cultivating the habit of prayer in three stages: meditation, aspiring prayer and contemplation. This last is described as “the prayer of quiet” as listening to the voice of God. “Union with God through Christ is the end of the spiritual life; and the prayer of quiet is the attempt to taste the joy and power of such a union in perfect dependence upon God.”

This statement of the aim and goal of the spiritual life leads Kirk to say that every one of these forms of prayer finds its consummation in the Holy Eucharist. At this point Kirk is representing traditional Anglican belief that in the Eucharist worshippers experience the presence of God-in-Christ, a sense of union of God and with each other. This perception is conveyed by another title for the Eucharist, Holy Communion. It is a high point for Christians in a life of prayer and holiness, which again aspires to a sense of oneness with God, belonging to God. Kirk commends fasting and almsgiving together with prayer as habits promoting spiritual progress.

Kirk believes that it is the work of the Holy Spirit to guide both clergy and lay people in the task of educating and caring for souls. Lay people by their upright lives may touch souls of people whom clergy fail to reach, and guide them in the right way.

Kirk believes that moral theology has the task of offering men and women adequate theoretical theology – sound teaching – and advice that is practical and realistic. If the ideas contained in his previous chapters are to be implemented in people’s lives, he needs to give an account of conscience. Therefore he offers next a chapter on conscience, law and casuistry.

Kirk notes two points of view on conscience. One regards it as primarily emotional, as a moral sense or faculty; the other treats it as primarily rational and calls it reason or the practical reason. In customary

---

59 Principle, pp 163-164.
60 op.cit. p.174.
61 op.cit. p.176.
usage, he finds that the word “conscience” signifies moral judgements connected with particular actions, while he repeats his earlier definition of conscience as “that tendency of human nature which leads both conative and cognitive elements to seek unsparily for satisfaction in the good, the beautiful and the true.” In practice, Kirk writes, the first movement of conscience is the feeling either of satisfaction or of uneasiness; the second – the thought “This is right” or “This is wrong”. “It is only on reflection that the question ‘Why is it right or wrong?’ is asked, and answered by reference to some general principle of morality.”

Kirk then enunciates “a first principle of morals . . . wherever conscience gives a clear ruling for or against an act, it must be unhesitatingly obeyed, even though impartial criticism holds that the conscience is ‘erroneous’ – that is, that the agent’s judgment as to which is right or wrong in the matter is at fault.” By “erroneous” in this connection is meant “invincibly erroneous”; that is, the principle stated above does not cover cases where further inquiry is possible and would reverse the judgment of conscience. This matter, and the problem of conscience itself were so important for Kirk that they led him to produce two further works, Ignorance, Faith and Conformity (1925) and Conscience and its Problems; an Introduction to Casuistry (1927). In the present work, he follows his statement of the “first principle” by raising these questions:

(a) What principles of right action should conscience recognize?

(b) How may conscience be distinguished from prejudice or convention?

(c) How are perplexities of conscience to be resolved?

By way of reply, Kirk states that the principles to be recognised by conscience are embodied in natural law, divine law and human law. He quotes Thomas Aquinas: “Reason naturally apprehends as good all those things to which man has a natural inclination . . . good is to be sought for, evil

---

62 Principles. p.177.
63 op.cit. p.179.
64 ibid; Kirk refers to Thomas Aquinas, Summa, i.2,4.19,aa,5,6, quoted Principles, p.183.
avoided”. Further, “natural law is completed in divine law” and the essence of the divine law is that it is of internal conditions rather than of external acts, and secondly, that it is . . a lex non scripta, a law implanted in the soul.

Kirk finds in Aquinas the view that the New Testament’s Beatitudes and Two Commandments summarising the Ten Commandments prepared the soul to receive the Holy Spirit in the form of a law of liberty. But the conscience of all Christians should accept as principles prayer, the Eucharist, and habits of “faith working through love”, as actions laying the soul open to the influence of grace.

Kirk endorses Aquinas’ teaching by stating that this observance of principles is the sign of a mature fully developed conscience. In cases where his people fall short of them, it is the task of the priest, Kirk says, to persevere in the work of instructing or assisting conscience to its full development. “In ideal, a life actuated by such a conscience will be spontaneous . . but until the ideal is reached, the Christian must live by the law of conscience, unless his liberty is to become licence.” The phrase “law of liberty” reproduces the text of the New Testament Letter of James where the writer urges his readers to be “doers of the word, and not merely hearers . . those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere . . they will be blessed in their doing”.

(vii)

Conscience and Law

Kirk turns next to the question “How far must the conscientious man hold himself bound to obey the laws of the state in which he lives?” He

---

65 Summa, i.2.q.94, a.2., quoted Principles, p.182.
66 Summa, i.2.q.91, a.4., quoted Principles, p.183.
67 ibid.
68 ibid. q.106, a.1; q. 108, a.1., quoted Principles, p.183.
71 Principles, p.183.
73 op.cit. p.185
74 James 1: 22a.
summarises the conclusions on the subject of Aquinas, Taylor, Sanderson and Hall. “... the human law ... is ... the application of the principles of external law to the circumstances of ordinary life in society. If, then, laws conform to the principles of natural law in three main respects — as being for the common good, as not exceeding the lawgiver’s authority, and as imposing no disproportionate burden upon any member of the community – they must be regarded as binding ... even just laws are only binding when framed by a competent authority.”

Kirk then raises the question of the right to rebellion, noting that on this, the authorities differ. St Thomas Aquinas allows rebellion against tyrants, unless it involves more suffering for the subject people than did the tyrannical rule. But Jeremy Taylor concludes that it is not lawful for subjects to rebel, or to take up arms against the supreme power of the nation under any circumstances.

Kirk acknowledges the difficulty of distinguishing between the dictates of conscience and those of prejudice, personal preference, or convention and again turns to Jeremy Taylor who suggests criteria to assist conscientious Christians. Kirk himself affirms the importance of ensuring purity of motive, while avoiding scrupulosity; the overarching principle is that “true Christian action should spring spontaneously from continuous communion with God ... no degree of reflection can move a satisfactory substitute for that one supreme source of morality.” He cites the danger of the unworthy motive in the case of large subscriptions to charitable purposes: “(these) unless anonymous, minister to self-advertisement as much as to benevolence; and the donor should be on his guard against the predominance of the personal motive.”

75 Summa, i.2, q.96, a.4, quoted Principles, p.186.
76 Principles, pp 186-7.
77 Summa, ii.2, q.42, a.2 ad.3., quoted Principles, p.187.
78 ibid.
79 op.cit. pp 188-9.
80 op.cit. p.189.
Casuistry

The last section of this chapter is on casuistry, the matter of dealing with cases of conscience. Kirk takes the view that cases of conscience normally embody a conflict between law and law, not between law and liberty. Kirk considers the case of a Christian who regards abstinence in the season of Lent as a law, but who then thinks that such abstinence may make him irritable or dull-witted, and harm his efficiency. The rule of honest work is opposed to the rule of abstinence. The true value of casuistry is that it does not substitute the liberty of the Spirit for a puristic, legalistic system of the most rigorous or detailed kind.\footnote{Kirk, Principles, pp 193-4.}

Kirk states that the task of moral theology is to find the principles justifying obeying the law of conscience when it appears to compete with another law.\footnote{op.cit. p.194.} First among such principles is that known laws are always to be obeyed. In cases of genuine doubt, “probabilism” [that is, following a “probable opinion”\footnote{T. Slater, Manual of Moral Theology, Vol.1, p.69, quoted Principles, pp 194-5, as an opinion which “rests on solid grounds such as would incline a man of prudence and judgement to embrace it”}.\footnote{op.cit. p. 196.}] is faulty if it relieves the enquirer of the burden of making fair comparison between arguments and authorities. “So long as he can find one probable opinion to support the action he wishes to take, he is exempt from all further moral responsibility in the matter.”\footnote{op.cit. p. 196.} For Kirk, the individual neither can, nor ought, to consider himself free from the duty of weighing the intrinsic merits of every case of conscience with which he is faced. Kirk agreed that it is wise, in every difficult problem, to take the advice of experts in the spiritual life: if there is agreement among the experts, there is a strong case for accepting their advice. If the authorities do not agree, Kirk offers further guidelines: the “safe” course is not necessarily to be followed: if a person is acting in accordance with some considered rule, and a doubt arises whether in any given case he ought not to alter his mode of action, he may conscientiously continue his original mode of action.
unless and until the doubt becomes a moral certainty.\textsuperscript{85} In cases where the choice of action lies between two evils, Kirk’s advice is to choose the lesser of the two.

Kirk ends this chapter with a summary of the principles “which should guide a conscientious Christian in any case of grave perplexity:

(i) Do not allow any of your considered rules of life to be abrogated or altered without very strong reason based upon obvious applicability of some equally binding or higher law.

(ii) Do not attach too much importance to your inclinations in the matter. The fact that you favour a certain course of action as being the easier or pleasanter for you is not necessarily evidence against its morality.

(iii) Assume that what has happened before in your experience will happen again, and do not be frightened by unlikely possibilities.

(iv) Where unhappy consequences are found in any case to ensue, choose the course of action which, whilst satisfying the foregoing rules, will minimise the evil ensuing.

(v) Go for advice to conscientious and intelligent Christians who have real experience of the particular kind of problem that perplexes you.

(vi) Having chosen your course of action along these lines with prayer for guidance, act boldly and firmly, though holding yourself ready to change your course if new evidence arises.\textsuperscript{86}

Kirk concludes: “There is . . nothing in this that is not corroborated by the ordinary rules of common sense. But the rules we have suggested have reached their importance after long testing in the experience of the Church.”\textsuperscript{87}

The thought contained in this chapter was so important to Kirk that his next two major works were on the subject of casuistry, conscience and

\textsuperscript{85} Principles, pp.198-9.
\textsuperscript{86} op.cit.,pp 200-201.
\textsuperscript{87} op.cit. p. 201.
its problems. In this chapter Kirk gives substance to his earlier statements on the nature, scope and purpose of moral theology. Kirk’s moral theology states that there is a place for law and principle, but legalism is to be avoided: the overarching principle is the liberty of the Spirit. Those who are responsible for the care and welfare of persons need to give advice that is both wise and practical: advice that is prepared to give the benefit of the doubt and to allow that circumstances alter cases.

(ix)

The Healing of the Soul

Kirk’s ninth chapter, The Healing of the Soul, acknowledges the difficulties and challenges that clergy face as they care for the people committed to their charge and as they seek to assist them in their spiritual progress. At this point Kirk signals what will be his main theme for the remainder of his Principles. People can be hampered in various ways in their spiritual progress. For many of them healing of the soul is necessary, and Kirk describes this as the gravest of all spiritual problems.88 If the Church of God has as an essential part of its mission the work of assisting all its members – and potentially all people – to undertake a spiritual journey towards the goal of ultimate happiness found in union with God and God’s human creatures, Kirk believes it is necessary to consider the qualities required in the priest who is expected to be the chief facilitator of such a journey, in the role Kirk describes as director.

At his ordination the priest is called to show himself a messenger, steward and watchman to his people. Moral theology adds that he is required to be a father, a teacher, a judge and a physician.”89

Kirk affirms that a priest’s work will not be fruitful unless he is working to increase his own holiness following that of Christ as a model and pattern.90 The specific qualities he expects of priests are a father’s love, a teacher’s authority, a judge’s equity and a physician’s skill.

88 Principles, p.203.
89 ibid.
90 op.cit. pp 203-4.
The father’s love, for Kirk, is of the kind that will elicit confidence and inspire effort. That will require first patience and a manner which never betrays disgust or horror, and secondly a personal interest that gives to each one who comes to him an utterly individual attention – an interest that does not allow the relationship to lapse when the immediate need has been addressed. He must have no favourites in his parish but must judge in all things impartially and without prejudice. This stance will still allow approved Christians among those for whom he is responsible to have a considerable share in organising the welfare of the parish.

As an incentive to effort, he must always appear an optimist as to the spiritual possibilities of his people even when he has good reason for doubt. Love sometimes needs to show itself in sternness and rebuke as much as in kindness and praise. It seems that Kirk expects a good father to treat his children with an appropriate combination of firmness and gentleness. But Kirk also assumes that those who come to a priest for advice will best be helped by encouragement.

On the priest’s authority as a teacher Kirk says, “Authority in spiritual things is a moral, not an official qualification.”\footnote{Kirk, \textit{Principles}, p.206.} This appears to be the kind of authority attributed to Jesus by the writers of the first, second and third Gospels of the New Testament.\footnote{e.g. Mark 1: 27.} To attain such authority a priest will need to engage in careful and diligent study and to widen continually his experience of human nature, supported by reference to the experience of colleagues and the whole range of Christian literature.

Kirk warns against authority that is arrogant. Priests need to admit the possibility of error, and will need to avoid delivering summary judgement of any matter until the facts have been fully examined. They will always be willing to admit fresh evidence and to state the grounds of any decisions which they make. They will not look for an enforced obedience
but for a considered agreement with their conclusion. It will be the authority of a teacher, not that of a tyrant.\textsuperscript{93}

Kirk expects the priest as judge to demonstrate equity. In the confessional, this means the ability to assess the gravity of sins confessed to him, the appropriate penance, the reality of a penitent’s confession and whether absolution can rightly be given. But Kirk’s view of spiritual direction extends beyond the limits of sacramental confession. It involves the ability to discern, in any case of difficulty or conscience, which spiritual principles are applicable and to adapt them where necessary to the particular problem under consideration, and the ability to assess evidence with sympathy and detachment. Any questions asked of the person seeking advice should be as few as possible, relevant, discreet, tactful and kindly in the helpful spirit of a friend, not in the manner of an inquisitor. They should reveal to the penitent or seeker the causes of his trouble. “It is always best that . . he should find the truth for himself, rather than wait for it to be told him by another.”\textsuperscript{94}

The priest as a physician of souls will need the skill of diagnosing the real causes of any spiritual disorder which comes to his notice; then he needs to choose the method of remedy, and to apply the remedy himself. “If it involves some new rule of life for the person he is trying to help, it must be presented to him in such terms and argument as will lead him willingly to undertake it . . the wise priest will have to decide what he is to tell, and how much he is to tell, to the people who come to him for advice.”\textsuperscript{95} Whatever the problem, the priest will need to behave as though it were something remediable; he will need to give assurances that he will take responsibility for the cure, and that he will not desert the person who has come to him.\textsuperscript{96}

\textsuperscript{93} Principles, pp 206-7.
\textsuperscript{94} op.cit. pp 207-209, passim.
\textsuperscript{96} ibid.
Sin

In the last two chapters of the *Principles* Kirk states that the priest as missioner, pastor or confessor, is primarily interested in sin as a practical problem. Moral theology acknowledges that sin exists as a fact of life. It affirms that Christ by his death and resurrection has overcome its power and that by the power of the Holy Spirit individuals can experience the effects of Christ’s victory in their own lives. For Kirk, the question is “how can the priest cooperate with the Holy Spirit to effect that experience?”

Kirk’s definition of sin includes all acts or habits deliberately committed or contracted regardless of their known danger to the soul. As a skilled physician of souls, the priest’s task is to discover remedies, and to help the individual to examine his own degree of responsibility for the acts or habits which endanger his soul’s health. The priest may need to urge him to confess them, ask God’s forgiveness for their evil effects in order to be set free from them, and to take such action as is necessary for the renewal of spiritual progress.

Kirk identifies a second criterion of sin, namely the harm that an action or habit causes to others. This view is cogent for those who believe that religion is a social as well as an individual possession. Included in this group in Kirk’s day was Temple, and among later critics, Preston, Lehmann, Fletcher and Pütz. Kirk acknowledges that “Christian ethics is concerning itself more and more with the social, as distinct from the personal, side of morality. Christian duty is seen to stretch far beyond a man’s immediate environment . . . thus he should ensure, as far as possible, that he buys no article made by sweated labour; that he invests his money in no undertaking suspect of unfair trading; that he supports no cause which forwards even

---

97 *Principles*, p.221.
98 op.cit. p. 223.
desirable ends by questionable means.”99 Kirk acknowledges that much in the New Testament bears out this point of view.100

Kirk considers next the Biblical doctrine of sin. In both the Old and the New Testaments he finds a third criterion of sin:

“Sin is rebellion against a God whom the Old Testament recognises above all as holy, while the New knows Him as loving and merciful.”101 Kirk’s reading of the Biblical writers leads him to say that this rebellion is a far more serious sin than either sin against oneself or a sin against one’s neighbour. For him, then, this criterion is the most searching of all, and the strongest motive for repentance.

In the third and final section of this tenth chapter of the Principles Kirk undertakes an analysis of the psychological origins of sinful acts and habits. He says that the ultimate ground of all action is instinct, which he defines as “a primary impulse to action accompanied by a definite emotional tone.”102 Examples of instincts cited by Kirk are fear, hunger or thirst, the maternal emotion, hatred, and sexual impulse. “But the theologian . . . sees that no instinct, however sinful be the actions that result from it, can be in essence evil.103 Human instincts are God-given. Their function in life is good. They lead both to the preservation of the body, and with the development of the spiritual consciousness, to the salvation of the soul. Sin may be due to human weakness and depravity; it is not due to complete pollution at its very source. Sin is ‘the corruption of the circumstances of virtue’”.104

Kirk traces the stages of growth of sinful tendencies from the stimulus or occasion to the mind’s and the emotions’ creation of ideas and feelings and to the moral conflict that engages the will. This last Kirk

100 op.cit. p. 226.
101 op.cit. p. 229.
102 op.cit. p. 234.
illustrates from Genesis 3, where Eve’s will to comply with God’s command not to eat the forbidden fruit is in conflict with the attractive alternative view expressed by the serpent. Kirk follows this illustration with another from Romans 7, where at 7: 19-20 Paul says “I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.”

Kirk finds in such a statement an expression of genuine belief in a spirit of evil capable of entering the soul and taking possession. The statement refers to “a state of degradation in which the idea of personality conveys no longer any meaning; the “self” – the self which God made for a good end – is no more. There is no longer in the sum of character any tendency for good; and without such a tendency to good true selfhood, personality, is an impossibility. Happily such a state of complete degradation is very rare. Few have so completely lost every trace of their original tendency towards good that there is nothing left to which appeal can be made.”

Kirk acknowledges that some cases are outside the reach of ordinary treatment. “The priest can do something by stimulating the spiritual life in other directions, in the hope that its influence will revivify that part of the conscience which has suffered atrophy; beyond this he can only pray the Holy Spirit to repair what by human means is irreparable, and wait for God’s grace to bring about a moral miracle.”

In other portions of his works Kirk acknowledges the contribution that science, and particularly, psychology, can make together with theology to the understanding of human behaviour, especially to the remedying of anti-social behaviour. And St Paul in Romans 8 writes in detail about the Holy Spirit as the agent of spiritual renewal and redemption of the whole creation, not only of the human part of it.

106 op.cit., p. 243.
107 Cited supra, chapter 1, p. 7.
Most of the final chapter of the *Principles* is given to Kirk’s distinction between mortal and venial sin. He traces the origin of this distinction to 1 John 5: 16, 17: “If you see your brother or sister committing what is not a mortal sin, you will ask, and God will give life to such a one – to those whose sin is not mortal. There is sin that is mortal; I do not say that you should pray about that. All wrongdoing is sin, but there is sin that is not mortal.”

Kirk also finds the distinction between a graver and a lighter form of sin in words attributed to Jesus in the three Synoptic Gospels:

“… people will be forgiven for every sin and blasphemy, but blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. Whoever speaks a word against the Son of man will be forgiven, but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven either in this age or in the age to come”.108 Kirk says: “If we look at sin from the strictly theological point of view as an offence, or rebellion against God, this distinction is a very difficult one to understand . . . nothing short of absolute purity is befitting for the Christian; he has no right to regard even the slightest decline from the ideal as being of small account. To do so is the surest way of warping and stultifying his conscience; once teach him that certain sins are not serious, and he will soon come to think that none are.”109

But Kirk affirms that there is another point of view; that of the priest whose work it is to try to repair the damages caused by sin to human souls. From this point of view, he says, the distinction between moral and venial sin is real and valuable.

Kirk says: “‘Mortal sin’ is sin in which the danger (to the soul) is great and urgent, and against which every means of treatment . . . must be employed, in spite of the risks involved.”110 He turns to Aquinas for three distinguishing marks of mortal sin.111 First, the sin in question must be one

---

109 *Principles* p. 246.
110 op.cit. p.249.
111 *Summa*, i.2.q.72, a.5; 9.77, a.8; q.88, aa.2.6; q.89, aa.3,5,6, quoted *Principles*, pp 249-250.

43
causing grave injury to an individual, to the Christian community, or to God and his purposes. Secondly, the sinner must be fully aware of this evil character and consequences of his sin. Thirdly, though aware of its character and consequences he must have sinned with absolute deliberateness and intention.

However, Kirk maintains that there is no final criterion of mortal and venial sin. “The decision in each case must be upon the merits. The priest must sum up the character and circumstances of the sinner, and then decide whether or no the danger to his soul is sufficient to warrant the employment of extreme measures, with their attendant risks.”\(^\text{112}\) As we shall see in Chapter 9, among the moral theologians writing in the ‘sixties was Herbert Waddams who described Kirk’s upholding of the distinction in moral theology between mortal and venial sins as not helpful; in fact he favours the abolition of the distinction.

On the matter of the treatment of sin, Kirk says that gradual methods rather than extreme ones should be applied first in all cases of venial sin – “of sin, that is, which does not threaten the soul with imminent danger of spiritual ruin.”\(^\text{113}\) – “following St Augustine, theologians have always held that the harm done to the soul by venial sin can be repaired by daily prayer and religious observances; for mortal sin the severer method of sacramental confession, penance and absolution is necessary.”\(^\text{114}\) Kirk’s own view is that it is necessary for those in the grip of mortal sin to renew devotion to the practices which promote spiritual progress. He admits that for most members of the Church of England “confession, in the sacramental sense, is not a part of the normal fibre of religion at all.”\(^\text{115}\) However, he says that according to experience, if the priest’s appeal to conscience has been successful – if it has won the sinner’s willing co-operation in an attempt to eradicate the sin – he may be more readily reconciled to an act of confession. Furthermore, preparing for and receiving Holy Communion

\(^{112}\) *Principles*, pp 251-2.  
\(^{113}\) op.cit. p. 252.  
\(^{114}\) Augustine, *de Symbolis*, 15; Enchir. 64.71; *Ad Jerom*. Clxvii.4; Serm. 56, quoted *Principles*, p. 252.  
\(^{115}\) op.cit. p. 255.
“with the definite intention of seeking in it a medicine for sin, will often have the psychological effect of confession, penance and absolution.”116

Kirk lists additional drastic remedies: breaking habits, removing occasions and opportunities, correcting ideas and inhibiting emotions, but admits that none of these methods is altogether satisfactory. The best methods are those that will redirect the instinct which lies at the root of the sin concerned by giving it a new outlet or sphere of activity. Again acknowledging Aquinas, Kirk says “moral theology recognises a list of seven ‘capital’ or ‘root’ sins . . . which derive their name from the fact that all other sins originate in one or other of them. The seven . . . are pride or vainglory, gluttony, sloth, covetousness, anger, lust and envy.”117

Kirk sees the priest as having the task of checking the sin in question by encouraging steady development of the spiritual life, and using his imagination, sympathy and initiative in redirecting the instincts of the people for whom he is caring.

In conclusion Kirk affirms that the priest, in looking for the instinct that causes a sin, is adopting the truest and most certain of human means of healing the soul. If this means often seems to fail, Kirk says, “God has some other method of dealing with the sin. God is faithful and his methods do not fail.”118

Kirk began the *Principles* with a discussion of the nature, scope, purpose and task of moral theology. The question arises whether he is a “virtues ethicist”, or a deontologist. In some parts of his work, he sounds like either or both of these, but perhaps he is more accurately described as a teleologist much influenced by Aristotle and Aquinas. In the *Principles*, as in his other writings, he sets a high value on the rights of the individual, but he is also very much aware of the Church as an institution. He is aware of the possible conflict between legalism and the need for sympathy with, and pastoral care of, the individual. He saw that part of his task was the renewal

---

116 *Principles*, p. 255.
117 *Summa*, i.2,q.84, a.4, quoted *Principles*, p.265.
118 op.cit. p.270.
of moral theology, especially for the work of making judgments in individual cases, a task particularly urgent in the years after 1920. He saw the importance of following the spirit, rather than the letter, of the law.
CHAPTER 3

THE DEVELOPMENT OF KIRK’S MORAL THEOLOGY
(a) Ignorance, Faith and Conformity (1925)
(b) Conscience and its Problems:
   An Introduction to Casuistry (1927)

(i)

The Main Themes Considered

In these two works *Ignorance, Faith and Conformity* (1925) and *Conscience and its problems: An Introduction to Casuistry* (1927) Kirk develops and extends some of the main themes of the *Principles*, especially the relation of the principles of law and liberty, or of authority and individualism.

Kirk’s biographer, E.W. Kemp, observed that the survey of moral theology undertaken in the *Principles* led Kirk to a special consideration of a problem which he formulated as follows:

“The catholicism, both of St Thomas and the Caroline divines, envisaged a Church clear in definition, authoritative in command, highly organised in administration and strict in discipline. The Church of England as we see it today, on the other hand, reveals a freedom of thought on the part of the individual, and a tolerance of that freedom on the part of authority, which would have startled both St Thomas and his Anglican disciples. Is it fair, wise or profitable to attempt to adapt the principles of a closely-knit organism such as the church which produced the moral theology of the past to a loosely-knit association like the Church of England of the present?”

Kirk examined this problem in *Ignorance, Faith and Conformity*. This book is mainly concerned with an examination of the concept of “invincible ignorance” as it has developed in Christian theology.

The entry on “invincible ignorance” in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (1961 edition) reads as follows:

“A term in moral theology denoting ignorance of a kind that cannot be removed by serious moral effort. It totally

---

excuses from sin because, being involuntary, it can involve no intention of breaking the law of God. It is to be distinguished from “vincible ignorance”, which, though partly excusing from sin, is culpable in itself, apart from the action to which it leads, as it involves failure to acquire information necessary to avoid the transgressions. The term “invincible ignorance” is frequently used with reference to those who, because of their upbringing and environment, are unable to accept the teachings of the Church.”

According to Kemp, Kirk concluded that the Church of England had maintained the fundamental principles of traditional moral theology, while in his own day upholding liberty of thought and tolerance.

Therefore, Kirk believed it was right and justifiable to speak of Anglicanism as part of a legitimate development of the principles of Western Christendom as a whole, or as an experiment initiated within the legitimate bounds of true Catholicism. Furthermore, he held that this development or experiment was wholly providential, and had brought to light new aspects of Christian truth of great value to the Church, which might otherwise have remained unnoticed.²

In this chapter I shall discuss the main themes of the two books: in the first book the questions raised in the course of Kirk’s treatment are invincible ignorance, the necessity of faith for salvation and the implications for heathens and heretics, faith and doubt, and conformity. In the second book, the main themes are conscience, loyalty, casuistry, error, doubt and perplexity, and the way in which the Church of England has dealt with them.

(ii) Invincible Ignorance

Kirk held that the liberty of thought and tolerance of the Anglicanism of his day could be found “anticipated, recognised and provided for by the two principles of ‘invincible ignorance’ and ‘custom’ which Christian experience has for centuries fully allowed and understood.”³ In his discussion

---

² Kemp, op.cit. pp 53-54.
³ Kirk, Conscience and its Problems, p.xii,f quoted E.W. Kemp, op.cit, p.53.
of ignorance Kirk considers the work of Abailard, Alexander of Hales and Aquinas.

He notes that the twelfth century church condemned at the Council of Sens the doctrine which Abailard advanced in his book *Scito Teipsum*. Sin, according to Abailard, is in the sinful consent of the will, “contempt of God or consent to evil.” Abailard notes that in St Luke’s account of the crucifixion of Jesus, Jesus prays for those who crucify him, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing”. “Therefore”, for Abailard, “what they did in ignorance cannot be called sin . . . nor can their very ignorance itself. Nor can infidelity (if it arise from ignorance) be sin, although it necessarily excludes adults who have the use of reason from eternal life.

For Kirk, Abailard’s condemnation arose from the suggestion that those who crucified Christ were guiltless and from his apparent suggestion that ignorance could be an excuse for any sin whatever. As we shall see, what is at stake for Kirk is the extent to which ignorance excuses a person from being accused of sin, and the question whether faith is necessary for salvation: does unbelief exclude a person from salvation understood as eternal life?

In Kirk’s view, Alexander of Hales (†1245) established two points. The first is that ignorance of the natural law can never be an excuse for actions in contravention of it; for that law is written on men’s hearts. The second is, that ignorance of what a person is bound to know is an equally futile plea; though here there are degrees of culpability according to the degree of complacency with which the culprit regards his ignorance and of the negligence from which it arises.

---

6 In the sense of unbelief.
8 op.cit. p.1, footnote. Kirk finds a “law of nature” in ancient Greek authors such as Sophocles and the Stoics and Christian authors retained it.
Kirk finds Alexander’s thought wanting on the following point: he clearly believes that some kinds of ignorance do not excuse for sins committed under their influence, but he was not sure what kinds of ignorance might excuse.

Kirk then examines the work of St Thomas Aquinas on the subject of ignorance, and sums up that work as follows:

“Ignorance of anything (whether a general principle or a particular fact) relevant to the immediate consequences of an act in apparent contravention of moral law, excuses from the guilt of sin if the following conditions are satisfied:

1. The act must not be in contravention of any of the first principles of the natural law.

2. Knowledge of the true facts must bring with it regret.

3. The act must have been committed with a clear conscience.

4. The clearness of conscience in the particular case must not be due to any direct or indirect neglect of the agent to keep his conscience alert and free from deadening influences.9

5. The ignorance must not be of anything which the agent might be considered morally bound to know by reason either of his “office” in general, or of the circumstances in which he finds himself, unless it can be shown that after the exertion of “diligence”10 the ignorance is invincible and (if the other conditions are satisfied) confers inculpability.”11

Kirk’s response to these conclusions is to ask “Is there such a thing as ‘a natural moral law’ divinely implanted in every man’s mind in such a way that ‘no man can be ignorant of its first principles?’ Doubt has been thrown upon the assertion by the argument that there is scarcely any moral “law” which at some time has not been ignored, and that with a clear conscience, not merely by individuals but by whole communities. But in

9 Kirk adds a footnote that the maxim “conscience must always be followed” – to which St Thomas subscribed – does not of necessity carry with it the corollary “a clear conscience always excuses” – neglect of this cautionary statement produces moral confusion.

10 “Diligence” in the sense of thorough enquiry, or search for relevant information.

11 Ignorance, p.34.
every society, says Kirk, there are certain acts for which the excuse “I did not know that it is wrong” will never be admitted. Kirk affirms this on the basis of the “conscience of society” which expects everyone who is possessed of the use of his reason to be aware of the dictates of that conscience. “There are few communities in which, for example, outrageous and inhuman brutality to a child would be condoned on the excuse that no one had told the offender not to do it.”

At this point Kirk deals again with the apparent tension between law and conscience, between the authority of the church and the individual. “So the ‘law of the Church’ has commonly involved the thought that the Church has the right to impose censures upon those of its members who fail to comply; and the ‘law of God’, that God reserves to Himself the power of punishing neglect of His law either in this world or the next, even if the infringement of the law does not . . . automatically bring its own punitive consequences with it”.

For Kirk, the danger of such thought has been evident in the history of the church in “formalism”. By this he means the tendency to obey not out of any respect for the law or for its author, but only through fear of the penalties of disobedience, whereby only such minimum of obedience is given as will suffice to evade those penalties. Such ethical formalism is wholly inadequate to the Christian ideal of virtue.

This raises the question – must it not be a mistake to think of the divine law as equipped with sanctions, and God as a God who punishes? By the threat of punishment will he not defeat his own end of securing willing acceptance? Kirk finds consolation in the fact that in the face of the bias towards law which Christianity inherited, the Church recognised the fact and character of conscience in retaining the “moral law of nature” as a code without sanctions. Its content has been inferred from the observation of principles of apparently universal acceptance, such as the right to life, the right to food, the right to shelter, the right to possession; the idea of sanctions

\[12\] Ignorance, p.37.
\[13\] op.cit, p.38.
\[14\] op.cit, p.39.
cannot arise until the correlative duty of respecting the right is taken into account.  

Kirk acknowledges that there were periods in Christian history when individualism was almost crushed out of existence by ecclesiastical law. But he regards, as a happy circumstance, that the highest and oldest of all laws which the Church recognised was a law without sanctions which appealed to conscience and to conscience only, and made formalism impossible. “The . . . insistence upon the inculpability of conscientious action . . . is the happy result of this alliance between the law of nature and the liberty of conscience against the formalist bias of ecclesiastical codes.”

Kirk takes note of the Church’s missionary efforts from the sixteenth century onwards which eventually extended through every continent. The challenge for the Church was to consider the case of heathen who did not believe the moral law and heretics whose beliefs were contrary to the moral law. Kirk cites Jeremy Taylor: “Invincible ignorance . . . is of things which we cannot know because we have never heard of them, and are not taught sufficiently”. Kirk also takes into account one effect of the Reformation: disagreement between Catholics and Protestants on the content of the truth constituting Christian belief and its application in worship and life.

(iii)

Faith, Salvation, Heathens and Heretics

Kirk’s concern with law and liberty next is concentrated on the question whether heathen and heretic can be saved, even if inculpable through invincible ignorance. Kirk had before him the traditional principle “No salvation outside the church” (which could be mitigated by an extension of the idea of the church). A second doctrine was that “original sin (with which no one can enter heaven) can only be washed away by

---

15 Ignorance, pp 41-42.
16 op.cit. p.43.
18 Promulgated by Pope Urban II in 1302.
baptism; this . . . is made less terrible by admitting the possibility of spiritual substitutes for the rite”. Thirdly, two biblical texts appeared to state clearly that faith was necessary for salvation:

Without faith it is impossible to please God, for whoever would approach him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him. (Hebrews 11:6)

Whatever does not proceed from faith is sin (Romans 14:23).

But this appears to be challenged by the text of 1 Timothy 2:4:

[God our Saviour] . . desires everyone to be saved,

one of the strongest affirmations of the universality of God’s grace. Kirk comments

“God could scarcely have willed man’s salvation, without at least putting within his grasp the revelation of the article of faith necessary to salvation, with, that is, making accessible to him the preaching of the gospel.”

However, as Kirk acknowledges that not all people have the gospel, he also acknowledges that “since God does not demand the impossible of anyone, where the means necessary to the creation of faith were not to be had, the world must certainly accept a good will in place of the act of faith”.

But this raises for him another difficult question:

“How could a soul be in a state of grace – on this word of salvation – drawing near to the Vision of God – unless it were dominated by the conviction that God was the author, governor and redeemer of its being?”

Part of Kirk’s response is to say “the doctrine that those to whom no opportunity of explicit knowledge of the faith had come, might yet be saved by loyally living up to the best they knew, was one of creditable antiquity.” He cited the third century theologian Origen as having two great principles:

---

19 Kirk cites the Early Christian Fathers Tertullian, Origen, Cyprian, Cyril of Jerusalem, Ambrose and Augustine as sources (Ignorance, pp 64-65)
20 op.cit. p. 65.
22 op.cit. p. 66.
23 ibid..
“the end shall be like the beginning” and “God shall be all in all” and quoting Scripture for his belief – from Romans 2:7,10: “it would seem that the Gentiles, though they appear to be severed from eternal life as not knowing Christ, and so unable to enter the Kingdom of God because not born of water and of the Spirit, can nevertheless not lose altogether the glory and honour and peace of good works”. 24 Origen qualified this universalism by allowing degrees of future blessedness: only the pure in heart shall see God, and in the Father’s house were many mansions of varying degree. Theodore of Mopsuestia and Gregory of Nyssa shared Origen’s views: Gregory Nazianzen had an open mind on the matter, but Augustine criticised this kind of universalism as heterodox and heretical. 25

Abailard, according to Kirk, introduced universalism in a new form. He developed the theory of Justin and Clement of Alexandria, who saw in some pagan philosophers sufficient anticipations of the full faith to qualify them as ‘Christians before Christ’ 26, by maintaining that no nation had ever been without faith in the Trinity.

A concept of salvation of the virtuous heathen, despite their lack of faith, was encouraged during the Renaissance through the revived admiration for the great pagans of classical antiquity, as well as in concern for the spiritual welfare of the heathen of the newly-discovered continents. 27 But for Kirk, “liberalism of this character is hardly consistent with any idea of the Christian faith as unique”. 28 He asks, “Will the heathen be saved by his invincible ignorance? Is invincible ignorance . . . of the same efficacy as justifying faith? If so, it would appear . . . that faith is not unique and absolutely necessary for salvation, and the distinctive character of Christianity is gone.” 29 He cites Abailard and the sixteenth century Franciscan Vega as denying that invincible ignorance of God has ever existed or ever can exist, as affirming as a theological commonplace that

24 Quoted Ignorance, pp 72-73.
25 de civ. Dei xxi.17.2a, quoted Kirk, op.cit. p. 74.
26 Justin, Apol.i.46: Clem.Alex.Strom.i.17, 19, etc. quoted Kirk op.cit. p.75.
27 op.cit. p.77.
28 op.cit. p. 78.
29 op.cit. p. 79.
there can be no such thing as invincible ignorance of the natural law, and that therefore sufficient faith has always been within every man’s grasp.30

Kirk traces the arguments advanced on the matter of faith and salvation from the time of the early Christian fathers to the Middle Ages, especially citing St Thomas Aquinas, Jesuit theologians such as Suarez, and Franciscans such as Vega. One issue to which the theologians gave their attention was whether salvation required full acceptance of the whole body of Christian doctrine, including acceptance of the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation. Aquinas said so, now that Christ had come and the gospel had been preached,31 although he had used the instance of Cornelius (Acts 10: 1ff) to prove that baptism “in voto” (“the will to believe”) was sufficient for justification.32 According to Kirk, some theologians thought Aquinas’ view was too rigorous. Seyssel, Archbishop of Turin, († 1520) considers the case of the Syro-Phoenician woman (Mark 7: 24-30) and argues if she could arrive at faith without direct revelation, there is no reason why the heathen of his day cannot do the same.33

Kirk notes three stages in the development of the Church’s doctrine of invincible ignorance. First, ignorance of a relevant fact or principle was seen, under certain conditions, to free the Christian from the blame of an apparently sinful act committed under the influence of that ignorance. Secondly, the heathen who had never heard the gospel was similarly acquitted of the sin of unbelief. Thirdly, a heathen or heretic was also acquitted who, having heard the gospel, was unable to accept it. Invincible ignorance of the gospel, though incompatible with Christian faith, will not involve the heathen in the fate of eternal damnation. Kirk discerns the problem for church members arising from moral theology. May they conscientiously disobey or doubt the church’s tenets and yet remain

30 Ignorance, p. 79.
31 S.T. ii.1, q.2, aa.7,8, quoted Kirk, op.cit., p.82.
32 Kirk sometimes appears to use “salvation”, “justification” and “beatitude” interchangeably, all conveying the notion of being in a right relationship with God sufficient to ensure eternal life, membership of the Kingdom of heaven.
33 op.cit. p. 91.
blameless and capable of salvation? Can they claim to retain their church membership in spite of this deliberate non-conformity?  

(iv)  

Faith and Doubt  

Before dealing directly with these questions, Kirk turns to a closer examination of the scholastic conception of faith in order to test the validity of these two principles: first, that the irreducible minimum of Christian faith— which human reason cannot attain unaided— is that God exists and that he rewards those who seek him; and secondly, that without this minimum of faith salvation is impossible.  

Kirk takes up the study of the scholastic conception of faith in the fourth chapter of Ignorance, Faith and Conformity entitled Faith and Doubt. He turns again to Aquinas: “Faith . . . is ‘the assent of the mind to that which is believed . . . firm assent without a shadow of doubt’  

This assent may either be “compelled” by the self-evidence of that to which it is given, as we assent to a self-evident fact or a syllogistic conclusion, or it may be the “voluntary” result of an act of will. The former kind of assent Aquinas called “knowledge”, “intellect” or “vision” (as when we say that we see a thing to be true); the latter kind he calls “the act of faith”.  

But why do Christians believe what they believe, or why ought they believe the teaching of the Church? St Thomas says that we believe the Incarnation because we hold God to have revealed it, and because we hold God’s revelation to be true. For St Thomas to say that we “hold” that God is true and that particular truths are revealed by him is to say that we know God to be true in what has already been revealed. The reasonableness of faith is shown by its being based upon, though not syllogistically deduced from, prior knowledge. St Thomas’ confidence in the truth of the revelation of God stems from the teaching of the Church and the words of  

34 Ignorance., pp 96-97.  
35 op.cit. p. 97.  
36 Aquinas, S.T.ii.2, 9.1, a.4 and a.8, quoted Kirk, op.cit. p. 98.  
37 op.cit. p. 99.  
38 op.cit. pp 102-103.
Scripture as forming an “infallible rule” of revelation.\textsuperscript{39} There is also the evidence of “signs”, by which he means miracles, prophecies, preaching, the invitation of God in the soul, and “the reasons adduced by the saints to show that the articles of faith are not impossible”.\textsuperscript{40} All these give the \textit{knowledge} that what is proposed is credible, but they do not compel assent to what is proposed, for they do not \textbf{prove} that what is proposed is true.

“It is on this basis, combined with the logical certainty of the existence of God, that we give the assent of faith to the things that are proposed; and if we are not certain of the existence of God by demonstration, then . . it must be assumed that we assent to that existence, as a credible hypothesis, by the same act and in the same way as we assent to the credibility of what is proposed.”\textsuperscript{41}

Kirk sums up St Thomas’ system as follows:

(1) The rational man knows that God is, and that He is all-knowing and all true; or, if he does not know it demonstratively, he infers its credibility from the evidence of signs, as to which he has no doubt. (2) He knows also that something is proposed to him as revealed by God. (3) He has grounds for concluding (“signs”) that this alleged revelation may fairly be accepted as a truth about God revealed by Him, in spite of the fact that reason has not demonstrated it to be true; he also has grounds which prevent him from concluding that it is wholly unbelievable. (4) He therefore assents to it, by the act of faith, as being revealed by God, and true. (5) What moved him is not that it is proved to be true, for that is \textit{ex hypothesi} out of the question; but something else which St Thomas called “the authority of God the revealer”.\textsuperscript{42}

But for Kirk, critical questions arise from St Thomas’s system. First, while it is true that Western Christendom, relying on it, asserted that Christian faith is only possible on the basis of a transcendentalist monotheism (God as one, and as a rewarder), and that without this faith salvation is impossible, and while St Thomas had great difficulty in

\textsuperscript{39} Aquinas, S.T. ii, 2, 9.5, a.3 quoted Kirk, op.cit. p.105.
\textsuperscript{40} S.T. q.I, a.5, ad 2, quoted Kirk, ibid.
\textsuperscript{41} op.cit. p. 106.
\textsuperscript{42} op.cit. pp 106-107.
admitting the blamelessness of those who after consideration were unable to accept the “faith”, his successors, Dominicans and Jesuits alike, had no such difficulty. Secondly, there is the problem of Christian doubt. A third question follows: what relation has St Thomas’s system to the “faith” of which Scripture or the experience of Christian history speaks?  

Kirk lists other difficulties. The critics of his day could not accept that the existence of God and the doctrines the Trinity and the Virgin Birth could be demonstrated by reason. Further, “we fail to see how faith can at once be . . . undetermined by the evidence and yet be reasonable. Still less do we accept his unshaken opinion that the words of Scripture and the creeds of the church are ‘above suspicion’ as witnesses to what has been revealed by God. But, above all, it is not at first sight clear what he means when he says that the only possible motive . . . for Christian faith is the authority of God as revealing”.  

Why, asks Kirk, this constant emphasis on revelation, and on the authority of God? “If a man gives a ‘firm assent’ to any proposition, he must do it on some authority – either that of reason or of someone or something else . . . if a man accepts the authority of the saints and the Church, he has still got to say why . . . he is forced to (say) ‘I cannot believe that God . . . would allow the saints and the Church to err’ ”.  

Kirk reaches acceptance of Thomas’s conception of faith by considering the implications of his statement as taking this form: “I cannot believe it to be otherwise, the universe being what reason assures me it is: and therefore I affirm that it is so”, which is analogous to the act of faith (an assent to something not demonstrably proved). To this the Thomist theologian adds the phrase “Reason tells me that God is, and is the author of the universe”. To him the act of faith ultimately takes the form “I cannot believe it can be otherwise, God being what reason tells me He is, and therefore I affirm it is so”. Kirk’s conclusion then (identical in effect, he says, with that of St Thomas) is that “the ultimate ground of faith is: (1)

---

43 Ignorance, p.107.
44 op.cit. p.108.
45 op.cit. p. 109.
God’s character as known . . . by reason and experience (2) the congruence of the proposed article of faith with that character”. 46

Kirk claims that to many Christians the sentences “God has revealed it” and “God has allowed it to be believed, and it is in accordance with what we know of God” mean the same thing, especially if the doctrine in question was asserted by Scripture and the Church – the authority of these two witnesses being sufficient to guarantee revelation. But Kirk would require such Christians to add “. . . what Scripture and the Church propose to me . . . is revealed by God, because the fact that Scripture and the Church should have been chosen as the sole instruments of revelation is in accordance with God’s character as a whole as it is known to me”. 47

But Kirk then asks whether St Thomas’ distinction between demonstration as necessitating assent and the evidence of signs as leaving it voluntary is a fair one. Is not “I cannot believe it to be otherwise” equally as necessitated as “I see it to be so”? Or, if assent to demonstration and self-evidence is compulsory, and faith is not, how can the latter be as “certain” as the former?

Kirk’s view is that St Thomas maintained this distinction because without it he could not vindicate the “merit” of faith, by which he meant its praiseworthiness. However, he believed that the thought of his time required the abandonment of St Thomas’s distinction between assent to reasoned truth as “necessitated” and faith as “free”, in favour of his distinction between the former as indifferent and the latter as praiseworthy. “We see a large part of the merit of faith in the fact that it believes, on the basis of such and such evidence and arguments, against the weight of apparently contradictory evidence and arguments”. 48 At this point Kirk cites St Thomas as unable to uphold this view because he was convinced that “reason” and “faith” cannot ultimately disagree; Kirk, on the contrary, is aware of many instances in which reason and faith do disagree. For Kirk, the praiseworthiness of faith is that it believes in the face of the difficulties of belief. And he concludes that

46 Ignorance, p. 109.
47 op.cit. pp 110-111.
48 op.cit. p. 114.
Christians of his day could agree with St Thomas that faith is “certain”; “the test of the certainty with which a conviction is held is . . . the degree in which men will commit their lives and all that they hold dear to it; and evidence is not wanting that . . . the culminating characteristic of Christian faith – (is) that it produces heroic and superhuman lives”. 49

Kirk next notes that St Thomas regards faith as praiseworthy not only because it is voluntary but because it is one of the theological virtues. 50 St Thomas defines a virtue as “the perfection of a potentiality” 51 . . . “a good habit by which ‘reason is ordered towards God’ 52 . . or by which ‘a man is perfected to act well’ ”. 53 But “good action” on the part of a man is action “which tends towards his end”, that is to say towards “beatitude”. 54 Human beatitude is of two kinds: the one “proportionate to human nature, at which a man can arrive by the principles of his nature; the other exceeding human nature . . . at which he can arrive only by divine virtue; i.e. by some kind of participation in the Divine.”. 55 Virtues which help to achieve the first kind of beatitude are called the moral or cardinal virtues; those which aim at the second are the theological virtues, where the second or supernatural end is the “vision of God”. 56 “Charity” 57 or love for God seeks to have its goal in Him, not to derive anything from Him; 58 it is a form of “honouring” God. 59 The value of charity is that it both paves the way to beatitude and also honours and serves God . . . or “beatitude and loving service of God cannot be distinguished – they are convertible terms”. 60

Kirk, then, affirms that St Thomas has three grounds for asserting the praiseworthiness of faith: (1) that it is “voluntary”; (2) that it is held not only

49 *Ignorance*, pp 114-115.
50 These are the faith, hope, and love of 1 Corinthians 13: 13.
51 S.T. i:2, q.55, a.1, quoted Kirk, op.cit. p. 115.
52 S.T. 1.q.55, a.3., quoted Kirk, ibid.
53 S.T. i.2, q.58, a.3, quoted Kirk, ibid.
55 S.T. i.2, q.62, a.1, quoted Kirk, ibid.
56 S.T. i.q, 1, a.4, quoted Kirk, ibid.
57 Translated as “love” in twentieth century versions of the New Testament.
58 S.T. ii.2, q.23, a.6, quoted Kirk, ibid.
59 S.T. q.25.a.1. Kirk adds the footnote “love to God must include love to one’s neighbour” ibid.
60 Kirk, op.cit. p. 117.
because of evidence, but also in spite of evidence; (3) that it is born and developed in an atmosphere of desire to honour God.

Kirk continues his interpretation of St Thomas as follows:

“Faith is essentially an expression of the Christian’s desire to honour and serve the Maker, Redeemer and Sanctifier of his being. Because the Christian loves God, he desires to believe about Him all the good that can be believed . . . though his respect for reason as a God-given quality makes him apply the test of reason to whatever may be propounded to him as being ‘of faith’, he adopts this precaution. . . because he aims at finding a creed worthy . . . of the God of whom it is asserted. It is this quality of faith which makes it . . . a Christian and ‘theological’ virtue; it is this quality in it which inspires the great thanksgivings for faith received, and prayers for faith’s increase, which ring out from the New Testament. Faith is a part of the Christian’s loving dedication of himself to God: this is what makes it praiseworthy.”61

Kirk concludes therefore that this conception of faith makes necessary the two principles mentioned earlier: if faith is an essential part of drawing near to God, no one can be “saved” – that is, brought wholly to God – without it; and that such a faith, based on a desire to honour God and offer him the free and loyal service of the understanding, needs must be inspired by the conviction that He is, and rewards those who seek Him.62 This analysis of faith allows one to deal directly with the questions which Kirk raises.

(v)

The Reasonableness of Faith:

Authority and Nonconformity

For Kirk, it was his view of both the reasonableness and the praiseworthiness of faith that made it difficult for St Thomas to accept “invincible ignorance” as an excuse for refusal to assent to the faith on the part of those to whom it had been propounded.63 Kirk says that such a

61 Ignorance, p. 119.
62 op.cit. pp 120-121.
63 op.cit. p. 122.
refusal must take one of two forms – either “I cannot see that what you allege to be true of God can be believed without doing violence to reason”; or “I can see that it might be believed without doing violence to reason, but I have yet to find a motive for believing it.” St Thomas would not accept the first objection because it denies the reasonableness of faith. But the second objection raises difficulties because it implies that a man has no instinct moving him towards his supernatural end – that vision and service of God which is the only ultimate motive, as of the other theological virtues, so too of faith.64

However, according to Kirk, St Thomas’s followers either consciously or unconsciously held a view of faith which differs from his; one which enabled them to say that invincible ignorance is unobjectionable.

Kirk notes that the Vatican Council of 1870 followed St Thomas in emphasising the reasonableness and “voluntariness of faith”, but it did not reject the doctrine of the inculpable “ignorance” of the heretic and the heathen who in good faith would not accept the faith.65 But he finds that the Roman Catholic Church has not provided for the Catholic who cannot accept one article of belief or conform with one principle of conduct, while able and glad to retain his hold upon the remainder. Kirk understands that the doctrine of the infallibility of the Papal authority and the infallibility of the Church requires acceptance of all articles of belief.

Kirk’s view of the Christian Church is that it is a society which confers privileges and imposes duties on its adherents as members of a corporate body. The New Testament describes the Church as the body of Christ. This social character of Christianity implies that the question for the Church to decide was that of the rights of conscience against the law.66

Kirk finds that while the leaders of post-Reformation Anglicanism, notably Richard Hooker and Jeremy Taylor, strongly upheld the authority of the Church and the doctrine of the general indefectibility and inerrancy of

64 Ignorance, p. 122.
65 op.cit. p. 129.
66 op.cit. p. 139.
the Church, he notes an important difference between the Church of England and the Church of Rome in the matter of authority and conscience. It is this: while many Anglican writers accept the *de facto* infallibility of the ecumenical councils of the undivided church of the early centuries, there is no conception of an existing organ of infallibility to which appeal at any time may be made and which is capable of altering the system of faith and morals at any time by an *ex cathedra* pronouncement. There may be reasons which justify the conclusion that an Anglican, who is conscientiously unable to accept or conform to one of the major articles of Christian faith and practice, cannot fairly claim to remain a member of his Communion. But the reason which operates in the Church of Rome – that nonconformity of this kind carries with it disbelief in the infallibility of the Church, and so throws doubt on every article of belief and rule of conduct – has no place in the Church of England.\(^{67}\)

(vi)

Custom and Conformity

From Kirk’s consideration of the nature of the Church, we now turn to his next question on non-conformity in the Church of England. Can the claim of authority be fully satisfied by a Christian who accepts some articles proposed to him by authority but conscientiously refuses to accept others? Is there still a place for him in the Church?

Kirk’s response to these questions is to point out that established custom has the force and authority of promulgated law: theologians and canonists agree on this.\(^{68}\) Custom can introduce, interpret and even abrogate promulgated law. Kirk herein sees a real difference between Rome and Anglicanism in the matter of authority and the individual conscience. “The genius of Rome has expressed itself in extending to the utmost the sway of promulgated law at the expense of custom; the genius of Anglicanism has taken the course of reducing the domain of law to the barest possible

---

\(^{67}\) *Ignorance*, p. 145.
\(^{68}\) Augustine, Ep.xxxvi.2, Aquinas, S.T. i.2,q.97, a.3 etc, quoted Kirk, op.cit. p.148.
minimum, and leaving all else to the regime of custom.” But for Kirk, it is a matter of great importance that in spite of this difference, both Rome and Anglicanism must both be adjudged “Catholic”. For Kirk “Catholicism” means a religion which upholds the consensus of Christian thought and practice in the past. For him, both Rome and Anglicanism share the same traditional point of view which cedes to law and custom respectively obligation upon the conscience of the individual.

Kirk’s view is that the principal factor within organised Western Christianity in determining the relation of the individual conscience to the authority of the Church, in matters where a divergence is likely to occur, has always been a wise application of the doctrine of invincible ignorance.

Kirk concludes that as the Church of England is free from the pressure of the doctrine of infallibility it may hold, on the plea of invincible ignorance, that nonconformity on any one point of the Church’s teaching may be conscientiously and without sin combined with loyal membership in other matters. “The responsibility here . . . rests with the body; it has the legislative right to decide within what limits nonconformity on the part of its members may still be tolerated, and within those limits the individual would appear to be free to follow the dictates of a certain conscience . . . without either the guilt of sin, or any moral obligation to dissociate himself from the community”.

Kirk grants that every communion recognises that a point must come at which divergence in faith or morals from the promulgated law of the church must incur penalties. However, he claims that the vast majority of the principles of conduct recognised in the Church of England are based on custom, rather than being canonical; and that neglect of them does not incur a penalty. Here it is apparent that the doctrine of invincible ignorance, understood as “conscientious nonconformity”, applies. For Kirk, all depends

---

69 Ignorance, p. 148.  
70 op.cit. p. 149.  
71 op.cit. pp 151-152.  
72 op.cit. p. 152.  
73 op.cit. p. 154.
on the definition of a “legitimate” custom; “for ‘legitimate’ custom, by universal consent, obliges in all cases with the same force as promulgated law unless and until the individual conscience proclaims certainly against it”.74

Kirk cites the scholastic Sylvester Prierias, the Jesuit Suarez and the Anglican moralist Jeremy Taylor in agreement on this point. Jeremy Taylor75 recognises these conditions required for “legitimate” custom: (1) it must be “reasonable and fit for wise and sober persons”; (2) “of present observation”; (3) “not against the law” where the law is “warm and refreshed and calls for obedience”; (4) “useful” or “to the good of the soul”, “honourable to a religion . . .”; (5) “of long abode” if not “of an immemorial time”. However, Kirk concedes that it is extremely difficult to decide how far any given or alleged custom satisfies conditions such as these, and so becomes obligatory.76

For the best guiding principles in such cases, Kirk turns to the maxim (recognised by all canonists and moralists): ‘in dubio melior est conditionis’77. Kirk’s interpretation of this is that whatever ‘holds the field’ of the man’s life – law, custom, or non-observance – may be left in possession until conscience gives a rule. A law at present observed should not be broken until the individual is conscientiously certain that it has been legitimately abrogated by custom. A custom in present observance should be observed until it is clear that it has been generally abrogated by law or disuse. A custom observed by a part of the community, or by other branches of the Christian Church, does not bind any individual until he is conscientiously convinced that it has obtained the force of law within his own communion.78

Kirk is satisfied that principles such as these cover most of the cases of perplexity which can arise in the matter of conformity. He concludes his

---

74 Ignorance, p. 155.
75 Duet.Dub., iii.4, rule 15, quoted Kirk, op.cit., p. 158.
76 Ibid.
78 Ibid.
book by affirming that the Anglican Communion’s tolerance of widely differing beliefs and practices has not impaired the traditional principles of Christian authority. On the principles of moral theology concerning invincible ignorance, these differences can be condoned as conscientious and blameless. He cautions that the ignorance which leads to differences needs to be genuinely invincible; that the differences stem from conscience, not convenience. “Only so can the Anglican system, which, by the specific experiment it has initiated within the legitimate bounds of true Catholicism, has . . . avoided the dangers of a merely formal uniformity, avoid also the equal danger of a wholly disruptive laxity and so prove its experiment to be not only legitimate but successful too."

(vii)

Conscience and its Problems

From Kirk’s treatment of the themes of law and liberty, authority and individualism, and the relation of conscience to them, we turn to the development of his thought in Conscience and its Problems.

In his introduction Kirk acknowledges that the Principles had borrowed its ground-plan from the Summa Theologica of St Thomas Aquinas and “that adaptation of Thomist principles to the needs of the Church of England which underlies the writings of Bishops Sanderson and Jeremy Taylor”. But as Kirk approached a more detailed treatment of moral theology and the study of Christian moral problems, this question presented itself:

“Do not the present circumstances and the probable future of the Church of England make all such borrowing illegitimate or misguided?”

Kirk’s view is that the Church of England of his day reveals a freedom of thought on the part of the individual, and a tolerance of that freedom on the part of authority more extensive than that of Aquinas and his

79 Ignorance, p. 162.
Anglican followers. But Kirk affirms and upholds the catholicity of Anglicanism.

In the first place, Kirk holds that the moral code of the Church of England is continuous with the code of the Church’s past, amenable to interpretation, understanding and application by methods whose reliability has been tested and endorsed in history. “We may hope for more definite and methodical guidance for conduct from our Church in the future, but . . . such guidance is already offered to us in the present, and . . . the methods and forms in which it is offered may yet prove to be as much akin to the mind of Christ as the methods of other communions and centuries”. These methods “are designed in God’s providence to produce a type of Christian character, at once highly individualised and yet truly loyal, as beautiful, saintly and effective as any type in history”. The Church of England has “mediated to us all that is central in our apprehension of the love of God and the grace of the Lord Jesus”. 81

At this point Kirk confirms his view of the role of moral theology as expressed in the Principles. Moreover Kirk claims that even without any further development of Christian ethics or moral theology, Anglicanism has much guidance to offer. There is general agreement on the Christian morality of its public utterances “which is endorsed by the unanimous acceptance of its members”. Moreover, “that wide tolerance of conscientious divergence of view, which is both the peculiar genius and the crowning glory of Anglicanism, enables the Church to endow with . . . authority . . many other principles for the guidance of conduct”. Perhaps this “tolerance of conscientious divergence of view” was in evidence at the time of the British General Strike of 1926 – Kirk devotes several pages in Conscience to General Strikes, which show a mind which is apparently content with theory; his contemporary, William Temple, then Bishop of Manchester, with several episcopal colleagues, confronted the Prime Minister of the day, Mr Baldwin, at the time of the strike and urged him to ensure that all the striking workers be given immediate and substantial

81 Conscience, p. xiv.
improvements in wages and working conditions. The Prime Minister’s reply was similar to the responses to similar protests offered by many politicians since: “religious people should confine themselves to religion and leave politics to the politicians”. In his subsequent book, *Christianity and Social Order*, Temple explains that all human beings are entitled to adequate housing, health, education, employment and working conditions on the basis of an adequate theology of creation; namely, that all people are made in the image of God, who is passionately interested in the political, social and economic conditions of their lives, which are to be considered as wholly integrated with the spiritual aspects of their lives. The divergences within Anglicanism are illustrated by the difference of Kirk’s views from Temple’s.

Next, Kirk mentions the general principles which he believes that the church affirms. These are truth, honesty, sobriety, and unselfishness, but he raises questions about the duties which follow from these principles. When is a departure from strict truth allowable? How do we distinguish between ‘shrewd business methods’ and dishonesty, legitimate self-care and unselfishness? How do we decide if any two of these principles come into conflict in a particular case? Each person’s conscience must decide, but what guidance should be offered in difficult cases?\(^82\)

This matter is of concern not only for the individual but for the whole Church of England, in Kirk’s view. The Church’s tolerance towards individual divergences of opinion helps to promote conscientious thought about moral questions – but the object of such thought is to secure unanimity. Kirk sees the role of moral theology as being to facilitate the attaining of a unanimity which is of the spirit rather than a uniformity which insists on the letter of the law for even the smallest detail of conduct.\(^83\)

Kirk sees *Conscience and its Problems* as a contribution to the task of attaining unanimity on the subordinate principles or detailed problems of Christian morality, which he sees as a great need for the Church of his day. He defends his drawing upon the traditional moral theology and canon law.

---

82 *Conscience*, p.xv.
83 op.cit. p.xvi.
of the past, as he sees the importance of not losing the achievements of the past in meeting the needs and problems of the modern world.\footnote{Conscience, p.xvii.}

Among the achievements to which Kirk refers is the Papacy’s refusal to countenance divorce and to give communion to divorced people. As we shall see, Kirk wrote extensively on the subject of marriage and divorce, affirming the promises made by the couple in marriage as being lifelong, and ruling out any subsequent marriage in the lifetime of either partner. Kirk’s biographer records his reluctance to give communion to divorcees. However, for several centuries there have been two schools of thought on divorce within the Anglican Church. One viewpoint is represented by Kirk’s position. The other viewpoint holds that marriage is not indissoluble; in particular, where a marriage has become destructive, especially if children are being adversely affected, the grace, love and care of God for all people allows partners to separate, with the possibility of finding happiness in a subsequent marriage.

Kirk’s desire for the Church to meet the needs of the modern world invites another question: what would he say about some sexual behaviour since the advent of the contraceptive pill? In the light of what he has written in the Principles it would be fair to infer that he would not approve of extramarital sexual relations.

Definitions of Conscience

The first chapter of Conscience and its Problems deals with conscience, its duties, privileges, limitations and dangers. The second considers the deference which loyalty demands that conscience should pay to principles commended by authority. The third and fourth chapters treat of the nature and history of casuistry and set out to show the stages by which Christian experience evolved sound principles of dealing with the various problems produced by this interaction of conscience and loyalty in the changing circumstances of the centuries. There follow chapters dealing with
these problems under the headings of Error, Doubt and Perplexity; Kirk puts forward rules of procedure long recognised by the Church as a help to their solution; and he examines the validity of these rules by applying them to questions of immediate interest or of special value as test cases; such as the aforementioned general strikes, birth-control, betting and gambling, commercial honesty and the ethics of compromise.

In his additional Note A: *Definition of Conscience* Kirk states that the Franciscans (e.g. Alexander of Hales and Bonaventure) placed conscience in the emotional side of human nature. By contrast, the Dominicans, as exemplified by St Thomas, were so clear that conscience is “the mind passing moral judgments” that their definitions are directed to making clear not so much the fact of their judgments, as the manner in which they are reached. St Thomas follows a tradition which distinguishes two elements in conscience – the *synderesis*, or intuitive grasp of first principles or standards by which alone moral comparisons can be made; and the *conscientia*, or process of applying these principles in estimating the rightness and wrongness of particular actions. The former he describes as “a law of our mind, in as far as it contains the first principles of the law of nature” or an “innate habitual possession of the first principles of action, which are the natural principles of the law of nature”. It is the dominant factor in the judgements of conscience, and so may aptly be termed, as Jerome suggested, a “spark” of the divine mind. Conscience is the application of this knowledge of the first principles to particular acts to decide whether they are right or wrong. The process is very similar to that of scientific discovery or judgement. Again, the laws of conscience, that is, of the *synderesis*, resemble the statutes of the civil power, and its method of applying them to a particular case is like the process by which a jury arrives at a verdict and a judge gives sentence. The whole matter is treated from the intellectual side.

---

85 *Conscience*, p. 379
86 Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, i.q.79, a.13; i.2.q.19, a.5; de Ver xviii 1, quoted op.cit. p. 379.
87 Aquinas, de Ver. ut. sup. Quoted op.cit. p. 380.
88 Aquinas, S.T. i.2, q.96, a.4, objj. 1, 2., quoted ibid.
89 Aquinas, S.T. ii,2, q.67, a.2, ad4., quoted ibid.
According to Kirk, St Thomas’ disciples in all branches of the Church followed his line of thought. Roman Catholic writers echo his definition. William Ames, the Calvinist moralist (1576-1633), calls conscience “a man’s judgment concerning himself, as regards his subjection to the judgment of God . . . I call conscience ‘judgment’ to indicate that it is a function of the mind and not of the will . . . for all the actions which are assigned to conscience in Scripture appertain to some power or faculty of reason”. Baldwin, his Lutheran contemporary, after noting the Franciscans’ location of conscience in the conative side of the soul (the side of the will or the emotions), follows St Thomas’ theory: “Conscience . . . is an operative faculty of the mind which applies these moral principles implanted in us either by the light of nature or the light of Scripture to some action of which reason declares that we ought or ought not to do, or to have done it”.90

Among Anglicans, Sanderson defines conscience as “a faculty or habit of the practical understanding by which the mind of man, by the use of reason or argument, applied the light which it has to particularly moral actions”.91 Jeremy Taylor’s thinking is similar: “conscience is the mind of a man governed by a rule, and measured by the proportions of good or evil, in order to practice, viz. to conduct all our relations and all our intercourse between God, our neighbour, and ourselves; that is, in all moral actions”.92

Kirk cites Bishop Joseph Butler (1692-1752) as one who sums up the matter: “There is a principle of reflection in men by which they distinguish between, approve and disapprove their own actions. The mind can take a view of what passes within itself, its propensions, aversions, passions, affections, as respecting such objects, and in such degrees; and of the several actions consequent thereupon. In this survey it approves of one, disapproves of another, and towards a third is . . . quite indifferent. This principle in man, by which he approves or disapproves his heart, temper and actions is conscience”.93 And again, “There is a superior principle of reflection on conscience in every man, which distinguishes between the internal principles

90 F. Baldwin, de Casibus Conscientiae, i.3., quoted Conscience, p.380.
91 R. Sanderson, Of Conscience and Human Law, i.13, quoted ibid.
92 Duct. Dubs. i.1, quoted ibid.
93 Joseph Butler, Serm.I, quoted op.cit. p. 381.
of his heart as well as his external actions; which passes judgement upon
himself and them; pronounces determinately some actions to be in
themselves just, right, good and others to be in themselves evil, wrong,
unjust".  

Kirk completes his Additional Note with two later definitions: “That
in me which says ‘I ought’, or ‘I ought not’ ” (F.D. Maurice, The
Conscience, p.31): “The mind occupied with moral phenomena” (J.H.
Hyslop, in Hastings’ Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics, s.v.
“Conscience”).

Kirk is writing in 1927. It is interesting and instructive to compare
his definitions with those offered by contributors to a Summer School
entitled “Conscience in the Seventies” conducted by the Centre for
Continuing Education, Australian National University, Canberra in January
1971. A Roman Catholic spokesman described conscience as a “faculty
within us which enables us to distinguish good and evil, right and wrong”. A
speaker from the Religious Society of Friends defined conscience as an
“inner light”. A sociologist with psychological training maintained that
“conscience” does not exist as a separate entity but is a word that describes
judgments which people make conditioned by social norms and pressures.

By way of comment: while Kirk in his definitions of conscience has
drawn attention to the contrasting views of the Franciscans and the
Dominicans, the definition of conscience as a faculty given above is
compatible with two different views of conscience, namely conscience as an
exercise of reason in relation to practical matters, and conscience as a feeling
or emotion.

95 The Summer School was directed by the Revd Dr John Nurser, then Warden of St Mark’s
Institute of Theology, Canberra.
Perhaps it is not surprising that over forty years after Kirk’s book appeared, the Roman Catholic view given above is the closest to Kirk’s definition of conscience. More importantly, the body of his book is true to his thoughts already quoted. He sees moral theology’s role as offering Christians sound guidance and a firm foundation on which to make the moral judgments which are part of everyday life on the one hand, integrally linked with their eternal destiny on the other. England after the First World War contained many people whose moral ideals and practice had been severely shaken by their experience of the war, as combatants or civilians. Kirk wrote moral theology chiefly to assist clergy in their pastoral work of caring for their people who were facing both old and new moral questions. As a priest himself he knew the challenges arising from daily life for Christian faith and life, and saw the role of moral theology as providing practical help for facing, meeting and resolving those challenges. As a scholar, he saw the role of moral theology as offering a sound theoretical theological basis for such practical help, guidance and counselling. One of the purposes of moral theology is to give assistance both to individual Christians and to the whole Church in the field of moral judgments, so that the mind which makes those judgments can be best informed. So the subject matter includes sin and salvation, and the means of enabling the Church to be open to God’s grace which has dealt effectively and finally with the power of the former and has placed the latter within the reach of the whole of humanity.

Kirk is a faithful upholder of the Catholic tradition within the Anglican church. By that I mean that the basis of his moral theology begins with the four points of the Lambeth Quadrilateral (1888) described in the Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church as “stating from the Anglican standpoint the essentials for a reunited Christian Church”. These are:
‘A. The Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, as “containing all things necessary to salvation”, and as being the rule and ultimate standard of faith.

‘B. The Apostles’ Creed, as the Baptismal Symbol; and the Nicene Creed, as the sufficient statement of the Christian faith.

‘C. The two Sacraments ordained by Christ Himself – Baptism and the Supper of the Lord – ministered with unfailing use of Christ’s Words of Institution, and of the elements ordained by Him.

‘D. The Historic Episcopate, locally adapted in the methods of its administration to the varying needs of the nations and peoples called of God into the Unity of his Church’.

As a Catholic Anglican, Kirk followed the beliefs and practice of the Church of Rome in adding five sacraments to Baptism and the Lord’s Supper, namely, Confirmation, Penance, Extreme Uction, Order and Marriage. So for him, moral theology has a great deal to do with penance and absolution, and with the entire combination of Word and Sacrament as essential for the individual’s and the whole Church’s spiritual journey and pilgrimage towards the fulfilment of its ultimate destiny, namely, the enjoyment of the Vision of God.

The second chapter of Conscience, on “Loyalty”, contains a section entitled “The Relativity of Moral Law”. Kirk seems determined to strike a delicate balance between achieving the desirable aim of unanimity among Anglicans on the moral laws which can never be breached (as mentioned above, namely, truth, honesty, sobriety and unselfishness) and exploring to the full the circumstances when one would be justified in not telling the truth, or not telling the whole truth, for example. His pastoral concern for the whole Church, clergy and lay, is shown in the care with which he deals with the practice of confession and sacramental absolution.

The next important issue for Kirk is that of loyalty to church teaching. Under what circumstances, if any, am I permitted to deviate from Church teaching, such as the Ten Commandments or the teaching of Jesus as
interpreted by the New Testament writers and their interpreters since their day? This is part of the realm of casuistry.

In searching history and discussing the issues of his own day, Kirk addressed the question: If I deviate from church teaching, under what circumstances will my priest-confessor withhold absolution? Kirk wants to allow maximum liberty of conscience and concludes that there can be very few cases in which absolution should be withheld – his chief concern is that withholding absolution may inflict lasting spiritual damage on the penitent, while at the same time the penitent needs to be helped to see the error of his ways if such error exists. Kirk gives considerable space to circumstances where doubt and perplexity arise – we are often faced with a choice from two or more difficult if not agonising possibilities, some of them involving conflicting loyalties – those to spouse, friends, family, workplace, church, political party, company and trade union may be cases in point.

In cases of doubt and perplexity, should the individual be given the benefit of the doubt? Kirk considers the history of probabilism and its more rigorous relative, probabiliorism. “This principle – that a ‘doubtful law does not oblige’ – is in its simplest form the rule of probabilism. A ‘probable opinion’ (which may be acted upon in cases of doubt) is simply a ‘reasonable doubt’ as to the obligation of the law”.  

Kirk believes that probabilism has encouraged laxity and inconsistency and is concerned to establish and secure the validity of the sacraments. Therefore he concludes that any “doubt” must be a real and legitimate one, and that the “benefit of the doubt” may not be taken where what we call vital interests are at stake.

It is with the interests of clergy, lay people and all interested enquirers in mind that Kirk is determined to uphold principles while allowing for the possibility of exceptions. On truthfulness, he writes “Moralists have at all times been attracted by the principle that in no circumstances whatever is any conscious attempt to misrepresent facts

97 op.cit. p. 272.
allowable; and that consequently lying is a ‘sin’ which no opposite evil\textsuperscript{98} can justify us in committing. St Augustine . . . is the champion of this rigorism, Kant followed him with equal emphasis”. But he acknowledges that “professional secrets . . . must be guarded at all costs – the secrets of the confessor, the statesman or the doctor; and sometimes the mere refusal to answer a question will be tantamount to a revelation of the secret. Only a direct denial of the truth will preserve the truth from discovery; is it then allowable? Cases again are commonly adduced in which it seems at least an open question whether a lie is not the lesser evil of two alternatives – the case of the murderer with an axe who enquires whether your father is in the house; the case of the lunatic whose life can be saved only by lying to him; the case of the dying mother who enquires after her dead child; the case of an innocent life which only a lie can save from a tyrant, a pirate or a miscarriage of justice. And further . . . it is easy to imagine both occasions on which veracity is apparently wholly unmeritorious, and also occasions on which a lie is apparently at least as noble and praiseworthy as the truth”.\textsuperscript{99}

Earlier\textsuperscript{100} he had stated that “unless the priority is made absolute the possibility of an exception is not ruled out”. It is a matter for the Christian conscience to use the liberty of the Christian to the full in working out which conflicting claim is the higher and which evil the lesser, while the notion that the end justifies the means is to be rejected.

On gambling and “birth-control”, Kirk refused to condemn all forms of the former but introduces the categories of “social” or “general” expediency when considering the “mild flutter” on a horse race as against imperilling the livelihood of families. On the matter of birth-control, it is important to note that Kirk does not support the Roman Catholic ban on the grounds of the practice’s being contrary to natural law; he rather urges caution on the grounds of social expediency, but he acknowledges that economic or social circumstances may lead a couple conscientiously to make the choice to limit the size of their family. Kirk did not become a bishop

\textsuperscript{98} The context includes the discussion of the wisdom of choosing the “lesser of two evils”.
\textsuperscript{99} Conscience, pp 338-339.
\textsuperscript{100} op.cit. p. 332.
until 1937; it would be interesting to know the extent of the influence of his writings on the bishops who included a statement on birth-control in the proceedings of the Lambeth Conference of 1930, a statement markedly more liberal than the Roman Catholic viewpoint.

In his treatment of conscience and casuistry Kirk is Anglican distinguished from Roman Catholic in his insistence on the liberty of the Christian conscience and his willingness and indeed, determination, to allow circumstances to be taken into account in all cases. For evidence, I turn to his chapter on ‘Birth control’.

“... the prohibition of birth-control in the Roman Communion ... is explicitly based upon a conviction that the practice is contrary to the natural law.”101

Kirk affirms that two great principles of the Gospel are that the Christian law is a law of liberty; and that the individual conscience should as far as possible be trained to autonomy and a capacity for self-legislation.

Prohibitions beyond the minimum required by respect for what was supposed to be known of the absolute moral law, would be fatal to both these ideals. Kirk regards it as a sign of strength that the Church has resisted the temptation to prohibit practices against which no more than general inexpediency could be urged. Only where an intuition was current that the practice, apart from all questions of consequences, was wrong in itself, might a general prohibition stand.102

Kirk, while following Aquinas in agreeing that reason and revelation are our sources for discovering the full content of the grace of God which offers salvation, and the means by which we may have access to that grace, uses the issue of birth control as just one example of Anglican moral theology’s difference from that of Rome.

On general strikes, Kirk considers the assertion that workers engaged in occupations immediately essential to the maintenance of life have no right

101 There was opposition to approving birth control in the Anglican Church early in the twentieth century. But to best of my knowledge, churches which approved birth control did not understand birth control as being contrary to natural law.
to withhold their services at any time, and he doubts the validity of a worker’s absolute right to withhold his work from society. However, he admits the legitimacy of strikes in general even in the case of ‘necessary’ industries. This does not mean that every strike is lawful, says Kirk, but there is no justifiable reason for condemning all strikes without qualification.

Kirk claims support from Roman Catholicism.

“When work-people have recourse to a strike, it is frequently because the hours of labour are too long, or the work too hard, or because they consider their wages insufficient. The grave inconvenience of this not uncommon occurrence should be obviated by public remedial measures. The laws should be beforehand and prevent these troubles arising; they should lend their influence and authority to the removal in good time of the causes which lend to conflict, between masters and those whom they employ.”

Cardinal Manning is quoted commenting on the Encyclical: “If for just cause a strike is right and inevitable it is a healthful constraint imposed upon the despotism of capital”.

I have referred above to the stance and action on the British General Strike of 1926 taken by Kirk’s contemporary, William Temple. It would be interesting and informative to know if Kirk and Temple conversed on the issue of that strike. At the time Kirk was at the height of his career as a priest and Oxford don, not yet Bishop of Oxford. Temple was Bishop of Manchester. Kirk’s biographer and pupil, the Revd Dr Eric Kemp, gives much space, by contrast, to Kirk’s disagreement with Temple over the establishment of the Church of South India in 1947, the most substantial element of which was Kirk’s doubt that the new Church was sufficiently Catholic and true to Apostolic teaching.

---

105 One of Kirk’s chief concerns was that apostolic succession through Episcopal ordination of clergy be preserved intact. The proposed Church of South India, ordained ministry included clergy who had not been ordained by bishops. There was also a serious doctrinal
The Ethics of Compromise

Kirk views the object of casuistry in history as the reduction as far as possible of the number of problems in which a final choice between two grave evils is the only possible solution.106 The number of cases in which a dissentient Christian could rightly be required to resign from the Church of which he is a member, for Kirk, confined to rare instances in which the Church itself demands his resignation. Refusal of absolution to a penitent is similarly mitigated by the doctrine of invincible error.107 Again, Kirk holds that upon inspection, principles such as “thou shalt not lie” retain their absolute rigidity only in certain circumstances.108

However, in the case of the patriotic trade unionist on the declaration of a general strike, and in other similar cases, says Kirk, the clear-cut choice between two evils would appear to be inevitable. Yet there is a chance that in some of them at least it might be legitimately deferred for such time as would allow of some new factor to intervene and make the final choice unnecessary. “Such a deferring issue may be termed a compromise. It is of the essence of a compromise, so understood, that it is not intended to last in perpetuity”.109 For Kirk, the chief danger of compromise is its tendency to harden into an acceptance of one of the two alternatives between which it was intended to mediate.110 However, Kirk’s concluding section combines this high moral stance with liberty. He allows that a moral compromise may embody a devotion of service and faith.

Kirk concludes his book with an estimate of moral theology. He views compromise as a course of action for Christians when decisions need to be made between two evils which moral theology calls perplexities. He concedes that in such cases no adaptation of the principle of the “lesser evil”

---

106 Conscience, p.362.
107 Namely, that if a person is ignorant of Christian teaching, he cannot be accused rightly of breaching it.
109 op.cit. p.363.
110 op.cit. p.366.
or the “greater claim” can be proposed which will guarantee a solution. It is impossible, Kirk says, even with the fullest human knowledge of the case, to understand all the consequences, good and evil, which will follow the adoption of either alternative, and therefore no balance can be struck between the two. But he criticises as erroneous the utilitarian assumption that it is a simple matter to decide where the ‘greatest happiness of the greatest possible number’ lies.

Kirk admits that if these views are correct, it may seem that “the whole ambitious structure” of moral theology is futile. “Every man must decide for himself according to his own estimate of conditions and consequences and no one can decide for him or impugn the decision to which he comes”.111

Yet he stands by three conditions which he considers necessary for the solution of problems of conscience – sound rules of procedure, alertness of intelligence and imagination and earnestness of moral purpose. He describes casuistry as a science necessary for human life. But in the face of its hardest problems it will only succeed if it is directed by sympathy, strengthened by self-discipline and enlightened by prayer. Even if these conditions are met, it may not always be able to establish that its conclusions are valid. But Christians believe in a God who pardons mistakes, if mistakes they are.112

It is possible to see these words of Kirk as a confession of failure for moral theology. They tell against the view that casuistry can be a science. It is possible to argue that Kirk’s answer to the problems of perplexities is unsatisfactory. Dr Augustinus Pütz113 finds Kirk antagonistic to what in his day was new psychology, although Kirk’s biographer, Eric Kemp, notes that Kirk did discuss with the psychologist Dr R.A. Hadfield and several colleagues the relation of psychotherapy and spiritual direction. A proper evaluation of the worth of casuistry needs to consider whether other models

111 Conscience, pp 375-6.
112 op.cit. pp hj376-7.
113 Dr A. Pütz, OSB. Patterns of Pastoral Thinking in Kenneth Escott Kirk, a Dissertation submitted for the Degree of Bachelor of Letters in the University of Oxford, 1968, passim.
might be found for determining the worth of casuistry, such as medical diagnosis.
(i)

An Overview of Kirk’s Vision of God

*The Vision of God* marks the pinnacle of Kenneth Kirk’s writing that appeared in an exceptionally productive decade (1920–30). In taking up the study of the *summum bonum* (literally “the highest good”) Kirk pays a great deal of attention to the contribution of St Thomas Aquinas to such study. “Man’s business is to discover wherein consists his own end or perfection, and then to pursue it”. St Thomas reviews the possible ‘ends’ which have been suggested for human life.1 He concludes “The last end for man is the contemplation of truth,”2 the contemplation of God, the beatific vision of God. This is the ultimate purpose of human life: happiness; the supreme goal of such happiness is the vision of God.

Such is the highest good for humanity, for Aquinas. In his preface to his Bampton Lectures, Kirk declares that he will attempt to “fill up a gap in Anglican moral theology . . . by concentrating upon the ethical implications of the doctrine”. In the lectures which follow he suggests that the doctrine ‘the end of life is the vision of God’ “has been interpreted by Christian thought at its best as implying in practice that the highest prerogative of the Christian, in this life as well as hereafter, is the activity of worship; and that nowhere except in this activity will he find the key to his ethical problems . . . it follows that the principal duty of the Christian moralist is to stimulate the spirit of worship in those to whom he addresses himself, rather than to set before them codes of behaviour”. Kirk makes the vision of God central to his understanding of the moral life.3

Kirk’s main theme is the hope of all people to attain to the vision of God. His central purpose expressed in the Bamptons is to show how this hope

---

2 Aquinas, op.cit. i,2,q.3, a,8, quoted op.cit. p.383.
3 op.cit. pp ix-x.
is realisable for all people, in spite of the view of some early Christian writers that only the monastic life offers real hope of salvation: the life of the secular world is too busy to allow time for the necessary reflection, meditation and contemplation. Kirk’s view of the monastic life is that its best exponents\(^4\) gave the Church excellent leadership through their religious communities’ life of worship and service. They sought to avoid setting before Christians codes of behaviour that were too rigorous. What drives Kirk as he writes these lectures is his perception of the need to point out that rigorism is the enemy of the gospel of Christ. For him it is a gospel not of moral codes or law, but a gospel of promise. The promise is that by living the gospel, all people may undertake and progress on a spiritual journey in which their hope of attaining to the vision of God is fulfilled. The gospel of Christ is intended to enable all people to attain to this vision. The essence of the gospel is freedom in Christ and the Spirit.\(^5\)

Kirk sees formalism (the tendency to reduce ethical principles to moral codes and rules) and rigorism as dangerous to Christian freedom. He finds such danger appearing both in the early and medieval periods and in his own day. Kirk identifies such a combination of formalism and rigorism in the discipline of the Church at Rome as early as the second century. The result of this discipline was a wrong attitude to ethical principles. They became less a means to secure the purity of life which achieves, and the energy of service which retains and attests, the vision of God. “More and more they become mere conditions of membership of a society where external conformity will be rewarded with assured salvation. Attention is concentrated upon law rather than upon life; actions become more important than motives; obedience takes the place of communion with God as the mainspring of Christian life; outward submission rather than inward spontaneity\(^6\) is what is expected of the believer”.\(^7\)

\(^4\) Such as Basil of Caesarea, Benedict, and Bernard of Clairvaux.

\(^5\) Expounded by St Paul: Roman 8:2, The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and death. 2 Corinthians 3:17, Where the Spirit of the Lord is there is freedom. Galatians 5:1, For freedom Christ has set you free. The Gospel of John 8:32, Jesus said, you shall know the truth and the truth will make you free. The Gospel of Luke, 4:18, Jesus quotes Isaiah 61, 1ff The Spirit of the Lord has anointed me to proclaim release to the captives, to let the oppressed go free.

\(^6\) An example of ‘inward spontaneity’ may be likened to the inward spontaneity of a bright child or adolescent student answering questions in class. This question arises: how are laws and ethical principles meant to achieve this goal of the spontaneous moral agent? If the most important ethical principles are 1. “love God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength”; 2. “Love your neighbour as yourself”; 3. “love one another as I have loved you” spontaneity may be achieved by asking such a question as “what is the most loving thing to do in (any given)
Kirk’s book begins with a foundational New Testament text (Matthew 5:8): “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God”. Pagan and Old Testament writers testified to the then widespread desire to attain the vision of God. The books of Exodus, Isaiah and Ezekiel describe the encounters of patriarchs and prophets with God as awe-inspiring, right ethical behaviour being regarded as a prerequisite for attaining such a vision. Kirk’s book traces the struggle of the church over twenty centuries with formalism and rigorism as obstacles to the realisation of the true freedom of the Christian Gospel as one of promise rather than of law. For Kirk, major contributors to this eventual realisation were such writers as Irenaeus, Augustine and Aquinas. Kirk holds that the doctrine “the end of life is the vision of God” implies that the highest prerogative of the Christian is the activity of worship. “The vision of God” (not attainable in its fullness in this life) is best described as “the experience of the presence of God”. Worship is usually defined as the ascription of worth or worthiness, merit, recognition to persons or to God, reverent homage or service, adoration, veneration, devotion given to persons or to God. For Christians, these terms describe human responses to God’s revelation of himself in Jesus Christ as a God of love and in his continuing presence as Holy Spirit. Genuine worship issues in right ethical conduct marked by service of others. In both Jewish and Christian worship a central place is given to the reading of scripture in which the story of God’s creative and redemptive/salvific activity is told. Kirk affirms the traditional Christian belief that human beings see God in Jesus Christ.

In sum, in these Lectures Kirk is sifting through the history of Christian theology in order to separate out the content of the good news based on the record of the person and work of Christ, a gospel of freedom from legalism and rigorism, a gospel of salvation and the promise of eternal life seen as knowledge of God through the works of God. Kirk affirms that the vision of God is open to all people, whether religious or secular, and that it is attained by undertaking a spiritual journey of progress marked by worship and service. The Church’s task is to ensure that its members are not burdened by impossibly rigorous standards.

---

that take no account of the circumstances of people’s lives, while ensuring that people’s moral decisions and actions take account of principles and values such as the theological virtues of faith, hope and love as guides and signposts. This is the insight which informs his later writing on marriage and divorce, and on absolution.

(ii)

Lecture 1

The Vision of God: The Problem of Discipline

_Biblical and Pagan Authors_

In his first lecture, Kirk gives a significant place to the philosophers. Kirk cites Aristotle as one who believed that the philosophic life is one of “seeing”.\(^\text{10}\) Aristotle said that the “highest branch of contemplation is theology”, and the philosophic ideal is the “worship and contemplation of God”.\(^\text{11}\)

Kirk includes Epicureans and Stoics such as Seneca among those eager to attain to the vision of God and quotes Justin Martyr in the _Dialogue with Trypho_ describing the end of Plato’s philosophy as to see God, but this vision is only possible when the soul has been set free from the body.

Plato sees an intimate union between the vision of God, the love of God, the imitation of God and the spiritual well-being of our fellows. Christianity, in Kirk’s view, shares the same collection of ideals. Kirk illustrates this especially in the eighth lecture where he writes on worship and service. In _Principles of Moral Theology_ he expounds the theological virtues of faith, hope and love; for him the task of Christians is to educate their consciences, (their faculties of discerning right and wrong, good and evil, and choosing to act according to the right and the good, springing from love for God, for humanity and for creation in response to God’s love for humanity and for creation). _The Vision of God_ represents a further development of Kirk’s understanding of the moral life.

For Plato, the vision of God requires purity of mind\(^\text{12}\) – Justin Martyr echoes this – it is a mental, not a physical vision. In the case of the writers of

\(^{10}\) _Bios theoretikos_, translated by Latin writers as _contemplatio_.

\(^{11}\) _The Vision of God_, p. 33.

\(^{12}\) _Symp._ 210D-212A.
the Hebrew scriptures, among the earliest is not only reluctance to use the divine name, but the belief that no one shall see God and live. Yet Gideon and Isaiah, Moses and the elders survive theophanies, and the psalmists state their generation’s aspirations.\footnote{Psalm 24, Verse 6. \textit{Such is the company of those who seek him, Who seek the face of the God of Jacob.}  
Psalm 27, Verse 4. \textit{One thing I asked of the Lord . . . to behold the beauty of the Lord.}}

However, in Kirk’s view, when the Old Testament canon closed, various influences combined to dim the hope of the individual Jew that he should seek God. There might be a vision after death – “apart from his flesh” Job hoped against hope to see his maker. Job 42 contains Job’s answer to the Lord. “I have heard of you … but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes”. The Oxford Annotated Version of the Revised Standard Version has this comment: “There is a contrast here between belief through tradition and faith through prophetic vision. (The NRSV prefers the reading “in my flesh I shall see God”, but this follows “after my skin has been destroyed”). God has not justified Job, but he has come to him personally; the upholder of the universe cares for a lonely man so deeply that he offers him the fullness of his communion. Job is not vindicated but he has obtained far more than a recognition of his innocence; he has been accepted by the ever-present master-worker, and intimacy with the Creator makes vindication superfluous. The philosophical problem is not resolved, but it is transfigured by the theological reality of the divine-human rapport”.

If there is anyone who shall see God, either in this life or the next it shall be the upright. Righteousness is the condition of the vision. For the Jew who doubted whether purity of heart was worth striving for with such an uncertain reward, the gospel offered its unqualified promise “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God”.\footnote{The Vision of God, pp 13-14.} Kirk, after examining all his sources, concludes that “the vision of God” means, in this life, “experience of the presence of God”.

The apocalyptists, from Ezekiel and Daniel to the Parables of Enoch and the so-called fourth book of Ezra, also make righteousness the requirement of
being granted the vision of God. Kirk also finds that among the rabbinic theologians there is a close connection of righteousness with the vision\textsuperscript{15}.

Kirk concludes his first lecture by treating of Philo of Alexandria and the Hermetic Books. The first of these sources is Jewish, but outside the Old Testament canon, the second pagan. According to Kirk, Philo was an enthusiastic aspirant to the vision of God. He is well aware that physical sight cannot attain the vision; only the “eye of the soul” can see God. For him “to know God is the highest happiness” but for confirmation of this he searched not philosophy but the scriptures of the Old Testament. He believed that the name “Israel” meant “seeing God” (etymologically Israel actually means “God perseveres”, or “God strives” or “one who strives with God”).\textsuperscript{16} For Philo this meant that Israel’s destiny as a nation is to see God.

The vision is to be secured by the practice of virtue. Kirk has found ethics in the Jewish sources, the philosophers and Philo: they share the conviction that right conduct is a prerequisite for attaining to the vision of God. In the New Testament and later Christian writers, Kirk discovers ethics based on such texts as 1 John 4: 7ff, \textit{Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God, and those who love are born of God and know God . . . we love because he first loved us . . . and sent his Son to be the atonement for our sins. Since God so loved us, we ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God: if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us. God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him.}

Kirk has discerned that Christian writers see the attaining of the vision of God as a process initiated by God, specifically by God’s love, and the attaining of the vision takes the form of a journey or spiritual pilgrimage which is in part at least an ethical response, a response of worship and service of God and humanity with love as its mainspring. Meanwhile, Kirk finds in Philo’s writing something very similar to that simple purity of heart which in the Gospel is the prerequisite of the beatific vision.\textsuperscript{17} This ideal of purity can also be expressed in terms of citizenship and kinship. Part of Philo’s practice of

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{15}op.cit., p.20.
\textsuperscript{16}Genesis 32: 24-30, Jacob called the place Peniel (“the face of God”) “for I have seen God face to face and yet my life is preserved”.
\textsuperscript{17}\textit{The Vision of God}, p.46.
\end{flushright}
virtue is “self-taught wisdom” or “philosophy” attained by meditating on God and his works, which he holds is not a way open only to the select few but a “broad highway” for all who choose to tread it. Kirk rates Philo highly, as he thinks the whole Christian Church should, for his passionate desire for the living God, his certainty that the pure in heart shall see him, and the conviction that faith alone can lead us to his presence.\(^\text{18}\)

Kirk describes the Hermetic Books as the most intense of all the pagan sources in the desire of seeing God which they express. They are not earlier than the fourth century but they embody an older tradition. They proposed to bring humankind to the vision of God by word of mouth.\(^\text{19}\)

In the course of his first lecture, Kirk discerns great divergences of theology and ethics within the doctrine of the beatific vision. He believes that his sources “set the stage” for a new development of religion and ethics, “in which these various conceptions and experiences of pre-Christian pioneers should influence the distinctively Christian ethos and inheritance, and by them be influenced in turn; and the end of that development is not yet in sight.”\(^\text{20}\)

(iii)

Lecture 2

The New Testament

At the head of each of his eight Bampton lectures Kirk places a Biblical quotation. Under the title of his first lecture, entitle The Vision of God and the Problem of Discipline he places Matthew 5:8: *Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.*

For his second lecture, The New Testament, he chooses 2 Corinthians 4: 6:

“For it is the God who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness’, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.”

In the first lecture Kirk affirms that “to see God” is the goal of Christian conduct, and that its history is the history of Christian ethics. For Kirk, the

\(\text{\textsuperscript{18}}\) ibid.

\(\text{\textsuperscript{19}}\) ibid.

\(\text{\textsuperscript{20}}\) The Vision of God, p.54.
vision of God in this life means “experiencing the presence of God”, and discovering how to be open to that experience is part of a spiritual journey towards that goal. The journey entails discipline, derived from the Latin verb discere, to learn, discipulus, a learner, a follower, one who is trained, a disciple, and disciplina, the art of learning, following, being trained, and being a disciple.

For all who embark on this journey, for all who are interested in the subject of Christian conduct, Kirk raises and deals with these questions:

“Is Christianity a code of rules or a life of freedom?” (a question which raises the problem of formalism); and

“Is the Christian ideal world–renouncing (rigorist) or world–embracing (“humanist”)?” (a question which raises the problem of rigorism and the issue of the place of a religious experience).

Having suggested a contrast between a rigorist and a humanist view of the Christian ideal, Kirk begins his second lecture with an examination of rigorism and eschatology in the New Testament accounts of the teaching of Jesus. He offers this definition of a “this worldly” or “humanist” code of ethics, contrasting with a rigorist “other–worldly” code:

“This humanist code . . . bids us enjoy life in due moderation, and realize the highest possibilities of every instinct and factor in the complex organism of personality. It prescribes positive social virtues as the ideal, and seeks to set up a new Jerusalem by steady evolution out of the existing world–order. It finds goodness in embracing the world and its joys, not in flight from them; it looks for God in his creation, instead of seeking him by spurning what he has made.”

Kirk notes that the theologians Johannes Weiss and Albert Schweitzer find in the teaching of Jesus both an eschatological theme, an expectation of an apocalyptic coming of the Kingdom of God either in his own lifetime or immediately after his death – the death itself being a means of effecting salvation, and an element of rigorism and renunciation of the ways, joys, interests and ideals of the world.

Kirk questions Schweitzer’s close linking of the apocalyptic and rigorist elements in Jesus’ teaching, chiefly on the grounds that the nature of both

---

21 The Vision of God, pp 7-8.
22 op.cit. p. 56.
apocalyptic and asceticism is essentially dualist. In Kirk’s view, apocalyptic despair of this world’s order; God must abandon it and create a new, entirely different world. Those who would inherit the new world must dissociate themselves from the present one, adopting a hostile attitude towards the body, the mind and the emotions.23

“Asceticism” is here used by Kirk as almost a synonym for “rigorism”. Its original form is a Greek word meaning “exercise” or “training” and much of the history of moral theology, ethics and Christian spirituality includes writings such as the “Spiritual Exercises” of Ignatius of Loyola. This kind of “ascetic” theology is intended to help those the goal of whose conduct is the vision of God, especially if we define that vision, as we have previously, as “experience of the presence of God”.

On the subject of dualism Kirk adds:

“Dualism says, ‘. . . we cannot reconcile them . . . good and evil . . . God and the universe, soul and body, matter and mind cannot in the end coexist; the universe is incapable of redemption . . . if God is to survive, the universe must perish; if the soul is to see God, the body must be annihilated.’” 24

In the latter part of his lecture, devoted to the vision of God in the New Testament, Kirk acknowledges that in the writings of Paul and John we can still find antinomies such as those of flesh and spirit, darkness and light, but both these writers are convinced that God has redeemed the world,25 and indeed the universe, through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and through him, good has triumphed over the power of evil.

Kirk cites Bishop Charles Gore as one who regards the Sermon on the Mount26 as “a proclamation of unworldliness in its extremest form. It is the poor, or those who have no care at all for wealth, . . . no desire for place or power or distinction . . . who are to enjoy the blessings of the kingdom . . . we are bound to recognize the extreme demand for renunciation as a most prominent element in our Lord’s teaching”.27

23 op.cit. p. 58.
24 The Vision of God, p.58.
25 The purpose of God’s sending his son into the world: John 3: 16-17
26 Matthew 5:1ff.
27 op.cit. pp 64-65.
He quotes Gore as saying of Jesus’ teaching as a whole that the method of Jesus was to proclaim that existing society is on the way to utter ruin and a fresh start, a new birth, a radical reform is required.\footnote{C. Gore, H.L. Gouge, A Guillaume, eds. \textit{New Commentary on Holy Scripture}, pp 287-292, quoted Kirk, op.cit. p.65.}

According to Bultmann, human nature and earthly society are in Jesus’ teaching wholly evil. Bultmann denies that Jesus ever thought of the kingdom of God as something embryonically present in human nature and society, to be brought to realization by steady progress.\footnote{R. Bultmann, \textit{Jesus}, passim, quoted Kirk, op.cit. p.66.}

Kirk puts a contrasting view of Jesus’ teaching. He finds that it legitimises earthly joys and ideals, and proclaims or implies the permanent value of natural beauty, domestic happiness and civil order.

“The very employment of parables from nature and human life implies a real community of character between the earthly type and its heavenly archetype. Even ‘evil’ parents, Jesus says, give good gifts to their children, and in so doing evince the presence of the divine spark within. The Lord who would have us forgive to seventy times seven betrays by that same demand the conviction that no sinner is utterly lost before the day of judgment – there must still be some possibility for good in a soul to which forgiveness can still have a meaning”.\footnote{op.cit. pp 66-67.}

Kirk is certain that the spirit of a pastor – the spirit of making allowances and discriminations, the spirit of tolerance, the patience which can overlook constant lapses and still find something to love in the sinner, the optimism which seeks forgiveness even in the most everyday surrounds – is a spirit found in the Jesus of the gospels.

Kirk discerns an essential task for Christian ethics – “it should attempt to find the truth about this amazing conjunction of the two ideas of rigorism and humanism in our Lord’s outlook”. They lie side by side in the gospel. If a synthesis between asceticism and humanism in Jesus’ teaching is impossible, “the Christian moralist will have forced upon him the invidious task of deciding which of the two elements is to be attributed to the Lord himself and which discarded as an alien excrescence”.\footnote{op.cit. pp 67-68.}
Kirk takes up the task to which he has referred by examining other New Testament texts. He compares the three Synoptic gospels’ versions of the story of the young man with great possessions, and finds diversity. Is the main problem barring entry into the kingdom of God the possession of riches, or trust in riches? In dealing with this question, Matthew introduced a conception which was to have a far-reaching effect upon Christian thought, life and organization – that of the “double standard” in ethics. As Kirk sees it, if the young man would enter into life he is to keep the commandments (without, apparently, surrendering his riches); but if he would be perfect and have treasure in heaven, he must sell all that he has and follow Christ. Riches are still a barrier, and the better course is to be rid of them; but they are not an impenetrable barrier, and some degree of beatitude may be reached even by those who retain them.

Luke, by contrast, accepts the rigorist interpretation. Further, Luke’s story of the rich man and Lazarus suggests that the rich man’s torments in Hades arise from the fact that he has received “good things” in his lifetime, while Lazarus is comforted because of the “evil things” he has suffered.

Kirk notes two versions of the beatitudes. Matthew has “Blessed are the poor in spirit”. Luke’s parallel is “Blessed are you who are poor” followed by “Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation”. Kirk writes:

“Either the ‘poor in spirit’ is the earlier, in which case some writer, who held material poverty a higher condition than material wealth, deleted the ‘in spirit’; or ‘Blessed are you poor’ was the original form, and ‘in spirit’ was added by a moralist who wished to eliminate the purely ascetic interpretation . . . it is clear evidence of a divergence of views upon the problem of riches.”

Kirk finds similar divergence in the writings of Paul. He has a depreciatory view of marriage and a conservative, patriarchal view of family

---

32 Mark 10: 23-26, is regarded by most scholars as the oldest version of this story of the young man: Jesus said to his disciples “how hard it would be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God” and the disciples were perplexed at these words, but Jesus said to them … “How hard it is to enter the Kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the Kingdom of God”. They were greatly astounded and said to one another “Then who can be saved?”


34 *The Vision of God*, p. 70.
relationships and of the institution of slavery which he appears to accept or condone. His advice to the Christians at Rome was to accept the rule of the secular authorities. But this element in his writing may have been prudential; he may have thought that the authorities could easily have extinguished the Church if the slaves or any other citizens became subversive, rebellious or merely resisted the authorities.  

Even in relation to the body and its needs (often the target of rigorist principles) Paul is no convinced dualist. He disciplines his body, and brings it into subjection, but he does not regard it as something against which the Christian must fight to the end. God has a care for the body; the body has a part to play in the divine economy. It is “for the Lord” as the “Lord is for the body”. It can be made a “living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God” and a “temple of the Holy Spirit”.

Kirk finds in the Johannine writings also (both the Fourth Gospel and the Epistles) the rigorist and the humanist strains of thought. At first sight, the “world”, meaning the sum-total of humanity, apart from the church of the redeemed, appears as something wholly evil. Without Christ it is “darkness” and not light. The conflict between light and darkness in John’s writings has raised the question: Is he a dualist? The world has refused to know the Word, its creator. Its ruler is Satan. The world has produced false prophets who are agents of anti-Christ. Christ cannot or will not pray for it.

The ethical complement of this, by contrast with the new commandment that Christians should love one another, is found in the injunction “Love not the world. . . if any man love the world, the love of the Father is not for him”. The task of the Christian seems to be not to “save” but to “overcome” the world.

---

35 By way of contrast, we find in these texts “Christian humanism and warm social morality”. Kirk, op.cit. p.80. 1 Cor. 13 extols love; Galatians 5 and Philippians 4 are catalogues of virtues; Ephesians 6 describes the spiritual armour necessary for Christian faith and life; he might have added Galatians 3: 28 (“there is no longer Jew nor Greek. . . slave or free. . . male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus”) as a text affirming that baptism into Christ creates a union which transcends all social divisions.

36 1 Cor. 6:13, cf.ib. 7:24.

37 Rom. 12: 1.

38 1 Cor. 6:19.

39 John 17: 9.

40 1 John 2:15.

41 1 John 5: 4, 5.
Yet in other passages the world, rather than being seen as irrevocably opposed to God, is described as favoured and loved by him. God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son that the world should be saved through him. To give life to the world is the purpose of the Son’s coming. The story of Jesus’ conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well reaches a stirring climax in the brave confession of faith by the despised Samaritans: “We have heard for ourselves, and know that this is indeed the Saviour of the world”.

Kirk concludes that rather than attempt to explain these contrasts away, it is better to admit that both dualism and monism are at work in the mind of John.

It is clear, especially when we examine parts of 1 Corinthians and Colossians, that Paul is seeking to counter the influence of various kinds of gnosticism, especially those that encourage not only asceticism, or its opposite, libertinism, but also a kind of spiritual elitism that requires special “knowledge” of hierarchies of spiritual beings that come between human beings and God. All forms of gnosticism and dualism regard matter as evil and inferior to spirit. Paul is highly critical of these. Especially in his Letter to the Romans he uses the terms “flesh” and “spirit” in opposition to one another. It is true that to Paul “flesh” has an evil connotation, “spirit” a good one. But, for Kirk, the vital question is this: Is the “sarx”, the “flesh”, in Paul’s psychology a principle so evil that it is incapable of redemption? Kirk is satisfied with this definition of “flesh” as used by Paul:

“Those factors in a man’s character, possessions or surroundings which, though they are good in themselves, it is possible for him to misuse or misapply... the tendency to misuse them which, apart from grace, is the normal tendency of life. But even this latter tendency is in itself no more than a potentiality. Not until sin enters in does the flesh become positive evil; then it is defiled with a defilement from which we can and must cleanse ourselves. But that which can be defiled is not in itself defilement; and this alone proves that St Paul did not regard ‘what nature evolves’ as wholly evil.”

---

42 John 3:16.
43 John 6: 33, 51.
44 John 4: 42.
45 The Vision of God, p. 84.
46 The Vision of God, pp 91-92.
After his wrestling with the problem of the origin of the rigorist element in the New Testament, Kirk’s conclusion is that it is yet to be discovered. Rather than borrowing anything of importance from the dualism of the pagan world around it, New Testament writers such as Paul and John resisted it and taught an alternative doctrine. Yet within a few generations of the apostles’ day, rigorism made a determined bid to capture the whole machinery of discipline and to oust humanism from the Church. Kirk’s thesis is that the New Testament writers were able to resist asceticism in their own time because of their significant development of the doctrine of seeing God\textsuperscript{47}.

In the written accounts of the teaching of Jesus, the vision of God is a dominant theme. We find it in the “motto” text of Kirk’s first lecture: “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God”\textsuperscript{48}. For Kirk, the whole emphasis of Jesus’ teaching is laid upon the character of God and the nature of his kingdom. It is teaching about God. He came “preaching the good news of God”\textsuperscript{49}. The Kingdom of God is something in which he is to come, not a state of things prepared for his coming by human effort. “It is true that Jesus spoke . . . of the character and behaviour necessary for those who would ‘inherit’, ‘enter into’ or ‘possess’ the kingdom; and that in so doing he purified, simplified and breathed new life into the ethical code of Judaism . . . like all great teachers, he spoke both of God and of man, or preached both doctrine and ethics. But whereas contemporary Judaism laid all the stress on man – that is to say on ethics, on what man has to do to fulfil the will of God – . . . by contrast the emphasis of Jesus’ teaching is upon God, rather than upon man – upon what God has done, is doing, and shall do for his people”\textsuperscript{50}.

Jesus teaches about a God who cares for his creation as a father for his children, who understands his people’s needs and gives to them generously, who is patient and long-suffering, who welcomes the prodigal, searches for the lost sheep and delights to give the Kingdom to his flock. He rejoices over the sinner who repents. He is also a Judge before whom there is no excuse. But “for all the ethical teaching in the gospel . . . Jesus’ primary thought and message was about God, . . . human conduct in his mind came in a second and

---

\textsuperscript{47} op.cit. p. 94.
\textsuperscript{48} Matt. 5:8. See also Matt. 18:10, John 3:3, 14: 8-11.
\textsuperscript{49} Mark 1:14.
\textsuperscript{50}The Vision of God, pp 95-96.
derivative place . . . He gave a vision of God where others could only speak of it"\(^51\). By “gave” a vision of God Kirk means that Jesus showed what life lived with a vision of God involved.

For Kirk, the essence of salvation is “God-centredness”, rather than the “self-centredness” which is the consequence of concentrating on ethical conduct and human behaviour\(^52\). As he explores the Synoptic Gospels he finds that in all three a central point is the confession of Peter at Caesarea Philippi, the story of Christ’s transfiguration and the consequent climax of the Passion narrative. The Transfiguration story is central because it is the story of the vision of the divinity breaking through the humanity of Jesus. Moses and Elijah are depicted as the forerunners of the Messiah. The voice from the cloud on the mountain top recalls the voice declaring Jesus as the beloved Son of God that is part of the narrative of Jesus’ baptism. Bultmann even believes the Transfiguration narrative was originally a Resurrection appearance story which Mark has antedated.

The Resurrection stories themselves have been interpreted by the Church as theophanies. As they stand, Paul’s account in 1 Cor. 15 is the earliest, by common agreement. In the Transfiguration and Resurrection narratives, says Kirk (following Professor Bacon), the truth about God-in-Christ is revealed when the disciples see the glorified Jesus. The ethical consequence of the vision is that Christians are transformed also: in the teaching of Paul it is the vision of the Lord “seen in a mirror” which transforms the Christian “into the same image from glory to glory” and “thereby reveals to him his discontent with the earthly house of his tabernacle”. Kirk’s view is that “the whole gospel . . . must be read and regarded as one great vision of God in Christ, akin to the vision given to the favoured three on the Mount of Transfiguration”\(^53\).

“Knowing”, “gaining” God, then, or God in Christ, is the goal or prize of the Christian life.\(^54\) And one of Paul’s distinctive features is his tendency to bring the Christian hope out of the future into the present. Eschatology holds out the promise of a day of the Lord in which the forces of evil will be

\(^{51}\) op.cit. p. 96.
\(^{52}\) op.cit. p. 97.
\(^{53}\) The Vision of God, p.101.
\(^{54}\) Philippians 3: 8-10, 12-14.
overcome, and this was the view of the early church. Paul declares that the power of evil has already been overcome through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Paul speaks from his own experience of encountering the risen Christ reinforced by visions and revelations of the Lord, and on that basis he asserts emphatically that we have already seen God. Kirk here produces his “motto” text for this lecture from 2 Cor. 4: 6: “For it is the God who said, ‘let light shine out of darkness’, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ”.

What is this vision like? Kirk adduces Paul’s vivid analogy from 1 Cor 13 which he rates as “the most exalted passage of his writings”:

“Now we see in a mirror, dimly; but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.”

This use of “knowing” has been controversial as allegedly offering comfort to Gnostics. But Paul is not depreciating the vision of God which we already possess. It is “in a riddle”, but it is still, for Kirk, something to be prized above all earthly possessions. “It is not yet as full and glorious as it will one day be, but very full and very glorious it still is”55. Kirk is saying that there is a vision of God now, and a vision of God in the life to come. At this point he is influenced not only by Paul but also by Aquinas’ concept of the beatific vision in the next life.

Kirk completes his lecture by examining the Fourth Gospel. Here he finds in John a firm statement that we can receive the vision of God in this life. Kirk quotes A. Loisy: “His gospel is a perpetual theophany”, and follows this with the opening verses of the First Letter of John which he thinks is a fit footnote of the gospel:

“We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life – this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us.”56

55 op.cit. p.102.
56 1 John 1: 1-3.
Kirk concedes that the author of the Gospel reminds his readers that “No one has ever seen God”, but in the sense in which he uses the words the vision of God is at all times impossible – that is, God is not visible to the physical eye. But earlier in the same paragraph he has written “the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth”. Later (14: 7, 9) he attributes to Jesus the words “He who has seen me has seen the Father”, and similarly at 6:40: “This is indeed the will of my Father, that all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life; and I will raise them up on the last day”. And finally, in the First Letter of John, we find that the vision of God makes the Christian like the Father, “for we shall see him as he is” (3:2). Resemblance to him is shown in mutual love, for God is love (4:12, 16).

Kirk concludes his lecture by pointing out that the vision is always corporate.

“That unbroken personal intercourse with the divine is the end for which man was created; that a foretaste of this experience is possible in this life; that to receive it depends upon moral rectitude and issues in increase of personal holiness – these are the pillars of the conception. (But) the vision is always a corporate one. ‘We’ is the word used throughout (the First Epistle of John). This implies that the experience of the Church makes up for deficiencies on the part of the individual .

Kirk adds that the vision of God expresses itself throughout in terms of the historic Christ – the revelation of God is “in the face of Jesus Christ”. Hence the Christian life must be social – its aims, methods and ideals are to be tested by, and adjusted to, the aims, methods and ideals of the Church. Further, New Testament asceticism never exceeds the limits observed by Jesus and condemns nothing which Jesus did not condemn.

At the end of the second lecture Kirk offers a summary of the different conceptions of the vision of God that he has examined.

57The Vision of God, p.108.
One view in early Old Testament writings is that God is physically visible in this life, although to see him is death.\(^{58}\)

A second view is that God is physically invisible but metaphorically visible (that is, knowable); that is, his character can be inferred from his "works". Rabbis and philosophers take this view; they are also influenced by a third conception. This is that God is comprehensible to reason, from his works, but still more knowable by "faith", or mystic and ecstatic experience. Many philosophers take this view, with Philo and some of the Hermetic literature.

Fourthly, the New Testament writers take a similar view to the third view, but they enrich it by adding the Old Testament record of the revelation of God and the person of Jesus as sources of rational knowledge of the character of God, and by stabilizing the vague concept of "mystical experience" in the far richer and more definite experience of communion with Christ in the Spirit. On the relation between "reason" and "faith", the New Testament writers insist on no one point of view, and so leave the way open for future developments.

Fifthly, most representatives of the last three viewpoints insist that moral affinity with God is essential to the vision. The New Testament writers suggest that it is more important than "experience".

Kirk identifies a sixth viewpoint as the "Gnostic" position (taken by apocalyptists, the mystery religions, and found in parts of Philo and the Hermetic literature): that God is wholly incomprehensible to human reason, but "knowable" by non-rational methods (such as dreams, trances, initiations and ecstasies).

Most schools of thought insist that God will be far more "knowable" in the next life than this.\(^{59}\)

---

\(^{58}\) Judges 13: 22; Manoah and his wife, parents of Samson; Exodus 33: 20, God speaking to Moses.

\(^{59}\) *The Vision of God*, p.110.
Kirk’s third lecture is entitled *Formalism*, and its first part *The Beginnings of Codification*. He sets the tone with this quotation from the head of St Paul’s Letter to the Galatians:60

“I am astonished that you have departed so soon from him who called you into the grace of Christ to another gospel.”

Kirk notes that St Paul’s indignant wonder was evoked by the reversion of one Christian church which he had evangelized to the rule-bound spirit of the Jewish religion of his day. But by the middle of the second century, Kirk finds, the example of the Galatians has infected the whole Christian Church. Writings from this period such as *The Didache*, *The Epistle of Barnabas*, and *2 Clement* present the genius of Christianity wholly in terms of law and obedience, reward and punishment. *The Didache* begins:

“There are two ways, one of life, and one of death . . . The way of life is this: first, thou shalt love God who made thee: second, thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself: and whatsoever thou wouldest not have done to thyself, do not thou either to another.”

There follows a list of Christian virtues and special duties, which include respect for ministers of the gospel, almsgiving, “true behaviour” of Christian parents towards their children, slaves and maid-servants, and the duties of slaves towards their masters.

The “way of life” is then closed with an injunction not to add or remove anything from the commandments of the Lord; and with a sentence which has caused much debate: “Thou shalt confess thy sins in the church, and shalt not come to thy prayer in an evil conscience”.

Then follows the way of death:

“The way of death is this; first . . it is wicked and full of curse; murders, adulteries, lusts, fornications, thefts, idolatries, sorceries, traffic in drugs, ravennings, false writings, hypocrisies, a double heart, guile, arrogance, malice, self-will,

---

60 Galatians. 1: 6.
covetousness, filthy talking, jealousy, boldness, pride, boasting.”

Most scholars date The Didache between AD 60 and 120. Kirk places it at about the year 100. The so-called Epistle of Barnabas is given approximately the same date. “Barnabas” includes the “Two Ways” which he calls the ways of light and darkness; the author proclaims himself a “teacher”; he upholds the doctrines of the divine Sonship of Christ, his life, cross and resurrection, but the greater part of his “teaching” is ethical, and his theme is justification by works. The second epistle of Clement dates from much the same period.

For Kirk, the chief significance of these three documents is this: they are clear evidence of the principal interest of the period codification. His explanation for this is that at the beginning of the Christian era both Jews and Greeks were demanding clear, authoritative and easily-remembered instruction on ethical questions. Kirk finds an abundant supply of pre-Christian authors, Greek, Latin and Hebrew, who prepared the ground for Christian formalism. Many passages in these writers’ works reflect the style and content of Psalm 1: The Lord knows the way of the righteous; but the way of the ungodly shall perish. Kirk notes the judgment of R.H. Charles on The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs, a Chasidic document of the second century B.C.: “the nearest approach to Christian ethics in the whole of Jewish literature.” Kirk cites the Testament of Asher: “There are two ways of good and evil; and with these are the two inclinations in our breasts, discriminating them”.

For Kirk Asher emphasizes one of the dangers of the early Christian codification of virtues and vices – its tendency to judge by externals, without due consideration of circumstances. Kirk holds that the circumstances of each case must be duly considered, without losing sight of first principles based on “the broad moral distinctions which we know to be universally valid”. Much of the writing on ethics and moral theology by Anglicans in the second half of the twentieth century took up positions on this statement: on the one hand, for example, Joseph Fletcher’s view that the only absolute is the command to

---

61 The Vision of God, p. 117.
62 op.cit. p. 118.
63 Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha, ii, p. 282.
64 Quoted Kirk, The Vision of God, p. 123.
65 op.cit. p. 124.
love⁶⁶; on the other, such writers as G.R. Dunstan reconstructing a Christian ethic based on a broader base of principles⁶⁷.

The “Two Ways” are represented in the synoptic record of the teaching of Jesus in the First Gospel – the broad and narrow way; and similar thought can be found in the parables of the Sheep and the Goats, the Wheat and the Weeds, the Drag Net, the Ten Maidens, the Rich Man and Lazarus, and the Two Houses. The three duties of prayer, fasting and almsgiving are listed in St Matthew’s version of the great sermon, where also the canons of the New Law are set out in parallel with those of the Old “which they at once fulfil and supersede”⁶⁸.

Catalogues of sins occur in the invective against the Pharisees, and the list of things which “proceed out of the heart” in St Mark; while the Matthaean Beatitudes provide a catalogue of virtues. There are no “household codes” in the gospels but the epistles are rich in them – Ephesians and Colossians deal with the relationships of husband and wife, parents and children, masters and slaves. Both Romans and 1 Peter list the virtues of the Christian citizen.

Kirk adopts a critical ethical and moral stance when noting New Testament writers’ fondness for lists of negative virtues, through use of words expressing abstention from, or absence of, sin and compares the Apostolic Fathers⁶⁹ unfavourably with the New Testament writers:

“... whereas in the New Testament the negative virtues are balanced by the positive ones, in the Apostolic Fathers the case is otherwise. This had a double effect. It gave strong impetus to the dualistic tendency which found its ultimate expression in rigorist asceticism; whilst it encouraged the ordinary Christian to be content with a tepid ideal of blamelessness... rather than to aspire to a life of positive well-being and progress.”⁷⁰

Kirk extends this criticism in a section of his lecture devoted to the dangers of formalism. The post-apostolic writers, he says, are moving on the path which leads towards a purely formal churchmanship of correct external

---

⁶⁸The Vision of God., p. 125
⁶⁹e.g. Clement of Rome, and the authors respectively of the Epistle of Barnabas, 2 Clement and the Didache.
⁷⁰The Vision of God, p. 130.
observances. Kirk finds in the New Testament writers a reaction against the 
spirit of Judaism; but he faults Didache, Barnabas and 2 Clement for mere 
opposition to the institutions of Judaism. The effort of Jesus to purify the whole 
conception of fasting has deteriorated into a sectarian wrangle about dates. 
When 2 Clement gives almsgiving a higher estimate than prayer or fasting, Kirk 
finds this reproduced in later Christianity in the doctrine of merit and works of 
supererogation, and the practice of commutation of penance.

Further, Kirk holds that the heart of the teaching of Jesus about the law 
is that purity of motive and genuine piety are more important than the emphasis 
on correct behaviour and punctiliousness as found in legally-expressed codes. 
The Beatitudes as found in Matthew, attributed to Jesus, form a code which is a 
table not of actions but of dispositions, of the virtues from which right action 
will habitually spring.

Another danger inherent in all codes is the danger of “anthropocentrism”. “If my aim in life is to attain a specified standard, or to live according to a defined code, I am bound continually to be considering myself, and measuring the distance between my actual attainment and the ideal. It is impossible by such a road to attain the self-forgetfulness which we believe to be the essence of sanctity.” The theme of self-forgetfulness as opposed to self-centredness is a central part of Kirk’s view of Christian faith and life as a journey towards the “purity of heart” (Mt. 5:8) that makes possible the “vision of God”, interpreted as the experience of the presence of God. Such self-centredness means that the uppermost question in our minds is always “am I doing right?”

Kirk contrasts St Paul’s attack on the law with the Apostolic Fathers’ rejoicing in law. In Kirk’s view the Fathers did not recognize either the law’s moral inadequacy or its psychological menace. St Paul’s basic accusation is that the law – any law – is powerless to alter the dispositions of the heart. St Paul’s gospel is freedom in Christ from the law, so he “sets grace over against the law, faith against works, the spirit against the letter, the vision of God, against the tables of stone. The vision of God . . . is a mirror which transforms the soul into which its light is flashed; it bestows eternal life and likeness to the

\[71 \text{The Vision of God. pp 133-134.} \]
\[72 \text{Romans 7.} \]
Father. It . . . alone can confer self-forgetfulness upon the receiver. Man’s first
duty . . . is to be receptive – to wait for this transforming or renewing energy of
God . . . Whatever metaphor the New Testament may be using of this primary
bond set up between God and the soul – the Spirit, or grace, or the indwelling
Christ, or the vision – the doctrine is still the same. The distinctively Christian
life begins with a new relationship . . . Once the relationship has been
established, the field is open for human effort and activity”. 73

If Paul is right, the new relationship needs to be such as to alter the
dispositions of the heart. This raises practical questions: how are dispositions
formed? How do we become good people? In the Principles Kirk suggests
ways in which the soul can be educated and good instincts be aroused and
developed. For Christians, the self-forgetfulness that Kirk regards as the essence
of sanctity may take the form of “looking to God”. But they may readily agree
that people can and do learn from each other and become good by following
good examples. When Kirk says “man’s first duty is to be receptive, and to wait
for the transforming or renewing energy of God” he may mean “being open to
the Holy Spirit”, where the Spirit is understood as the giver of freedom, love
and new life. There are ethical sections in the first Letter of John that form the
basis for “forming dispositions” or “changing attitudes”. 74 These sections of the
Letter have been summed up as a call to “do the truth”. The Gospel of John
(Chapter 14: 6) sees “truth” in the person and work of Jesus himself: (Jesus
said) “I am the way, the truth and the light”.

By contrast, the Apostolic Fathers contain few references to grace, seeing
God, receiving the Spirit, to being in Christ, or enshrining an indwelling Lord.
Kirk’s final warning in this part of his work is that the Apostolic Fathers alter
the whole balance of New Testament theology. God is not conceived as a
Father whose loving purposes are the true and only canon of the law, and whose
abiding and inspiring presence is the perpetual instrument of its fulfilment. He
is now thought of primarily as Law-giver and Judge. Communion with God,
present and future, is relegated into the background; salvation and recompense
become the main objects of the Christian’s desire.

73 op.cit. p. 135.
74 1 John 4: 7ff. Let us love one another for love is from God . . we love because he first loved us;
3: 18, Let us not love in word or speech but in deed and in truth.
Kirk’s criticism of codification and formalism is this: early Christian writings of this kind conveyed the view that obedience for the sake of reward is all that matters. This means that the inherent ethical value of the action performed is indifferent. So long as it is commanded it is right, and it is right for no other reason than that it is commanded. Tertullian went so far as to say “if we do well we merit of God and he becomes our debtor” and Kirk attributes the same sentiment to Cyprian, Victorinus, Hilary, Jerome, Augustine and Ambrose. For Kirk this is close to the doctrine of merit and works of supererogation. “The Church is all but completely assimilated to the model of secular society”.  

At this point in his work, Kirk confronts the apparently inconvenient fact of the presence of the motive of reward in the Gospels; it has been said that the conception of reward and punishment dominates the whole of the synoptic presentation of ethics. Each of the beatitudes includes a promise; many of the parables are parables of judgment. “There is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children, or fields, for my sake and that for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age . . . with persecutions – and in the age to come eternal life”. “Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven”. “If you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you”.

Kirk’s response to these texts is to say that the problem that they present cannot be ignored or minimized. He held that the main tendency of Jesus’ teaching was to help his hearers to forget themselves by focussing all their aspirations upon God and the kingdom of God. The Gospel mentions rewards, but it also demands service to which no promise of reward is attached. Kirk’s solution to the problem is judicious. In his view true Christians are self-forgetful, but they are not to pursue self-forgetfulness in a legalistic way to the point of refusing to think of rewards, for that would not be consistent with the

75The Vision of God, pp 138-139.
76 Mark 10: 29, 30.
78 Matt. 6: 14.
80The Vision of God, pp 141-142; self-forgetfulness maybe understood, for example, as “looking to God” and “doing the truth”, as in the teaching of 1 John.
full content of the Gospel. Kirk counsels against too much self-scrutiny. He advocates that Christians fix their thoughts on God, turn to God and allow God to correct whatever needs correcting in them; this is the benefit which contemplating God brings.  

Discipline and Formalism

After this treatment of the theme of self-forgetfulness, Kirk digs more deeply into the matter of discipline which occupies him throughout the whole book. His discussion on discipline stems from his concern that the formalistic attitude of the early Christian leaders and writers was likely to lead to punitive measures. As we shall see, Kirk is eager to emphasize the pastoral nature of Christian faith and life that places forgiveness at the heart of the Gospel. In his view formalism gives the Gospel an excessively penal flavour. As he discusses discipline his thoughts are pastoral rather than penal. If humanity is to see God and to find ultimate fulfilment in that vision, discipline is necessary (earlier defined as “learning”, “following a teacher or teaching”, “being a disciple”, all of which phrases imply the art of putting Christian faith into practice). In his discussion of formalism Kirk now turns his attention to that art of Christian conduct as pursued in history both by individual Christians and by the whole Church, and in particular what the Church’s response was to its members who it perceived to have fallen short in their attempts to live the Gospel – discipline in that sense.

Kirk finds that in the days of the early Church formalism proved to be a cause of moral advance. He acknowledges that as a means of personal discipline it is of great value, provided that, in keeping with the New Testament demand, “it is kept subordinate to the living experience of the living God which is at the heart of Christianity.” He adds that codification of principles goes hand in hand with corporate discipline; and the latter is beneficial as long as it is exercised for pastoral and remedial purposes, that is, to strengthen and to cooperate with the personal self-discipline of the individual. But if it is used not pastorally but penally, the moral code has the effect of encouraging purely outward-observance and of stifling the freedom from restraint necessary if people are to realize their God-given gifts. “And because the Church soon began to forget that its charter was simply and solely to help men to be pure in

81 The Vision of God, pp 144-145.
heart that they might see God, it sowed for itself in its exercise of discipline a harvest of evils…” 82

The Church early developed accredited agents and machinery for making the exercise of communal discipline possible. The Ignatian epistles speak of the authority of the bishop as the authority of Christ, and Barnabas and Didache exalt the authority of the ministry.

Moreover, the Church inherited from Judaism, as instruments of discipline, penance and excommunication. In Judaism, these instruments retained a pastoral character of allowing for the restoration of offenders on repentance. Kirk then examines five New Testament texts, which provide evidence of discipline of varying degrees of severity. The five are discussed under these heads: “the commission to bind and to loose”; “St Paul at Corinth”; “the Epistle to the Hebrews”; “The Sin unto Death”; and “the Sin against the Holy Spirit”.

Kirk deals with the first of these as found in St Matthew’s Gospel at 18:15ff, a general commission probably addressed to the leaders of the church: “Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven”. 83 Kirk interprets this as dealing with the granting or refusal of reconciliation. This passage allows for the intervention of the Church if two individuals are unable to reach resolution of an offence. The same passage contains the merciful instruction to forgive till seventy times seven. St Matthew’s account of St Peter’s confession at Caesarea Philippi also includes this promise that what is bound or loosed on earth shall be bound or loosed in heaven. The Fourth Gospel also has the commission to bind and to loose given by the risen Christ to the apostles. 84

The Matthaean emphasis is on opportunities for reconciliation for offenders. In St Paul’s case, the evidence of 1 and 2 Corinthians refers to a similar incident, which introduces the anathema or curse, but allows for the restoration of the offender. 85

---

82 The Vision of God, p. 147.
83 Matt. 18: 18.
84 Matt. 16: 19, John 20: 23.
85 The Vision of God, pp 156-159.
The *Revelation* of St John contemplates the restoration of penitent offenders. But the *Letter to the Hebrews* emphatically declares it to be impossible, and so embodies a purely penal conception of discipline. The *Gospel according to the Hebrews* is more lenient; Kirk allows for the possibility that it is a protest against the *Letter*. The writer of the *Letter* asserts three times that if those who have “tasted of the heavenly gift” fall away, it is impossible to renew them again to repentance. However, the *Gospel according to the Hebrews* takes up St Matthew’s saying about “seventy times seven” and repeats it with this important addition: “For in the prophets also, after they were anointed with the Holy Spirit, matter of sin was found”.

Kirk offers this comment:

_The rigorist practice of refusing reconciliation to grave sinners was bound up with a doctrine of irresistible grace – the immediate and indefectible perfecting of the Christian by the Spirit at his conversion. The ‘Gospel of the Hebrews’ sets its face not merely against the practice but against the doctrine too. Even ‘in the prophets’ (and so much more in the ordinary Christian) and that after they had received the Holy Spirit, sin was found; how tender, therefore, must not the Church be with the lapses of everyday believers!’_

This amounts to a strong endorsement by Kirk, as a moral theologian and as a priest, of the supreme importance of the pastoral element in the administration of discipline in the life and work of the Church.

In the case of the “Sin unto Death” – in modern translations of 1 John 5: 16 the reading is “there is a sin which is mortal” – Kirk interprets John as admitting that there is a sin for which restoration is impossible, but as insisting that sins which are not mortal admit of reconciliation. A more modern writer offers this interpretation: “*Sin which is mortal* is not an act, but a state. It is not forbidden to pray even concerning this”.

This leads naturally to the texts on the Sin against the Holy Spirit. In Mark, people were saying of Jesus, “He is beside himself” and scribes from Jerusalem accused him of casting out demons by Beelzebul the prince of

---

86 op. cit. p. 161.
87 The New Oxford Annotated Bible (RSV). In Chapter 2, x, on *Sin*, I cite this text as used by Kirk to explain the origin of the distinction between mortal and venial sin.
demons. After ridiculing this suggestion with the Parables of the divided kingdom, the divided house and the strong man armed, Jesus says “People will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter; but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness but is guilty of eternal sin” – for they had said, “He has an unclean spirit”.

Matthew 12: 32 and Luke 12: 10 read “Everyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven; but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven.” Kirk’s view is that to Matthew and Luke the words mean “Blaspheming against Jesus is forgivable, blaspheming against the Spirit is not.” The contrast between Mark on the one hand, and Matthew and Luke on the other, he thinks, could be an echo between rigorism and humanism in discipline, as Mark’s version of the saying lends itself to rigorism. “There was an unforgivable sin . . . but even blaspheming against the Son of Man was excluded from the category, still more all lesser sins. Here then, was a message of hope for sinners: they were not to be unduly oppressed by the danger of incurring permanent excommunication. Those who popularised the logion in the Q version (Matthew and Luke) were willing to open the gates of forgiveness even to blasphemers against the Name”.

Norman Snaith’s article on Forgiveness in A Theological Word Book of the Bible is instructive: “For Jesus Christ, and therefore for the Christian, there is no limit for forgiveness, assuming always that there is true repentance on the part of the forgiven one” (“Seventy times seven” (Matt. 18: 20f) is quoted as a Rabbinic phrase for ‘without limit’). “There is another Rabbinic phrase . . . ‘hath not forgiveness forever’. It is used . . in a discussion concerning slander. In Mark 3:30 the context is one of slander in that they said that Jesus had an unclean spirit. This slander involved blasphemy against the Holy Spirit because it asserted that Jesus cast out devils by the prince of devils and not by the Holy Spirit. If the analogy with the Rabbinic saying is sound, then Jesus was actually talking about a human offence, and he meant that such slander was hardest of all to forgive. In this case, the idea of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit being the unforgivable sin is due to a misconception of the significance of the saying, for it is plain enough elsewhere that, given true repentance, there is no limit.

---

89The Vision of God, p. 165.
whatever to forgiveness. The ‘sin to death’ of 1 John 5: 16 refers to that persistence in sin which so deadens the sensibility of a man that he cannot repent. It is therefore ‘to death’ because there can never be forgiveness without repentance”.

Kirk completes his lecture with an account of discipline at Rome. He regrets that the rigorist view of the *Letter to the Hebrews* predominates for many generations, to the detriment of the whole atmosphere of Christian ethics, unfortunately for the Church. The *Shepherd* of Hermas, published by the year 140 in Rome, shows how disciplining matters were dealt with there, at a time when the dominant view at Rome was that grave sinners were to be excluded from the Church without any hope of readmission. Hermas is a formalist, but pleads for *one* reconciliation after baptism even in the gravest cases.

Kirk’s criticism of Hermas is this – he shows little interest in the well-being and moral advancement of the individual. It does not occur to him that if one reconciliation of the sinner to the Church after baptism be allowed, no question of principle can stand in the way of repeated reconciliations where they may be needed. To his credit, Hermas realised that the Church’s discipline was too penal. He proposed one post-baptismal reconciliation for *all* grave sins. But the church excluded from this amnesty the three sins which by Tertullian’s time it regarded as “mortal”, apostasy, adultery and homicide. For them no reconciliation was allowed, though the sinner might be encouraged to submit to life-long discipline in the hope that God would forgive after death that from which the Church dared not absolve during life. For all other sins, one reconciliation only: for relapsing sinners no further hope on earth. This system constitutes the danger to the church described by Kirk in the opening paragraphs of this chapter. For Kirk, the danger of formalism was the tendency to live the moral life by rule. This was a reversion to the idea of the scribes and Pharisees which it was Christ’s mission to attack. For Kirk this imperils the message of the Gospel that “to see God” is the goal of Christian life, where “to see God” means “experiencing the presence of God”, basing his claim on such texts as Matthew 5: 8 *Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.*

---


91 Similar texts conveying this message are John 17: 3, where experiencing the presence of God is linked with eternal life: “This is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and
“The experience of the presence of God” includes that of the disciples’ abiding in Christ and of Christ’s abiding in the disciples, experienced now.\textsuperscript{92}

This description of the vision of God has ethical consequences for the New Testament writers. John has Jesus in conversation with Nicodemus saying:

“no one can see the kingdom of God without being born anew . . . no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit . . . the wind blows where it chooses . . . so it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”\textsuperscript{93}

And John’s own interpretation of the purpose of Jesus’ place in human history is as follows:

“God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life . . . God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”\textsuperscript{94}

For the New Testament writers the ethical implications of the vision of God are not only a life springing from “new birth” but conduct based on “new life in the risen Christ” or “life in the Spirit” where Christ and the Spirit are seen as liberating believers and disciples from the power of sin, evil and death. The theme of the entire letter of the Galatians has been described as \textit{Freedom in Christ.}\textsuperscript{95}

It is this apostolic description of the vision of God, based on God’s love or grace experienced in the freedom given by Christ and the Spirit as a present

\textsuperscript{92} John 15: 1ff. Similar understanding is conveyed by St Paul’s letters, Galatians 3: 27, 2 Cor. 5: 16-17 (the concept of “being in Christ”). Paul confirms his testimony with references to the Spirit of Christ as “dwelling in you”, Gal. 4: 6, Rom 8:11.
\textsuperscript{93} John 3: 3, 5, 8.
\textsuperscript{94} John 3: 3, 5, 8.
\textsuperscript{95} The title of the Study for the Australian Student Christian Movement National Conference, Geelong 1957, by Dr F.R. Arnott, then Warden of St Paul’s College, Sydney, later Archbishop of Brisbane. There are some restraints on this freedom. Paul himself writes: \textit{You were called to freedom. . . only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love be servants of one another.} (Gal. 5: 13). Free from the law, Christians must not abuse their liberty. The Ten Commandments, the two Commandments attributed to Jesus, the theological virtues (faith, hope and love) remain as principles of moral guidance for Christians. Freedom in Christ does not mean licence to kill or hurt others indiscriminately.
reality issuing in Christlike faith and life, that Kirk perceives as lessened and indeed imperilled by the dangers of formalism and rigorism.

(v)

Lecture 4

Rigorism

The Oxford Dictionary defines *rigour* as “severity, strictness, harshness, harsh measures, strict enforcement of rules, extremity, hardship, austerity of life, Puritanic strictness of observance or doctrine.” To be a “rigorist” is to insist on “logical accuracy, exactitude.”

Kirk chooses as his text for the heading of his fourth lecture these words attributed to St Peter (the context is the First Apostolic Council at Jerusalem):

“. . . Why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear?”

At the beginning of his fourth lecture Kirk notes that the fourth century church was marked by this distinguishing characteristic of Christians: actions and external conformity rather than motives and inner acceptance were the most notable features. For example, an almost mechanical rule of almsgiving had replaced all other precepts as the duty of Christians and the one which was perceived as more likely than any other to secure their salvation.

Kirk singles out Jerome as a severe critic of the result of this process as he perceived it in the Christian Rome of the fourth century. “Even charity itself is regulated by rule”. The “sternness of the gospel” is a phrase in which, for Kirk, Jerome sums up his whole message.

Before Jerome appeared Antony of Egypt.

96 Acts 15: 10. Peter’s statement is a reply to some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees, who said “it is necessary to circumcise them and charge them to keep the law of Moses”(Acts 15: 5). Peter’s statement could be seen as a significant illustration of change, or a significant moral principle reaching beyond circumcision – perhaps both – a moral principle of freedom in Christ for both Jews and Gentiles. Peter reminds the Jerusalem church of the events described in Acts 10:34 ff: the Gentiles receive the Holy Spirit and Peter declares: God makes no distinction between Jews and Gentiles: both are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus (cf Acts 15: 11).
97 The Vision of God, p. 174.
99 Jerome, ep. 77, 3.
100 Kirk, op.cit. p.176.
“About A.D. 270 Antony . . . withdrew to the wilderness. . . Fasting, poverty, celibacy, solitude, are the means of renunciation attributed to Antony. Prayer, with such minimum of physical labour as would suffice to secure the bare necessities of life, was his occupation.”

Athanasius, Antony’s biographer, describes him as “the Father of the Monks”, and the second part of Kirk’s lecture is entitled “Monasticism and the Vision of God”. Much of Athanasius’ biography is taken up with a sermon of Antony’s which says nothing about the vision of God. “The reason may be” writes Kirk, “that Antony himself was reticent about it . . Athanasius says of Antony that he ‘eagerly endeavoured to make himself fit to appear before God, to become pure in heart, and ever ready to submit to His counsel and to Him alone’. The hermit, therefore, seems to have thought of the vision as the end of life; but its fruition is reserved till after death. To prepare for this vision is the object of his asceticism. On the other hand, he asserts and expects that visions of the holy ones will be reward of asceticism here and now.”

“The goal of life is to achieve communion with the holy. It can be attained in measure and from time to time even in this life. Its condition is purity of heart. We may question whether an asceticism as rigorous as Antony’s was necessary . . but if he has departed from the true Christian development at all, it is in this matter of the means alone. As far as the end of the process is concerned, he is at one with the apostles.”

This judgment of Kirk’s on Antony compared with the apostles is significant in view of what he goes on to say about monasticism, the gnostics, Marcion, Tertullian and Montanus, rigorist discipline, and his view that this discipline implies a doctrine of Christian sinlessness or of irresistible grace. He finds in Athanasius himself the belief that “the beatific vision is the goal of life: the fine peroration to the de Incarnatione is full of it. We are to search the scriptures, to learn more of the ‘second glorious and truly divine appearance of Christ to us’. For that search ‘an honourable life is needed, and a pure soul, and the virtue which is according to Christ’ . . . Such a life will enable the Christian to ‘receive what is laid up for the saints in the kingdom of heaven; which “eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, nor hath entered into the heart of man”’.  

102 Athanasius, Vit. Ant. 7.  
103 The Vision of God, p. 182.  
104 op.cit. p.183.  
105 Athanasius, de Inc.57.
There were precursors of Antony in both Syria and Egypt, notably Origen, although he did not found an ascetic school. ¹⁰⁶ In examining Origen, Antony and Methodius (Bishop of Patara at the turn of the third and fourth centuries) Kirk finds that the fundamental purpose of rigorism was to see God. He cites the “Spiritual Homilies” of St Macarius of Egypt as being among the most authoritative sources for the spirit of primitive monasticism. “Their central doctrine . . may be inferred from the following passage:

‘This is a thing that everyone ought to know – that we have eyes within, deeper than these eyes; and a hearing deeper than this hearing. As the eyes of sense behold and recognize the face of a friend or loved one, so the eyes of the true and faithful soul, spiritually illuminated with the light of God, behold and recognize the true Friend.’” ¹⁰⁷

However, Kirk notes that this aim and this doctrine were often perverted into a quest for ecstasy and visions. For him the most important part of the journey towards the vision of God was the service of God, and of His whole creation. ¹⁰⁸

Kirk finds that this principle is sometimes ignored by the monks, even Antony and Cassian (c. 360-435, founder of two monasteries near Marseilles, where he wrote his two books, the Institutes and the Conferences, out of the material he collected during the years he spent in the Eastern Church). Yet they insist upon the duty of brotherly love, they condemn the over-valuation of ecstasy, and their writings warn that the quest for “religious experience” alone is illegitimate. ¹⁰⁹

**Rigorism and Prayer**

Kirk affirms that the monks’ great positive contribution to Christianity was to allot to prayer the first place among Christian activities. ¹¹⁰ This is “of crucial importance. It marks the point at which, rightly or wrongly, Christian ethics took a divergent road from that of moralism pure and simple.” ¹¹¹ As we shall see, Kirk discusses this point more fully in his eighth lecture in which he

---

¹⁰⁶ Kirk, op.cit. p.184.
¹⁰⁷ The Vision of God, p. 193.
¹⁰⁸ op.cit. p. 199.
¹⁰⁹ op.cit. p. 203.
¹¹⁰ Cassian, Coll.i.8 (quoted Kirk op.cit. p. 203).
¹¹¹ Kirk, op.cit. pp 203-204.
treats the question “Is ‘worship’ a higher ideal than ‘service’?” At this point in his fourth lecture Kirk compares action with prayer:

“Action . . . can be (and should be) directed towards God, as well as prayer; and action may often be as selfless as prayer. But the immediate end even of self-forgetful action is always the well-being of some other and lesser person or thing than God, and the lesser ends may fail to evoke the full disinterestedness which attends upon the greater. Prayer, however . . . the full round of prayer, consummated in thanksgiving, praise and worship, is directed to God alone; and so prepares the way for a self-forgetfulness which . . . shall be sustained by the thought of God.”

Kirk seeks to illuminate our understanding of the monks’ giving primacy to prayer and their notion of the vision or contemplation of God in terms of worship by referring us to our own experience of corporate worship. This includes progressively stages of confession, praise, thanksgiving, reading of scripture and intercession. In the course of this process it is possible for all worshippers to experience moments which can fairly be called ecstatic. This helps worshippers to appreciate what the monks call contemplation, the mystics the “way of union”, and the New Testament “seeing God”. For Kirk contemplation is not so much “looking at God” as “looking towards God”. This analysis of his subject helps to explain why Kirk has been described as an outstanding Anglican moral theologian for his time.

_Rigorism and Asceticism_

However, in spite of his positive assessment of the place of prayer in the life of the monks, Kirk still has this to say about asceticism: “. . . in the early centuries, the connexion of asceticism with the vision of God was dominated and determined by a false conception of God”. False, because the monks held that asceticism of the most rigorous kind was the normal road to the vision. The false view of God that imagined God expected his people to adopt such rigorism as a way of life was encouraged by the Gnostics, with special reference to celibacy, fasting and poverty. The scholars of Kirk’s own day, such as Wendland and Bousset, led Kirk to say:

---

112 _The Vision of God_, p. 204. This appears as a forthright assertion of the primacy of worship over service made by an Oxford don in 1928 between the two World Wars. Forty years later appeared the liberation theologians whose Christian ethic included, along with worship, a call for “orthopraxis” (right actions) as well as “orthodoxy” (right belief).

113 Kirk, op.cit. pp 206-207.

114 op.cit. p. 207.
“A dualistic theology, an ascetic system of ethics, an ecstatic experience of God, and a hope of redemption from the evil dominance of the flesh – these... constitute gnosticism.”

The dualistic theology mentioned above “accepts the contradictions of experience as ultimate... sees no victory for the divine except in the annihilation of the human, no escape for spirit except by the destruction of matter... the aeons (part of the system of the Gnostic Valentinus), the Syrian demiurge, represent attempts to bridge the unbridgeable gulf between God and creation... the world and the flesh are irredeemable; at best we may hope that God will redeem the soul from them both. In theology (this system) leads to the doctrine of the ‘unnatural God’ – a God so radically unlike the world of nature that he will least be found in any process that can be called natural.”

The followers of Valentinus, and other Gnostics, thought of themselves as “the elect”, in determinist terms: the “invisible Church of the elect” is already made up; they believed that a visible Church was unnecessary.

Kirk adds three figures to his portrait of the rigorism of the early Christian centuries: Marcion, Tertullian and Montanus. They belong to the second and third centuries. (Marcion, a native of Pontus, died c.160; Tertullian c. 160-c.220, a native of Carthage, the first Christian theologian to write in Latin; Montanus founded an apocalyptic movement in Phrygia in the second half of the second century).

Marcion’s dualism was chiefly that between the Old Testament and the Gospel. He will not allow to the Christian revelation any preparation in Jewish prophecy, nor to Christ his Jewish descent. Judaism is wholly natural, Christianity wholly supernatural. Strangely, Marcion insisted on a rigid asceticism as legalist as anything in the Old Testament.

To Kirk, Tertullian is as rigorist as Marcion. Both condemn marriage and uphold fasting. But when Tertullian was about fifty he deserted Catholicism for Montanism. In that system, asceticism is the way to obtain the indwelling spirit; visions and revelations are the essence of all that is divine.

---

117 op.cit. p. 218.
Kirk turns next to the issue of rigorist discipline in the early Christian centuries; in particular, the problem for the Church of dealing with those members who fall short of rigorist standards of conduct, or who “relapse into sin”.\textsuperscript{119}

Kirk criticises the discipline of the Church at that time as a departure from the New Testament record of God’s grace shown in forgiveness and reconciliation of the world to himself in Christ\textsuperscript{120}. The rule of one reconciliation only for grave sins is never relaxed during the Imperial period. “All grave sinners are expected to come forward for open penance. Further, the desire to keep the Church unspotted from the world led to a stiffening of the details of penitential discipline which must have deterred the vast majority of sinners from making any advance towards reconciliation. . . . what a recent writer has said of the first two centuries that the Church was more concerned with her prerogative of binding than with that of loosing, can without exaggeration be extended to the first five.”\textsuperscript{121}

Kirk finds, then, that the doctrine of the “unnatural God” dominates both the Church’s rigorist discipline and the Gnostic systems. The discipline, for him, implies a doctrine of Christian sinlessness or of irresistible grace. He cites Ignatius’ letter to the Ephesians for evidence: “The spiritual man cannot do what is fleshly . . No man sins who professes faith.”\textsuperscript{122} Tertullian, Justin Martyr and Origen have similar passages. According to the Didascalia it is inconceivable that “once having gone down into the waters of baptism (the Christian) will again do the abominable and impure works of the heathen and the depraved.”\textsuperscript{123}

Kirk notes that the idea of an immediate metamorphosis of the soul by reception of divine grace was common in the Graeco-Roman world. Within Judaism, the author of the Epistle of Barnabas says, “When he renewed us through the remission of sins, he made us a new creature . . as he saith by another prophet, ‘I will take away their stony heart and give them a heart of flesh’ ”. St Paul’s similar words, (from 2. Cor. 5: 17), if taken apart from the

\textsuperscript{119}The Vision of God, p. 222.
\textsuperscript{120}2 Corinthians 5: 19, Luke 23: 34.
\textsuperscript{121}Kirk, op.cit., pp 225–229.
\textsuperscript{122}Ign and Eph. 8: 2, 14, 2, quoted Kirk, op. cit. pp 229-230.
\textsuperscript{123}Didasc. 5, quoted Kirk, op. cit. p. 230.
context of his full teaching, could easily support a doctrine of Christian
sinlessness here and now.

What is the source of this doctrine? Kirk finds that it is not to be found
in the teaching of St Paul, or of Judaism, or of contemporary paganism. “Its
origin was genuinely empirical”.124 Such conversions do occur. “There is no
reason to suppose . . . the contrast which St Paul loves to draw between the
present purity and the past infamy of his converts is based on anything less than
fact”.125 Even if some converts managed to be sinless for a moment, says Kirk,
it is a dangerous fallacy to make sinlessness a final criterion of sincerity for all
Christians. But many enthusiasts in the Church did this.

Kirk’s criticism is that this amounts to the doctrine of the unnatural God
making a new appearance. “In no department of conscious life is perfection
normally achieved except as the result of long and disciplined effort . . To
assume . . that the only convincing sign of the presence of divine grace shall be
an immediate and compulsory moralization of the whole personality would be
to assume that God acts in the moral life in a way wholly in contrast to man’s
efforts and achievements in that life, and wholly diverse from the processes of
nature elsewhere. Such a view introduces the ideas of magic into the sphere of
all others in which they are most fatally devastating, and throws Christianity
back upon . . the most tragic and superstitious of all errors.”126

The problem for the Church, says Kirk, is that this tragedy happened.
Christian discipline, “far more than any Judaistic formula of earlier days,
tried to put a yoke on the neck of the disciples heavier than they were able
to bear.” Formalist in operation – for it shows no interest in the communion of
the Christian with God – it is fully rigorist. . . and therefore ranks with
Gnosticism and the aberrations of primitive monasticism as a factor in the whole
great problem which the Church was called upon to face.”127

Kirk’s analysis states the problem in the form of a question and with this
challenge he ends his fourth lecture: “Is rigorism in all its manifestations
wholly unChristian; or can some test be discovered to separate what is Christian

124 The Vision of God, p. 233.
125op.cit. pp 233-234.
126 The Vision of God., p. 234.
in it from what is pagan, and some machinery devised to prevent the latter from intruding and encroaching upon the former?"\(^{128}\)

\(^{128}\) *The Vision of God*, p.234.
CHAPTER 5

THE VISION OF GOD: THE BAMPTON LECTURES
FOR 1928 (Continued)
The Christian Doctrine of the *Summum Bonum* (Lectures 5 - 8)

(i)

Lecture 5
The Reply to Rigorism – Discipline

Kirk’s fifth lecture, entitled *The Reply to Rigorism* (subtitled *I – Discipline*) has this quotation from St Matthew’s Gospel at its head – the words are attributed to Jesus:–

> Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.

[Kirk’s *Reply to Rigorism* extends to the sixth lecture, subtitled *II – Doctrine*].

The above quotation refers to an element in the early Church which pressed for every Christian to become an encratite – that is, to adopt the extreme of rigorism.

Kirk’s account, in his fifth lecture, of fourth century humanist opposition to rigorism includes anecdotes from Egyptian monks such as St Macarius. His story of two holy women leads him to conclude that “there is no difference between the monastic life and the secular. It is the motive alone which God observes; and he gives the spirit of life to all alike”.

1 Not many writers drew the full inference from such stories that monasticism is at best a vocation among other vocations, and that the secular life is as capable of high virtue and of the vision of God as the cloistered. Kirk cites three who did make such statements – Helvidius, Jovinian and Vigilantius, but they were trenchantly criticised by St Jerome.

---

Such criticisms recur not only in Jerome but in all the Fathers. They do not, in Kirk’s view, settle the question whether there can be distinctions of spiritual status as well as personal worth and achievement in the Church. But they do settle an immediate practical question: they find a valid and sure place in the Church for the earnest Christian who cannot disentangle himself from worldly affairs.

“So grew up the extraordinary perplexing phenomenon of a double moral standard in Catholicism – a lower and a higher grade of Christian achievement – the distinction between counsels and precepts, the religious and the secular vocations, the contemplative and active lives. There can be no doubt that the distinction saved Christianity. It reconciled every extremist who was prepared to face the facts at all, and so retained within the Church that witness to Christian otherworldliness so greatly needed at a time of acute secularization. But it left the Christian moralist with the curiously elusive problem – How far, if at all, is the distinction thus expressed of any ultimate validity?”

The Fathers found the distinction in scripture. In the Matthaean version of the story of the young man who had great possessions they found a distinction between “having eternal life” and “being perfect”. They considered Leah, Martha and Peter inferior respectively to Rachel, Mary and John the beloved disciple. The many mansions in the Father’s house were supposed to indicate degrees of reward; just as the thirty-fold, sixty-fold and hundred-fold of the parable, and the gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay and stubble of St Paul indicated different degrees of merit. St Paul’s distinction between “permission” and “command” was quashed as early as Tertullian’s time, as he wrote “we may with more impunity reject advice than injunction”.

Optatus of Milevis’ interpretation of the Parable of the Good Samaritan, with the Samaritan’s offer to repay “whatever more you spend, I shall repay” eventually caused the launching of the doctrine of works of supererogation by the hands of Augustine and Fulgentius.

From the abovementioned distinction emerged doctrine of the two lives – the secular and the religious, the active and the contemplative, the

---

2 The Vision of God, p. 240.
3 Tert. ad ux.i.3.i.1. quoted Kirk, The Vision of God, p. 241.
married and the celibate. But while writers agreed that there was a
difference between the active and the contemplative life, and that the latter
was the “higher” of the two, two questions arise for Kirk: what is the nature
of the difference, and why is “contemplation” higher than “action”?4

Some saw the difference as one of degree only. The Christian life is
a life of progress. Its goal is the contemplation or the vision of God, and this
is the “highest” stage. Others saw the two lives as differing in kind; the
“contemplative” life aims at vision, the “active” at some other and lower
good. By the grace of God even the man “in the world” can attain salvation
if he brings forth fruits worthy of repentance, but he has excluded himself
from attaining the highest rewards. Kirk calls the first version of the
“double-standard” theory the valid theory, that is, the one that asserts a
difference in degree only. The second, invalid, theory is the one asserting
difference in kind.

Kirk traces the development of monasticism as one way of living out
the faith in worship and service and the resolution of the question whether
this was a superior way to that of the life of the secular Christian. Was the
religious life, if not the only way to fulfil the purpose and attain the goal of
human life, namely, the vision of God, the surer way of the two?

At stake were these principles: the vision of God is open to all; all
are called to it; the Christian life is one of stages of progress. To accept
these principles for Kirk amounts to accepting the view that the distinction
between the monastic and the secular Christian life was one of degree; that
the life of action is preparatory to the life of contemplation. This he calls the
“valid” theory.

The “invalid” theory, by contrast, is that the two lives differ in kind –
that contemplation is impossible in the active (that is, the secular) life. The
reforms of St Pachomius, St Basil and St Benedict challenged this theory and
prepared the way for establishing full relations between the ascetics who
chose the monastic life and those who chose to live in the secular world.

4 The Vision of God. p. 242.
In Kirk’s fifth lecture, a central place in the matter of discipline is given to penance, that is, the way in which Church members, especially leaders, deal with human frailty, the failure of Christians to live up to their profession of faith, especially in the matter of adhering to the recorded teaching of Christ. He finds an important part of the Church’s reply to rigorism in the movement from the impossibly rigorous public discipline of the early centuries to a private system of discipline. In this process priests’ jurisdiction over private confession and absolution increased, spreading from the monasteries to the wider church. Part of this process was the development of the sacramental theory of absolution whereby both confession and absolution were seen as a necessary means by which God’s promised forgiveness is mediated. In Kirk’s view, the possibility of pastoral discipline without rigorism became clearer and more realisable when leaders and teachers such as Abailard assisted this development, part of which was the comparative valuation of mortal and venial sin.

The Valid Theory

The valid theory, as Kirk sees it, which made the “active” life a stage on the road towards “contemplation”, contained three main principles. First, the vision of God is open to all – a secular vocation is no barrier. Secondly, all are called to it; if they refuse to follow the vision, they have not lived up to the level required of them. Thirdly, against the rigorist notion that Christians can become “perfect in a moment”\(^5\), this theory sees the Christian life as a long journey. “We must not daunt the immature Christian by laying on him too heavy a burden at once. He must take his life by stages, achieving what is possible here and now. The immediate duties (e.g. the “active life”) are “precepts” to be obeyed at once; the ulterior aims may be held in reserve as “counsels” for the present, which will become . . . precepts or immediate duties by-and-by”\(^6\).

Clement of Alexandria, Augustine and Gregory the Great all declared that the vision is open to all.\(^7\) Basil of Caesarea “refuses to draw a hard and

---

\(^5\) The Vision of God, p. 243.
\(^6\) Ibid.
\(^7\) C. Bigg, Christian Platonists of Alexandria, pp 119-120.
fast line between monks and other Christians. He teaches that all Christian life must be ascetic. ‘The law which bids us love God more than father, mother, or self, more than wife and children, is as binding in wedlock as in celibacy’”8.

At this point in his exposition Kirk reveals more of the essence of his moral theology, or at least that part of it which is pastoral theology applied to the task of helping and guiding Christians in their faith and life, their journey towards the vision of God, defined as “the experience of the presence of God” or “perfection”, (Kirk’s expression in the following paragraph), or “Christian holiness”.9

“Christian perfection is not attained in a moment. It is a matter of progress. In the visible organisation of the Church this doctrine of stages of progress was symbolized by the difference between the catechumen and the baptized. . . . It provides the key to the science of pastoral guidance – at one and the same moment to make the individual feel that he has already achieved much (or rather that much has already been achieved in him), thereby stimulating his hope of further advance; and equally to remind him that there are higher stages . . . to which he must still reach out. Reveal the full demands of Christ in a single instant, and you are as likely to dismay as to encourage; unveil them gradually, leading on to the next stage as each stage in turn is seen and firmly occupied, and you will hearten and encourage.”10

Such insights into human psychology and behaviour show Kirk to be an important writer and contributor to Anglican moral theology. He combines principle (the goal of the journey is kept in view) with compassionate understanding of the practical difficulty of living the Gospel, and he notes the need for adjusting guidance and counselling to the individual’s circumstances and needs. He is a Christian moralist who has seen the excessive burdens placed on Christians by rigorists and who has consequently sought to adopt a humanist, pastoral discipline.

9 op.cit. p. 246.
10 op.cit. p. 245.
Kirk finds several New Testament passages in which the writers show that this method is congenial to them. They distinguished between the “infants in Christ” and the fully grown, between the early duties and simple doctrines appropriate to the first stages – the “milk of the word”, and the “meat” of the gospel reserved for the mature. “An irreducible minimum of doctrine and precept was set before the beginner – a statement of truths to be held and of sins to be put off at the very outset. Beyond that, and progressively to be attained, lay the deeper truths, the higher ideals and aspirations, of Christian holiness in the future”.

Kirk adds:

“However low the minimum be placed, it must at least be higher than the world’s standard, so that the veriest beginner has advanced a little from his unconverted state, and feels a moral stimulus in his new environment . . . both for the beginner and the Church the minimum itself must always be advancing, and the range of precept continually widening.”

He cites Clement of Alexandria as saying the lower stages are marked out by faith, fear and hope, obedience to authority, discipline, control of passions. The higher stage, to which he says all men and women alike are called, is the life of righteousness, and knowledge, of serene and reasonable convictions, of glad and spontaneous moral activity. The life of love issues in the life of freedom. For St Ambrose, in the lower grade stand the Ten Commandments; in the higher, poverty, love of enemies, prayers for false accusers and treating the poor as fellow-sharers in the blessings of grace and nature. Kirk believes that a wise pastor can assist Christians’ spiritual progress, (in the direction suggested by Clement and Ambrose), by analysing their difficulties, distinguishing the more serious from the less, and offering advice on overcoming them.

Kirk’s next important point is the form which the double standard took on the idea of prayer, or of the life appropriate to the vision of God. Two stages of prayer, the active and the contemplative, were open to the

---

11 1 Cor. 3: 1-3, 13: 11, 1 Peter 2: 2, Hebrews 5: 11 – 6: 1.
12 The Vision of God, p. 246.
13 ibid.
14 op.cit. pp 248-249.
Christian. Kirk cites Cassian and St Benedict as sources of this view of prayer and spiritual knowledge.\textsuperscript{15} Out of this variety of treatment Kirk traces an eventually dominant formula of a life in three stages – purification, illumination, and union with God, or contemplation. He discerns here the doctrine of stages of progress in the spiritual life of Christians.\textsuperscript{16}

Kirk finds in Gregory the Great an interesting and important formulation of the doctrine which he regards as one of the best examples of the teaching of the early Christian Fathers on the subject. Gregory describes the joys of the vision of God but emphasizes also the need for works of the active life, the life of discipline and service. For Gregory there is no such thing as a purely contemplative life. There are at best moments, or periods, of contemplation which are experienced intermittently in the active life. The first reason he gives for this are that the necessary labours of the day are a distraction from contemplation. Secondly, the love for God and our neighbour which is kindled in contemplation must find expression in the positive virtues of the active life.\textsuperscript{17}

This quotation demonstrates that both Gregory and Kirk have a firm grasp on life’s realities, together with the possibilities of human beings’ realising the ideal of the vision of God. Kirk finds the essence of Gregory in these words:

\begin{quote}
“The active life is this: – to give bread to the hungry, to teach the ignorant, to correct the erring, to rebuke the proud, to tend the sick, to give to all as they need, to care for one’s dependents. Contemplation is, while retaining all one’s love for God and our neighbour, to rest from action and cleave only to desire for the Maker, with a mind which has dismissed all cares and is aglow with the vision of its Creator.”\textsuperscript{18}
\end{quote}

“We cannot stay long in contemplation . . We can only glance at eternity through a mirror, by stealth, in passing . . . we have

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{16} Kirk, op.cit. p. 251. By “illumination” may be meant Christians’ allowing themselves to be open to the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Christ, as a source of light [ (John 1:4 “In him (the word, Christ) was life, and the life was the light of all people” and Chapter 9, verse 5 (Jesus answered) “I am the light of the world”). “Illumination” may also mean “enlightenment” as growth in the understanding of Christ’s teaching, and hence of God.
\textsuperscript{17} op.cit. p. 252.
\textsuperscript{18} Hom. In Ezk. II.ii.8.
\end{footnotes}
to return to the active life, and occupy ourselves with good works. But good works help us again to rise to contemplation, and to receive nourishment of love from the vision of Truth. Then, once more moving back to the life of service, we feed on the memory of the sweetness of God, strengthened by good deeds without, and by holy desires within.”

In Kirk’s view, Gregory’s thought is wholly true to the New Testament. It offers the vision of God to all; it calls all to the search for the vision; “the ideal is an obligation laid upon the married as upon the monk. Purity of heart is still the first and fundamental condition of seeing God. It allows for the rigorist element in the New Testament by insisting that self-discipline and renunciation are of the essence of the active life; but it sets a bar against rigorist excesses by asserting that the Christian cannot become perfect in a moment, and that he must be allowed to progress towards such degree of renunciation as may be necessary for the vision and its fruits.”

The Invalid Theory

After this advocacy, Kirk nevertheless records that the valid theory failed because it would not face this question: “Can a Christian attain the fullness of contemplation without becoming a monk?” For the theory of stages of progress to be applicable to the facts of life, only one answer was possible, and that answer was “Yes”, says Kirk.

“If everyone is called to the vision of God, and many obviously cannot leave the secular life, then monasticism is irrelevant to the issue. You may achieve the vision by the renunciation of wealth and marriage but you may also achieve it in ways which do not involve these surrenders.”

Kirk turns next to the challenging question: what grounds are left for preferring monasticism to the secular life? A compromise theory had emerged by the time of St Thomas Aquinas, namely, that the monastic renunciations make the pursuit of the vision easier. But to say explicitly that the monastic life was no better than the secular, or still more to say that it was the less heroic of the two (as possibly implied by the compromise theory) – was almost impossible in the early centuries. Because of the

---

19 ibid I, v, 12, quoted Kirk, The Vision of God, p. 252.
20 op.cit. pp 252-253.
21 op.cit. p. 252.
failure of the valid theory, the theory of stages of progress, due to unwillingness to question the pre-eminence of the monastic life, a wholly different version of the “two lives” emerged and became dominant. Kirk describes this as “Gnostic and Manichaean rather than Christian.”\textsuperscript{22} The contemplative life, the life which offers its followers the vision of God, is better than the active life; the monastic life is “higher” than the secular, so the argument ran, though certainly not the easier. Therefore the contemplative life \textit{must} be the monastic life, and the active life the secular. The two differ in \textit{kind} rather than in degree; they are mutually exclusive alternatives, and the Christian must choose between them. “We may still offer the layman the hope of salvation; but it is salvation of a definitely lower grade, for he does not, and by virtue of his secular occupation he cannot, live the life of contemplation”.\textsuperscript{23}

Kirk finds this doctrine in the works of Origen, Cassian, Jerome and Ambrose. Aquinas attempted to warn against it by asserting that the so-called “state of perfection” (the monastic life) is no real \textit{state} at all but merely a \textit{way} by which its adherents profess that they are striving – (as all Christians should strive) after perfection.\textsuperscript{24} Despite him, however, this “invalid” theory made headway throughout the middle ages, according to Kirk, who claims that it was stereotyped by the Council of Trent:

“Indeed, it may be conjectured that humanism will have a severe struggle to get its way here in the Roman Church, for its triumph would mean the complete downfall of the theory of monastic superiority which is so firmly established in the tradition of the centuries. So long as the tendency to exalt the celibate over the married life remains, it will involve the belief that the celibate is doing more for God than the married, and therefore will receive, \textit{ceteris paribus}, the higher rewards.”\textsuperscript{25}

Kirk sees the victory of the invalid theory (the victory of the view that the conception of “action” and “contemplation” differ from one another in \textit{kind} over the view of the stages of spiritual progress) as disastrous. Its

\textsuperscript{22} \textit{The Vision of God}, p. 254. 
\textsuperscript{23} op.cit. p. 255. 
\textsuperscript{24} Aquinas, S.T. ii.2., q.184, a.3 ad 2, a.5, ad 2. 
\textsuperscript{25} Kirk, op.cit. p. 256.
results are found in the medieval penitential books, with their formalist emphasis on the avoidance of sin and the performance of codified duties as the sum of the layman’s endeavours, and their almost complete silence on the vision of God as an inspiration and a goal.

Yet Kirk concedes that there were gains. Eventually the theory of stages of progress contributed to the defeat of rigorism and the new outlook which it provided was expressed in practice by the leaders of the reform of monasticism. They accepted that active service, the mark of the Christian in the world, was a necessary virtue of the monastic life. They saw that the faithful performance of secular duties and the renunciations of the monks were equally methods of preparing for the vision of God. For Kirk this was part of an important development in what he calls “the reply to rigorism”. This lecture and the next form a pair under that title.

The Reform of Monasticism

The remainder of this lecture, the fifth, is given to the work of some of the abovementioned leaders of the reform of monasticism, specifically St Pachomius, St Basil and St Benedict. The lecture concludes with the reform of penance, and the form of penance in the Middle Ages. As we have seen, Kirk believed that for the theory of stages of progress to be applicable to the facts of life, it was necessary to believe that a Christian can attain the fullness of contemplation without becoming a monk. The reform of monasticism was a necessary part of the Church’s eventual reply to rigorism with both discipline and doctrine accommodating the view that the Christian Gospel was a gospel of promise, not of law. The writers and thinkers whom Kirk considers in his succeeding lectures all contributed to the development springing from the contrast between the Valid and Invalid theories. The introduction of service to the monasteries helped to undermine the Invalid view. These same writers also helped to put various methods of prayer and contemplation within the reach of those living in the secular world. Part of this reforming movement included the reform of penance, as the rigors of the penitential system led to its virtual breakdown, giving rise to the emergence

26The Vision of God, p. 257.
of private absolution. Church leaders realized and taught that the promise of the Gospel included the possibility of forgiveness, renewal and spiritual progress for all people.

Kirk finds reform beginning as early as the fourth, fifth and sixth centuries. Basil and Benedict especially sought to bring the monastic life into closer kinship with the secular. Basil inaugurated his monastery at Caesarea between A.D.365 and A.D.370. He made the communal life the foundation-stone of his system.

“In the solitary life, says Basil, the gifts we have from God are useless . . . the Lord Himself gave us an example . . . He washed his disciples’ feet. Whose feet will you wash? To whom will you be a servant? Compared with whom will you be last of all if you remain a solitary?”

He insisted on work as a first principle. Everyone of his monks must have, or learn, a trade. Not only is active charity demanded, but self-imposed asceticism is condemned. “Basil was more interested in the spirit than in the outward observances of asceticism.” Kirk’s estimate of Basil as a reformer includes naming another great reformer, St Benedict, as his spiritual heir.

Kirk begins his exposition of Benedict’s reforms by reminding us that “for Antony, Cassian and Basil the purpose of the monastic life (was) the vision of God. The conditions required for the vision of God were purity of heart, and the way to purity was self-discipline. They did not . . . ignore the truth that spiritual attainment issues and must issue in active service of God . . . Vision and service – the service both of God and man – go hand-in-hand.

“Yet . . . even Basil . . could not wean eastern monasticism from self-centredness. The greater part of the monk’s striving is a striving for that self-conquest which makes union with God possible; the service in which ‘union’ should find its expression receives less emphasis. ‘Panhedonism’ is

---

27 The Vision of God, p. 257.
28 op.cit. p. 266.
29 op.cit. p. 265.
31 op.cit. pp 266-267.
32 op.cit. p. 268.
still a danger” (where ‘panhedonism’ is understood by Kirk to mean the view that a subjective experience, such as ecstasy, constitutes the whole end of human endeavour) “. . . at this point Benedict showed himself a spiritual genius of the highest order. He keeps the idea of service in his Rule, underlining it as it had never been underlined before”.33

Kirk points out that although Benedict, in striking contrast to his predecessors, makes little reference to the contemplative life or the vision of God, prayer cannot but be contemplative, and by his emphasis on the opus Dei, Benedict, like the early monastic pioneers, made prayer the central human activity. “What is significant is that, at the cost even of surrendering the great phrase ‘seeing God’, he eliminated all thought of the monk’s own emotions and experiences from his idea of prayer. His Rule offers no possible excuse for panhedonism; the prayer he calls for is wholly theocentric”.34

The Reform of Penance

Benedict’s life spanned the end of the fifth and the beginning of the sixth century. If one of his great achievements was to aid the process of assimilating the condition and activities of the monks to those of the laity, there was still a great need to set the laity free from “an iron and tyrannical discipline . . . the Church had to address itself to the question of penance”.35

By the fifth century there were no longer any sins irremissible by the Church on earth, but the number of sins for which reconciliation would only be given when death was near was considerable. Penance for grave sin after baptism, but one penance only, was still the invariable rule.36 In Kirk’s view the practice of open penance, public confession and discipline resulted regrettably in the expulsion of people from the church without mercy. The

---

34 ibid.
35 op.cit. p. 275.
36 ibid.
Church was failing to fulfil its true function for helping both the society and its members toward that vision of God which is their goal.\(^{37}\)

Open penance, public discipline, in Kirk’s view, could not fulfil the Church’s responsibility of pastoral care so long as no real hope of considerable, patient and open-hearted treatment was held out to the offender to induce him to come forward for his own soul’s good. “For the ordinary direction of the spiritual life of the Christian multitudes, for correction of trifling faults, for co-operation in the personal self-discipline of the individual, further modifications were needed”.\(^{38}\)

For Kirk, that need was met through private discipline and private absolution and reconciliation by a priest. This overcame the barrier against second reconciliations and the shame attaching to formal readmission to communion. Kirk traces the growing jurisdiction of the priest in absolution and reconciliation, originally the prerogative of the bishop, and the spread of private reconciliation from the monasteries to the Church at large. The Irish missionaries spread the custom in Britain, and Columbanus introduced it, about the year 590, on the Continent, and there also it found increasing favour. In the seventh century a Council of Chalon declared “the penance of sinners, which is the medicine of the soul, to be useful to all men”, and the eighth century Dialogue of Egbert shows that the devout laity habitually received absolution in the twelve days before Christmas”.\(^{39}\)

Kirk traces the popularizing of confession through the tenth, eleventh and twelfth centuries. This period also saw the raising of the question: “Is forgiveness mediated by confession or absolution?” Abailard (1079-1142) was among the theologians who took the view that forgiveness and reconciliation followed immediately on confession. Penitential exercises, though no longer an antecedent condition of reconciliation, were not allowed to fall into disuse, but “a new theory was required to account for their...

\(^{37}\textit{The Vision of God}, p. 276.\
^{38}\textit{op.cit.} p. 279.\
^{39}\textit{op.cit.} p. 285.
continued necessity, and this led to the development of the doctrine of purgatorial fires”.  

Moreover, the twelfth century witnessed the rapid development of a sacramental theory of absolution. Kirk attributes this development to a fuller understanding of the human heart and its processes exemplified by Abailard and St Bernard of Clairvaux. The Church had consistently taught that God would immediately forgive a perfectly contrite person. But a truer psychology saw that such contrition was rare. These leaders perceived that the priest as reconciler of the penitent with God could communicate God’s grace as forgiveness to the penitent. The priest, hitherto spoken of as the witness and helper of the sinner’s penitence, now becomes the agent of forgiveness, and the declaratory form of absolution is finally adopted. “Not much more than a century later, annual confession of all mortal sin is required of all Christians”.  

It became the desire of the laity to receive regular absolution, but the clergy were not prepared for the task this laid upon them. Penitential books had to be prepared for their guidance. Both Aquinas and Abailard assisted by defining mortal and venial sins. “A sin is mortal if it is committed deliberately and with full knowledge of its gravity; only where there has been some degree of inadvertence does it become venial”. Abailard insists that “venial” sins are actions which “we know to be wrong, but commit in a momentary forgetfulness of their wrongness; which must imply that mortal sin is committed with full knowledge and deliberate intent. So clear a statement was epoch-making, and the Schoolmen were quick to take it up and make it authoritative”. Kirk gives Abailard credit for putting penance on a basis on which it will minister to a true and real conception of the essential character of sin. 

Yet Kirk finds that this preoccupation with sin, penitence and confession gives religion a false orientation as it is untrue to the primary

---

40 The Vision of God, p. 286. 
41 op.cit. p. 291. 
42 op.cit. p. 297. 
43 ibid.
purpose of Christianity of assisting all people to progress to the vision of God. For Kirk, it was the popularity of the writings of St Gregory (especially his “Pastoral Rule”) which enabled the clergy to understand that the pastor’s first duty is to be an example to his people. He is to teach and set this example by purity of heart, active love of God and neighbour, discretion in speech and wide sympathy. In Kirk’s view the Pastoral Rule would help the clergy to “learn that such a virtuous life, and that sympathy which binds people together most closely, rest on the practice of contemplative prayer”.45

Kirk’s positive estimate of Gregory’s work concludes:

“For a clear and practical exposition of the relation between that communion (with God) and the ordinary duties of daily life, between religion and ethics, there are few passages in Christian writing so concise or so true to the New Testament spirit. It is not without reason that St Bernard . . . should select Gregory as his example of the true pastor – indeed, of the true Christian.”46

Kirk quotes some of Gregory’s own words: “God deals with you as a doctor with a convalescent. . . as a father with his son . . . Divine providence would not curb and educate you now under the rule of discipline, unless it designed that you should be saved for ever”.47

Kirk thus ends his lecture on a positive and hopeful note. “Every earthly problem, difficulty, circumstance is to be tested . . . in the light of the vision of God; that is the whole story . . . (the new system) made possible a wise exercise of pastoral discipline, whose essential secrecy was proof against the danger of rigorism”.48

---

44 The Vision of God, p. 298.
45 op.cit. p. 299.
46 op.cit. p. 300.
48 op.cit. p. 301.
(ii)

Lecture 6

The Reply to Rigorism: Doctrine

We turn now from the first part of the Church’s reply to rigorism, the reform of pastoral discipline, to the second part of that reply which is found in the development of doctrine. Kirk takes this up in his sixth lecture. For Kirk, the major contributors to this development are Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Augustine of Hippo, and Bernard of Clairvaux. He begins his lecture by discussing the relationship of naturalism and Christianity. He does this because up to this point in his lectures Kirk has dealt mainly with the ethical implications of his theme, the vision of God. Now he raises theological questions: in what sense is God seen, and how is God perceived? To what extent can God ever be seen? How are we to understand the tradition of Moses’ interviews with God? The writer of the First Letter of John promised that “we shall see (God) as he is”. This raises the question “what is the nature of the resurrection life and experience?” Kirk links these questions with what he calls “the greatest question in the world – that of the being of God”.49

By naturalism Kirk means the identification of God with whatever is visible. “True naturalism . . . would deny the possibility of ‘revelation’, as distinct from ‘reason’ . . . it would also deny the possibility of moral freedom.”50 “The unnatural God is the God of radical transcendence, a God who cannot serve the needs of religion because little can be said about him. The (concept of) the natural God cannot serve the needs of revealed religion because it runs the risk of identifying God with the natural order. For the (Christian) faith God has to be both transcendent and immanent in ways which avoid an agnosticism of God as unnatural and a loss of divine identity as divine in the naturalness of deity”.51

---

49 The Vision of God, p. 305.
50 op.cit. p. 304.
51 I am grateful to Dr D.W. Dockrill of the University of Newcastle, NSW, Australia, for this clarification.
Kirk finds a turning-point in the history of the development of doctrine at the appearance of Aetius, a follower of Arius who generated one of the great credal controversies of the fourth century. Kirk held that in Aetius’ view God was identified with the material universe. This amounted to a naturalism which removed from the concept of God the attributes of ineffability, incomprehensibility, transcendence and other-worldliness.

Aetius was more extreme in this respect than Arius himself but the reaction of the bishops who met at the Council of Nicaea (325) and at the Council of Constantinople (381) seen in the creeds which emerged from them indicated the Church’s rejection of naturalism.

Kirk then turns to the work of Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Augustine and Bernard of Clairvaux. All of them throw light on the main problem of Christian ethics which Kirk sees as the nature and implications of that vision of God which “the testimony of centuries proclaims to be the goal of human life”.52

“Kirk holds that Irenaeus crystallises the whole scheme of Christian ethics in a single epigram: “The glory of God is a living man, and the life of man is the vision of God”53 for “by that vision alone men live . . . by it they are made immortal”.54 Writing before the end of the second century, Irenaeus agrees with the Gnostics that God is incomprehensible, but asserts against them that he has made himself visible in nature, prophecy and the Incarnation.”

Kirk discerns that Clement and Irenæus share the insight that theologically as well as ethically all turns on the conception of what is meant by “seeing God”. “But whereas Irenæus is more interested in that which is seen in the vision of God, Clement’s practical mind turns rather to the process itself, and to the pre-conditions required by it.”55 He uses words to describe spiritual experience such as “theoria”, “epopteia”, “gnosis”, initiation, deification, “being made perfect”, which gnostics also use. But on the matter of the “two lives”, he chooses what Kirk calls the genuinely

52The Vision of God, p. 313.
54ib., iv, 20, 6, quoted Kirk, op.cit., p.313.
55op.cit. p.314.
Christian view: there are two lives, two ways, two stages of the Christian journey. But they do not represent two classes of Christians eternally distinct from one another – the religious and the man in the secular world, the mystic and the uninitiated:

“They are . . . stages on the path which all . . must tread if they are to come within sight of God.”

Kirk calls Clement the first Christian Platonist. “The true Christian is the true philosopher. ‘He loves and honours the truth, and the beginning of [true] knowledge is “wondering at things”, as Plato says in the *Theaetetus*”.

Kirk also finds in Clement an ethic which states that the body must be treated “gravely and respectfully, as a tabernacle given to the soul by God . . as the soul is not good by nature, so the body is not by nature bad”. With Plato we are bound to say, ‘For the soul’s sake, care must be taken of the body. Those who decry created existence, and vilify the body, are wrong . . the frame of man was created erect for the contemplation of heaven’.

Clement’s ethical scheme includes a wholly Christian advocacy of active love and service. “A contemplation of God which does not issue in love is only ‘gnosis’, in imperfection . . for it is said ‘To him that hath shall be given’ – to faith ‘gnosis’, to ‘gnosis’ love, to love the inheritance”. There is also a spiritual aspect of his ethic of active love and service: rectitude of life, clearness of spiritual intuition, benefiting others, making straight the crooked places of their souls; he prays that they may repent and be converted.

Kirk cites two other features of Clement’s teaching. First, more than any other writer of his day he shared with John and Paul the characteristic of

---

56 *The Vision of God*, p. 314. “theoria” and “epopteia” have to do with “seeing”; “gnosis” is usually translated “knowledge”.


58 *Strom.* iv, 26, 163, 164, 165, quoted Kirk, op.cit., p.316.


60 *Strom.* vii, 10, 55 quoted Kirk, op.cit., p.317.

seeing the promises of God already fulfilled in the present. Clement concludes that the true Christian is he who does good for its own sake without thought either of reward or punishment.

Secondly, Kirk calls Clement a loyal Churchman with a real sense of the function of a divine society and a real joy in his membership of it – a real longing for its consummation. “In this also he is true to the regulative principles with which the apostolic writers surrounded the thought of the vision of God”. Kirk completes his work on Clement by quoting this passage:

“I pray the Spirit of Christ to wing me to my Jerusalem. For the Stoics say that heaven is properly a city, though places here on earth are not. . . For a city is an important thing, and its people a decorous body, a multitude of men regulated by law, as the Church (that city on earth impregnable, invulnerable) is ruled by the Word, a product of the divine will on earth as in heaven.”

So the thought of the city of God links Clement with Augustine (”the life of the saints is a social one”) as does Platonism, through which Augustine says himself that he entered the Christian Church. But the story of his journey is extraordinary. In the Confessions he accuses himself of “vanities”, such as the quest for riches and power. He wants truth and certainty for the ordering of life.

Kirk records: “Prepared though he was to be counted as a catechumen, he would go no further; ‘lest he should come to believe falsehoods, he refused to believe anything at all’. He required certainty before he changed his way of life; he was ready when he had found wisdom – but not before – to forsake what he already regarded as empty hopes, lying insanities, and vain desires.”

Kirk notes that Augustine found a degree of certainty in Neo-Platonism, especially in the doctrine of the vision of God, and the way to

62 The Vision of God, p. 319.
63 Strom. iv, 26, fin, quoted Kirk, op.cit., p. 319.
64 Augustine, de civ. Dei, xix, 5 – quoted Kirk, op.cit. p. 319.
65 Augustine, Conf. vi. 4(6), quoted Kirk, op.cit. p. 320.
66 Ib. vi, 11(18, 19) quoted Kirk, ibid.
attain it. He documents Augustine’s intense and profound experience of the presence of God and union with God, noting his motto for life – “It is good for me to cleave to God” as a foretaste of the “enraptured certitude of Christian communion with God.” He acknowledges the difficulty of tracing the stages by which Augustine passed from Platonism to Christianity but he cites as one of the high points of the journey his ecstatic experience at Ostia. In Kirk’s view, Augustine found a greater and more enduring certainty in Christianity than his transient experience of certainty as a Platonist.

Kirk traces the stages in Augustine’s progress towards Christianity between the earlier ecstatic experiences and this final one. The voice in the garden is the climax of these. The sequel of this was Augustine’s declaration to his mother, Monica, of his decision to live the celibate life. Kirk puts a high moral value on this apparent conversion, as he believes that sexual indulgence was Augustine’s besetting temptation.

On Augustine’s conversion Kirk adds: “Augustine seems to imply that his whole attitude towards the person of Jesus changed profoundly during the spiritual process recorded in the Confessions. . . It was the failure to sustain the high neo-Platonic experience of the vision of God which first turned Augustine’s mind seriously to the person of Christ – a failure due, as he fully recognized, to his weakness in the face of sensual temptations! ‘I sought a way of acquiring strength sufficient to enjoy Thee’, he writes, ‘but I found it not until I embraced that mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus, who is overall, God blessed for ever’ ”.

To turn from the Confessions, Kirk finds in Augustine’s de civitate Dei the view that there are two cities, one earthly, one heavenly, and the concept of the vision of God can be translated and applied to the notion of a spiritual journey from one to the other. It is possible for human beings to

---

67 Augustine, de mor. eccl. cath. i, 16 (26); ep. 155, 3 (12), etc. from Ps.73.28. Kirk’s own note: “Harnack, Hist. of Dogma, v, p.62, rightly makes the phrase the centre of all Augustine’s thought”. Vision of God, p.321.
69 Augustine, Conf. viii, 12(29), quoted Kirk, op.cit. p. 323.
70 Augustine, Conf. vii, 18 (24), quoted Kirk, op.cit. p. 327.
experience a foretaste of the heavenly city in the Church understood as the city of God, the new Jerusalem. Sharing with St Paul the tendency to bring the future forward into the present, “he found the new Jerusalem projected into this world, and traced its fortunes militant here on earth.”  

Kirk finds the two cities contrasted in this passage:

“Two loves have given original to these two cities – self-love in contempt of God unto the earthly; love of God in contempt of one’s self to the heavenly . . . in the earthly city the wise men follow either the goods of body, or mind, or both, living according to the flesh, and such as might know God honoured him not as God, but because vain in their own imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened; but in the . . . heavenly city, there is no wisdom of man, but only the piety that serveth the true God and expecteth a reward in the society of the holy angels and men, that God may be in all.”  

“The vision of God in the city of God” was his ideal. But the aim of both cities is peace – “the peace of man with man, the peace of a family, the peace of a city, the peace of the city of God, the peace of all things” – is a “part of our final good; it is ‘the greatest wish of all the world’, and a copy of the orderliness which is of the essence of God. So a man must seek the peace of his children, family, friends and all men, and wish that his neighbour would do as much for him. Because the earthly city’s goal is peace, it is an imitation or copy, a foretaste of, first step towards, the heavenly society. In Augustine’s view, God had a use for the earthly city. Augustine looks favourably on the Roman Empire, and “Christ was born in Bethlehem.”

With this high valuation of the earthly city goes a genuine appreciation of all the good things of life. Augustine admires the beauty of nature and the cosmos, the wonder of art and science, the harmony of the human body. The enjoyment of all these gifts are part of God’s will for
man, but Augustine still longs for the peace and joys of the heavenly city . . .

“I love a certain light and sound and fragrance and food and embracing when I love my God, who is the light, sound, fragrance, food and embracing of the inner man.”\textsuperscript{78} “The happy life is to rejoice to God for God and in God, and there is none other.”\textsuperscript{79}

For Kirk, Augustine’s “true worldliness” is well expressed in \textit{de civ. Dei}, xix, 19 in which he says that a man may choose either the active, the contemplative, or the “mixed” life. All that matters is that both “love of the truth” and “the duty of charity” are preserved. Of the active life, he says that honour and power should be used for the benefit of others. Thus worldly goods are not to be eschewed, nor to be enjoyed as God is enjoyed, but used.\textsuperscript{80}

Further evidence of Augustine’s willingness to see much that is good outside the sphere of revelation and the miraculous is found in his high evaluation of pagan philosophers such as Socrates, Plato and Plotinus who can be quoted as in agreement with the prologue to the Fourth Gospel\textsuperscript{81}. Moreover, in writing on the Christian’s attitude to philosophy as a whole, Augustine pays generous tribute to Lactantius, Optatus, Hilary and Victorinus.

Kirk follows this substantial treatment of Augustine’s doctrine of the Church (the city of God) with an equally considerable exposition of Augustine’s other basic doctrine, the doctrine of grace, under the title “Grace and Freedom”. Kirk assesses this doctrine as “the preliminary to all missionary, evangelistic or pastoral work.”\textsuperscript{82} He raises the question: if Christians are journeying towards salvation (understood as redemption from evil, restoration to wholeness, the vision of God, experience of the presence of God as eternal life in union with God as our ultimate purpose and

\textsuperscript{78} Conf. x, 6, quoted Kirk, \textit{The Vision of God}, p. 333.
\textsuperscript{79} 1b, 20 (29), 22 (32), quoted Kirk, op.cit. p. 333.
\textsuperscript{80} op.cit. p. 334.
\textsuperscript{81} Augustine, de civ. Dei. x, 2, quoted Kirk, \textit{The Vision of God}, p. 334.
\textsuperscript{82} op.cit. p. 335.
happiness) are they doing so by their natural powers alone, or the grace of God alone, or a combination of the two?

Justin Martyr and Clement of Alexandria acknowledge that we are free to choose what is good. Clement says that our will to choose righteousness is assisted by God’s grace. Tertullian, the semi-Pelagians, Gregory the Great, the Schoolmen, the Council of Trent, the Arminians all agree in emphasizing the doctrine of the co-operation of freewill and grace in the process of salvation and sanctification (the latter word literally means “being made holy” – perhaps the most basic New Testament text on this theme is found in St Paul’s description of “life in the Spirit” that leads to the fulfilment of the potential of both individuals and of the whole creation). 83

But Kirk raises the question: “Which comes first in man’s salvation – grace to turn and strengthen the will; or will to demand, or merit, or lay hold on grace?” 84

Augustine’s opponents, the Pelagians, affirmed that the second was correct. “ ‘The possibility of goodness was given us by God’, Pelagius is reported to have said, ‘but the will and the deed come from ourselves’ ” 85. “The law is as good a means of salvation as the gospel; there were men, even before the coming of Christ, who lived without sin.” 86

Essentially, claims Kirk, Pelagianism is no more that an optimistic natural morality; Pelagius was a rigorist in ethics – all we have to do in order to be saved is to try harder to be morally good. Kirk’s view is, in effect, that the Pelagians pitted anthropocentrism against Augustine’s theocentrism, and that their ideas could flourish in an atmosphere of atheism or agnosticism.

Augustine’s response to this is to say that we cannot earn grace; that is, we cannot of our own freewill turn ourselves to God and earn thereby whatever grace and help God is able to give. “Grace must come first; without such prevenient grace man is wholly impotent. No effort of the

83 Romans 8: 1-17, 28ff.
84 The Vision of God, p. 336.
86 de gest. Pel. 11(23), quoted Kirk, op.cit. p. 337.
natural will can therefore have any significance for goodness; only by an unmediated, supernatural act of God can we enter upon or be maintained in the Christian pilgrimage . . . The very power to believe, or faith itself, cannot come from us; in this as in all else ‘our sufficiency is of God’. 87 ‘we cannot even will unless we are called; and would we will after our call, our will and our running are vain unless God gives strength to the runner and leads him whither he calls him.’ 88

Kirk concludes that for Augustine the grace of God is an irresistible grace which saves us whether we will or not. This amounts to saying that those under the sway of this insuperable grace are from the beginning predestined to receive grace. But for Kirk, Augustine’s predestination is an inference from the fact of grace, and not vice versa – an answer to the question “Why then, if no man deserves grace, do some receive and some not?” 89 Conversely, those who fail to bring forth fruits of righteousness fail because they are predestined not to grace and glory but to eternal damnation 90.

Yet Augustine struggles with the text “God will have all men to be saved”91. For if grace is irresistible, all people will be saved eventually, if not in this life, in the next. The God of these passages of Augustine appears to deny natural justice. But Kirk points out that Augustine never says that we are wholly without goodness; and wherever there is goodness, there is grace, “the image of God”, God’s work.92 And Augustine insists that although by original sin (inherited by our physical descent from Adam) man has lost “freedom”, he still retains “free will” and is thus still free to co-operate with grace received, irresistible though that grace may be. He is still accountable. Augustine “attempted to hold the balance between Pelagian naturalism and Manichaean rigorism – to assert the prevenience of grace and yet the

---

87 Augustine, de praedest. sanct. 2, 3, 5, etc; ep. 194.3 (9).
88 Augustine, de praedest. sanct., 3 (7); de grat. et lib arb., 33, quoted Kirk, The Visison of God, p .339.
89 op.cit. p .340.
90 Augustine, de perf. just. hom., 13 (31); ench., 26 (100); de. civ. Dei, xxii, 24 (5), quoted Kirk, op.cit. p. 340.
91 1 Tim 2: 4.
responsibility of man . . . in this paradoxical emphasis both upon divine prevenience and upon human free will, Augustine followed the true line of Christian development which would allow neither rigorism nor naturalism undisputed sway in theology.”

Kirk’s conclusion is this: the solution of the paradox lies in the doctrine that the essence of grace is love, and the essence of man’s salvation is that he should become loving.

“The importance of this conception cannot be over-estimated. Three things are true about love; first, that it always confers independence upon the object of its love. It gives, compelling no return; it goes on giving, though no love is given in answer. It is the one force in the world which does not bargain; which leaves the recipient absolutely free to reject, accept, or repay. So, if God’s grace is love, its lovingness consists first of all in giving freedom to men and then in keeping them free. In creation, providence, redemption, we have … God giving men greater freedom, desiring indeed a return, but never demanding or compelling it.

Second, if love endows the recipient with freedom – it also … confers upon the giver actual freedom.

And finally, love is irresistible; many waters cannot quench it … Love is undaunted by opposition, rejection, irresponsiveness.

God’s grace to man, then, because it is a grace of perfect love, endows him with unconditional freedom. But for that freedom to realize itself it must, in loving response, surrender to that irresistible and undying love that called it forth. That this at least was Augustine’s dearest thought need not be doubted.”

Further, on the matter of freedom, Augustine saw in man a formal freedom both of “posse peccare” and “posse non peccare”. In practice, unless this freedom issued in love towards God it was bound to end in

93 The Vision of God, pp 342-343. When Augustine says that man has lost “freedom”, he is referring to the interpretation of the Genesis story of Adam’s disobedience to God’s command (commonly described as “the Fall”). St Paul in Romans 5: 12ff, Romans 6 and 7, describes the human predicament as being “enslaved” to sin as a consequence of Adam’s disobedience, i.e. humanity has lost its freedom. But we are still morally accountable because we can distinguish between good and evil and can use our freewill to choose either. Kirk offers a third explanation in succeeding paragraphs in the main text. Manichaeism, founded by Manes (c. 215-275) was a form of severe asceticism.
94 op.cit. pp 343-344.
95 “posse peccare” means “to be able to sin”, “posse non peccare” means “to be able not to sin”. “non posse peccare” means “not to be able to sin”.
slavery to sin. “Freedom, now made prisoner, can do nought but sin; only if freed and helped by God can it avail for justice.”

Sin is therefore, voluntary; it follows from the fact that man has not surrendered to the love of God. Love towards God is kindled when we “accept the Holy Spirit.”

The truest freedom is the “non posse peccare” of the saints. “Augustine . . . (declares) that God’s grace – God’s love – has an irresistible power to summon forth this love to God which will make men free . . . ‘That we might receive the love whereby to love him, God loved us first while we loved him not.’”

In this lecture Augustine receives the lion’s share of Kirk’s treatment because Augustine “was forced, by circumstance and personal history alike, to face the dilemma of rigorism and naturalism more frequently than any other figure in Christian history.”

Kirk lists Augustine’s Manichaeism, Platonism, the ascendancy of monasticism, Donatist puritanism, the fall of Rome, and the struggle with Pelagianism as important elements in assessing him and his contribution to Christian theology, faith and life. “His analysis of grace is the clue to all his thought. In the greatest of all texts, ‘God is love’, he found a truth powerful enough at once to transcend, to embrace and to reconcile the divergent tendencies into which the Christian interpretation of the universe so constantly finds itself dissolved. By this more than by any other of his services to the Church, his true greatness can be recognized.”

Kirk’s final tribute to Augustine is to say that it would be impossible to overemphasise his influence on western ethics. “The purpose of life, in his view, was not to achieve success in measuring himself against an ethical standard . . but to see God.”

This required acknowledging our dependence upon God, which for Augustine was man’s love for God reaching out to God in the fullness of a life of Christian service.

---

97 Augustine, de spir. et lit; 3 (5), quoted Kirk, op.cit. p. 344.
98 Ibid.
99 Augustine, de grat. Christi, 26 (27) with reference to 1 John 4: 10, 19 – “we love because God loved us first” quoted Kirk, op.cit. p. 345.
100 Ibid.
101 op.cit. p. 346.
102 Ibid.
In his conception of the vision of God, Augustine mediated between the intellectualist tendencies of Clement of Alexandria and the ecstatic strain to be found in Neo-Platonism. He admired the monks of the Egyptian desert but did not share their indifference to culture and education. “In all this he conserved what was best in the aspirations of previous centuries . . . but fought the battle for a theocentric outlook with a zeal unparalleled except in the New Testament . . . he discerned a New Testament doctrine . . . It is ‘in the face of Jesus Christ’ . . that men are to see God.”\textsuperscript{103} Herein Kirk sees a link with the final subject of his sixth lecture, the work of Bernard of Clairvaux.

Kirk gives Bernard credit for redressing the balance of monasticism. He, a great Cistercian (1090-1153), strove to recapture the spirit of the Benedictine rule whose mark was simplicity (laborare est orare – to work is to pray). “Obedience and humility are still high among monastic virtues, but their purpose is merely to fit the monk for service rather than for saving his own soul”. “Man must not live for himself alone, but for the good of all”. Contemplation without active charity is only an “inane idleness”, but after a good deed contemplation may be sought more surely.\textsuperscript{104}

Kirk finds it natural that Bernard’s thoughts on service are most commonly concerned with ministering to the spiritual needs of others. He interprets St Peter’s threefold commission to feed the sheep as a feeding by precept, example and prayer, especially loving thought and intercession for the labours of others. Bernard acknowledges that the secular life is more irksome, difficult and dangerous than the monastic.

Kirk describes Bernard’s life as rigidly ascetic, but in him both rigorism and humanism are retained. “The true preparation for the vision of God is the life of active charity. What is required for communion with God is ‘solitude of the spirit, not (necessarily) of the body’. This solitude of the spirit is simply detachment from earthly desires and ‘can be exercised even

\textsuperscript{103} Kirk, The Vision of God., pp 346-347.
\textsuperscript{104} Bernard of Clairvaux, in cant. sermo 41, 46.7, 47.4, quoted Kirk, op.cit. p. 349.
in a crowd.’”  

The fullness of the vision of God is not attainable by anyone in this life, even what can be attained must be reached by stages. “The experience which, with all other great Christians, he calls ‘seeing God’, and to which he attributes the origin of whatever is of value in the life of service is so far beyond all human merit that he scarcely dare lay claim to it. ‘this is a chamber into which I have [only] at times been allowed to penetrate – and alas! How rare the day, how brief the stay’. But such as it is, his own experience must serve him as an example whereby to communicate to others what is the mainspring of Christian life.”

Such passages place Bernard among the great mystics. But for him the test of the validity of mystical experience is always moral. “God deigns to show himself lovable, serene and peaceful, sweet and gentle, full of mercy towards all who look on him.” Such a description portrays the vision of God as something infinitely worth striving for. But for Bernard contemplation has the power to inspire to action and to renew ideals. “By the revived activity of my heart I know his presence; by the sudden victory over vicious desires and carnal joys his power for good . . . (thus) I . . marvel at the depths of his wisdom . . his goodness and kindness. In the renewal and recreation of my mind, of my inner man, I glimpse . . the excellence of the divine beauty.”

Kirk then moves on to a comparison of Bernard with Augustine and claims that Bernard made an advance on his teachers. “In the transition from Platonism to Christianity, Augustine had remoulded the best of contemporary philosophy to fit the truth of the Word becoming flesh. He had substituted the ethics of love and humility for the ethics of self-reliance and self-regard. But he had failed to grasp that the same Christian standards must be applied to the Church’s mysticism as to her philosophic creed and moral code, if the three strands of faith, conduct and experience of God are to be woven into a perfect cord. . . his descriptions of the vision of God . .

109 Bernard, Ib. 74.6, quoted Kirk, op.cit. p. 353.
contain little that is distinctive of Christianity . . they are all but wholly Platonic . . Bernard . . inferior to Augustine as a theologian, shows himself the more truly Christian of the two.”  

He completes and transcends Augustine’s work. But Augustine’s influence on Bernard can be seen especially in Bernard’s treatise De gratia et libero arbitrio in which he wrote, “Remove free will, and there is nothing to be saved: remove grace and there is left no means of saving. The work of Salvation cannot be accomplished without the co-operation of the two.” Thus the love and grace of God, and the resultant activity of man, together made the central theme of Bernard’s message to his age.

In his estimate of Bernard, Kirk affirms that his great contribution to Christian ethics is his concentration on the person of Jesus. “The Bridegroom of the soul – whether the “soul” be Church or individual – is to Bernard always and only the glorified Jesus, as known in that humanity in which he walked the earth . . (to Bernard) Christian devotion, whether Catholic or Protestant, owes the rediscovery of its most treasured and evangelical elements.”

Most of Bernard’s sermons for the Christian year focus attention upon the earthly life of Jesus. The text from the Song of Songs: “My beloved is a bundle of myrrh” he applied to the sum total of the labours and sufferings of Jesus. His sermon on the Name of Jesus, and constant recurrence to the name and consideration of all it stands for – the testing by this standard of our lives and our whole environment – “this is at once the great mainspring and the great reward of the Christian life.”

Kirk continues:

“The result of ‘true’ consideration is . . the flowering of all the graces of Christian saintliness. Where this result is absent no real union with God has been attained: where it is present – where the soul is visibly increasing in saintliness and discretion in likeness to Jesus our ‘brother’ (in cant. sermo

---

110 The Vision of God, p. 354.
111 Bernard, In cant. sermo. Passim.
113 Bernard, In cant. sermo 15.6, quoted Kirk, op.cit. p. 356.
114 op.cit. p. 357.
15.4) we need no other test that God has been with us . . . Bernard is certain that moral advance is impossible without the vision of God in Christ; and moral stagnation is a sure sign that however much we claim to know God, our claim is empty and void.\textsuperscript{115}

For sanity and saintliness combined – for all the distinctive lessons of Christianity in ethics – a Christian could scarcely find a better teacher than St Bernard, in Kirk’s view.

He concludes his lecture by praising Bernard for his moderation in respect of Christian discipline. His teaching is a call for self-discipline, whose purpose is to fit the soul to see God and to serve him. But the exercise of discipline coercively by the authorities of the Church is wholly repugnant to him. “Men cannot be bullied into the way of seeing God, and that is all that matters.”\textsuperscript{116} He was eager that charity should take precedence over justice; he opposed the use of force against heretics and Jews. “Faith can only be produced by persuasion, never imposed by force; heretics should be taken not by arms but by arguments.”\textsuperscript{117}

Kirk’s final words on Bernard were these: “the synagogue honours his name even to the present day as that of one who in practice as well as in theory was its friend and protector . . . Bernard stands alone in his championship of prayer and preaching as the weapons of the Church against Israel, and in condemnation of the stake and the sword.”\textsuperscript{118}

(iii)

Lecture 7

Confusion and Order

Kirk’s seventh and eighth lectures, entitled respectively \textit{Confusion and Order} and \textit{Law and Promise}, throw more light on the question of the central purpose of his Bampton Lectures and the relation of this purpose to his earlier and later works.

\textsuperscript{115}ibid.
\textsuperscript{116} \textit{The Vision of God}, p. 357.
\textsuperscript{117} Bernard, in cant. sermo 66.12, quoted Kirk, op.cit. p. 358.
\textsuperscript{118} ibid.
The principal theologians whom Kirk treats in his seventh lecture are those of the school of St Victor, St Thomas Aquinas, St Ignatius of Loyola, and St Francis de Sales. In Kirk’s view, by the beginning of the thirteenth century Christianity was in danger of disruption into groups and movements in which all that distinguished Christian morality seemed likely to disappear. He believed that the main cause of the danger was the fact that emotionalism had outstripped reason, and the principle of ethical stability and discipline had been lost.\(^{119}\) However,

“The greatest minds saw clearly that heresy could never be met successfully except by clear and persuasive argument. Without surrendering the primary conviction that religion is a personal matter between the soul and God, theology must so think out the conditions of that intercourse as to keep it within the bounds of sane reason and sound morality.”\(^{120}\)

Among Kirk’s heroes are Hugh and Richard of St Victor. He believes their thought is based upon the Platonic tradition as handed down from Augustine:

“Contemplation – the vision of God – is . . . the goal of life. It is an ecstatic experience, or direct intuition, of the divine essence, in which consciousness is raised to such a height that it forgets itself and all around it.”\(^{121}\)

In his treatise *The Vision of God*, Vladimir Lossky documents the view of several, including those just mentioned, that God cannot be known or seen in his essence\(^{122}\) but only by revelation through his works and through Christ, described in the New Testament as “Son of God”. Lossky’s final sentence reads:

“After several centuries we find ourselves confronted again by the vision of Christ transfigured, through whom the Father communicates in the Holy Spirit the light of his inaccessible nature, a vision of God which we encountered at the outset of our study in the work of St Irenaeus . . . disciple of St John, . . . who said ‘No one has ever seen God, the Son alone, who is in the bosom of the Father, has manifested him to us.’”\(^{123}\)

\(^{119}\) *The Vision of God*, p. 371.

\(^{120}\) ibid.

\(^{121}\) op.cit. p. 378.

\(^{122}\) Greek ‘ousia’.

This debate continues still, as does the closely related one also well documented by Lossky, summed up in the form of a question: “Is salvation deification?” Theologians of the Eastern tradition have used words such as *theosis* and *theopoiesis*, which are equivalents of *deification*, and some of them at least have taken their stand on the text of 2 Peter 1:4:

> “Thus he has given us . . . his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may escape from . . . corruption . . . and may become participants of the divine nature.”

Western tradition theologians have denied the possibility of deification, while upholding the truth of salvation, on the ground that divine nature and human nature will always be distinct: but this is based on following Augustine, Luther and Calvin on the doctrine of original sin. On the matter of deification two questions which arise are these: Is deification external or internal to the soul? If internal, does it transform the soul or does it enhance its creaturely features? In his *Principles* Kirk gives considerable space to the *Education of the Soul*. I believe that this demonstrates his view that the soul can be transformed; that this transformation is part of the spiritual journey of growing closer to God.

To return to the Victorines: while Richard, with Hugh, emphasises the ecstatic character of contemplation, and its qualities of “expansion of mind”, “elevation”, and “alienation”, the purpose of contemplation is not to achieve a “mere ecstatic vacuity.”

> “It aims at a genuine vision of God ‘in the face of Jesus Christ’ . . . its goal is ‘to see Christ in utter clearness’. Still, the originality of the Victorines lies neither in their description of the vision of God, nor in their insistence – in which they follow the genuine Christian tradition – upon purity of heart and intensity of love as its conditions. God cannot be seen except ‘in a clean mirror’. The real contribution of Hugh and Richard to the development of Christian thought is their analysis of the intellectual travail which must accompany moral effort in the process of advance. It is with them that

124 Greek: theias koinonoi physeos.
125 *The Vision of God*, p. 374.
the word ‘meditation’ . . . first comes into prominence as a sign-post for the Christian pilgrimage.’”[126]

Kirk’s definition of contemplation, or seeing God, is “apprehension of truth itself – truth as it is at its very source, unsullied by the perversions of human imagination.”[127] Hugh and Richard see three stages on the journey to the vision of God of which contemplation is the last; first comes reflection, then meditation. It is still possible to find conductors of retreats, or people, lay and ordained, recommending this approach to Christians’ life of prayer and worship as part of their spiritual journey to the vision of God. The thought of Hugh and Richard evidences discipline and concentration, moving from the realm of ideas and undisciplined thoughts, which could be part of reflection, through meditation, which for Hugh includes natural theology, psychology, mathematics, physics, ethics, economics, politics – “learn everything; thou shalt find in the end that nothing is superfluous” is his motto.[128] The purpose of this pursuit of discipline, through the disciplines, is to make the principal subject of meditation God’s orderliness in creation, proceeding to contemplation, in which state there is no obstacle between oneself and God.

Kirk turns next to St Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225–1274) and at once acknowledges that Aquinas treasured both Hugh and Richard of St Victor among his authorities, especially for their thought of the orderliness of nature. Kirk accepts Gilson’s description of Aquinas’ doctrine as “Christian humanism” or “naturalism” provided that “Christian” is understood here as meaning “other-worldly”. By this Kirk means that Aquinas’ system champions the dignity of humanity and nature, while finding “the grounds of that dignity in the supernatural order which supplies the abiding source of their being, as well as their only hope of perfection.”[129]

Kirk then offers this comparison of Augustine with Aquinas:

“St Augustine (emphasized) the gulf between nature and God so sternly as to leave no hope of salvation except by the

---

[126] ibid.
[127] ibid.
[129] op.cit, p. 379.
substitution of grace for nature. St Thomas – equally conscious of the gulf – devoted himself to setting on a firm basis that other aspect of Augustine’s thought in which nature, the natural man and natural society, despite their utter difference from God, are yet seen to be . . . true messengers of the grace of God.”

For Kirk, in order to understand Aquinas’ ethics, we need to see how he approached his task in metaphysics. He conceives reality as an ordered hierarchy of existence ranging from God at its summit – God whose being is wholly from himself, who is not corporeal, who is perfect actuality and not merely potential – to matter at its base, its existence dependent on higher orders of being, its essence corporeal, its natural mode undetermined potency.

At the heart of Thomism lies the principle of analogical reasoning. This enables us to move from what we know, sensible existence, to the source of existence who is pure Being. What we know of corporeal intelligence can teach us something of incorporeal intelligence, what we know of becoming can teach us something about pure Being. The novelty of St Thomas lies in his attempt to avoid the Platonic suggestion that the lower orders of being are mere shadows of the Reality from which they derive their existence, and so to eliminate the dangers of pantheism and neo-Platonism. He is not a pantheist either, as is shown by his hierarchy of existence that differentiates nature from God. This differentiation means that, in effect, we cannot know God directly by reason, for his existence is different from that of the rest of creation. But analogy is a way of proceeding to knowledge of God and a vision of God by learning to understand humanity and the visible universe with the help of physics, psychology and philosophy.

Kirk writes:

‘Here . . is the first of St Thomas’ great contributions to Christianity . . He insists that the moralist shall study the

---

130 ibid.
131 Aquinas, CG., ii, 29; ST., I, q. 47, a.2.
132 Aquinas, CG., i, 21, 22; ST i.q.3, aa. 3,4, quoted Kirk, The Vision of God, p. 379.
133 Aquinas, ST 1.q.6, a.4, quoted Kirk, The Vision of God, pp 379-380.
implications of man’s exact place in the hierarchy of being, before he attempts to estimate the nature and content of human duty. Our whole ethical outlook is to be determined by the fact that man is intermediate between non-intelligent matter . . and the angels, who are pure incorporeal intelligence . . His perfection, therefore, must . . lie in an operation akin to, yet distinct from, the operations of brutes or angels. He must not content himself with the life of a brute, but neither must be attempt to be an angel. In either case he will miss his own vocation, which is to be a man – a being composed of soul and body.”

Kirk next nominates as a further distinctive step forward Aquinas’ treatment of Aristotle’s thesis that “whatever acts, whether consciously or unconsciously, acts for an end”135, though the end may be, in some cases, the action itself. The end is “in some sense appropriate to the agent, and therefore may be called his good”136 or “perfection.”137 God is the greatest of all goods, therefore God is the end to which all things move, that they may achieve the perfection which he alone can give them138 and which “consists in a certain likeness to him.”139

Each category of existence has a perfection of its own; our task as human beings is to discover our own end of perfection, and then to pursue it. Aquinas reviews the possible “ends” which have been suggested for human life.140 Man’s true end cannot be sensual enjoyment nor bodily well-being; these are common to humans and the brutes, and humans are more than brutes.141 It cannot consist in things external to human beings – honour, glory, riches or power, nor in virtuous acts alone, for all such acts have an end beyond themselves.142 We consider that we share with beings higher than ourselves the gift of intelligence, and unless that achieves its due end, our life remains incomplete. So Aquinas concludes:

134 op.cit. p. 381.
135 Aquinas, CG., iii, 2; ST., I, 2, q.1, a.1, quoted Kirk, The Vision of God. p. 381.
136 Aquinas, CG., iii. 3,4; ST, i,2, q.1, a.4 ad 1.
137 Aquinas, CG., i. 37, 38, quoted Kirk, op.cit.p. 381.
138 Aquinas, CG., iii, 17.
139 op.cit. p. 382.
140 Aquinas, CG., iii, 27-36; ST, i, 2, q.2, the whole based on Aristotle, Eth. Nic. X, 6-8, quoted Kirk, op.cit. p. 382.
141 Aquinas, CG., iii, 27; ST, i, 2, q.2, aa. 5, 6.
142 Aquinas, CG., iii, 34, quoted, Kirk, ibid.
“Hence the last end for man is the contemplation of truth.”

Kirk offers this assessment of Aquinas: “Perhaps his greatest contribution to ethics is the doctrine that the passions are to be ordered and harmonized, rather than extirpated; and it is from this point that he develops his massive scheme of the cardinal virtues.” These are the three moral virtues, temperance, fortitude and justice, and the intellectual virtue of prudence. These, for Aquinas, are to direct the movement of the soul towards the vision of God, and are the criteria for judging actions, whenever they are in question; in such cases, we are entitled to ask the agent not only “Are your passions under due control?” but also “have you considered the effect which your action will have upon others?” Over eight centuries later these are still vital questions for us to raise whenever it is necessary to question an action.

In addition to his estimate of Aquinas’ contribution to ethics, Kirk notes the importance of his elucidation of the doctrine of the vision of God, which shows him as advancing upon the Victorines. First, he affirms that contemplation is not the prerogative of the scholarly alone. Consideration of God’s wisdom in creation which leads to admiration of God’s excellence and reverence for God and to a love of God’s goodness: these are within the reach of all human beings. “Religion” for Aquinas is the “direction of man’s whole life” towards God and the primary act of religion is “devotion” – the will to give oneself readily to all that pertains to the adoration of God. His crucial point is this: “Meditation or contemplation (Kirk says that at this point in his argument Aquinas uses the words synonymously) is the cause of devotion.”

143 Aquinas, CG., iii, 37, cp. ST, i, 2, q.3, a.8, quoted Kirk, ibid.
144 Aquinas, ST, i, 2, q.24, a.3, quoted, Kirk, op.cit. p. 384.
145 The Vision of God, p. 386.
146 Aquinas, CG., ii, 2, quoted Kirk, op.cit. p. 389.
147 Aquinas, ST, ii, 2, q. 81, a.1, ad 5.
148 Aquinas, ST, q.82, a.2.
149 Aquinas, ST, ii, 2, q.82, a.3, quoted Kirk, op.cit. p. 390.
The second point in Aquinas’ elucidation is that the vision of the divine essence is reserved for the future life, and ecstasy is seen as of secondary importance. If Aquinas thus stands with other theologians on the matter of the vision of this divine essence (he allows that Moses and Paul received the vision of the divine essence in their ecstasies), Kirk grants that for St Thomas the contemplation of God “as revealed in his works” will be radiant in the fullest degree. Evidence for Kirk’s claim is found, for example, in the adoration and passion for God conveyed in Aquinas’ Eucharistic hymns “Pange Lingua”, “Verbum Superbum” and “Adoro te devote”, which combine mysticism and discipline to a remarkable degree.

Kirk offers this estimate of Aquinas:

“. . . if we take from him two thoughts only – that honest intellectual endeavour (impossible . . without moral effort of the highest kind) is no less a service of God than any other, and that ordered discipline is the condition of success in all things, even in the pursuit of the vision of God – and add to them the lesson of his life, that he counted the world well lost if he could bring those two truths home even in a time of wild and fantastic imaginations, we shall not think any place too high for him in the roll of Christian heroes.”

Kirk concludes his survey of order emerging from confusion by giving a place of great importance also to St Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556) and St Francis de Sales (1567-1622). They are both significant figures in the development of the idea of methodical prayer. From his mystic experiences at Manresa (1522-3), a year in which he gave a great deal of time to prayer, Ignatius derived the profound spiritual insight which marks his Spiritual Exercises. The Spiritual Exercises display the four principles of his life, discerned by Kirk as militant service, discipline, devotion to the person of Jesus, and submission to God’s will.

The central moment in the Exercises, for Kirk, is communion with God:

“Herein lies the importance of Ignatius for the history of the vision of God. Devoted though he was to the active life of

---

150 The Vision of God p .392.
151, op.cit., p.394.
service, he saw that all its resolutions, as all its achievements, must be the fruit of an inner communion with God . . . its primacy is implied by the ‘Foundation’ at the head of the ‘Exercises’ . . . by the ‘contemplations’ which are to precede the ‘election’; by the ‘colloquy’ with which every exercise ends; and above all by the ‘fourth addition’ – ‘in the point in which I shall find what I desire, there I will rest’ When God has been found no further effort of ‘method’ is needed; and when God has been found, his purposes will be made clear.”152

The popularity of the *Exercises* was widespread, and St Francis de Sales was just one great spiritual writer who recognised its quality. In Kirk’s view, the separate meditations of the *Exercises* proved adaptable to the devotional life even of secular persons. “Thus Catholic ‘piety’ took another step in the direction of becoming non-monastic; just as it also became, as the result of Ignatius’ sense of discipline, more ordered than ever.”153

St Francis was Bishop of Geneva when *The Introduction to the Devout Life* was published, which is addressed to “persons living in the world”. Kirk acknowledges the kinship between Ignatius and Francis, but finds the latter more humanist in language and temper than the militant Ignatius, and also more optimistic concerning human nature and the effect on it of the passion of Christ. Kirk also regards Francis’ *Treatise on the Love of God* as an important contribution to the study of the subject of union with God and contemplation of God.154

Both the Ignatian and the Salesian methods of prayer are intended to help lay people in their journey towards the vision of God. Kirk warns of the danger of becoming dependent on manuals, methods and schemes, while allowing that many people have found them helpful. But both Francis and Ignatius wisely insisted that the scheme, though needful, was always secondary. Kirk equally wisely states that it must be adapted for every different individual; “it might be described as the moment the soul found ‘that which is sought’.”155

---

152 *The Vision of God*, p. 403.
153 op. cit., p. 405.
154 op. cit., p. 409.
155 op. cit., p. 411.
Kirk concludes his lecture with two claims: piety is no longer exclusively monastic by the end of the sixteenth century, and chaos has been succeeded by order. “With St Ignatius and St Francis de Sales . . Christian thought about prayer reaches its high-water mark . . the new methods of prayer concentrated devotion upon the life of our Lord, completing by their methodical approach the work that St Bernard began.”¹⁵⁶

Of the writers considered by Kirk in his seventh lecture he sees Aquinas as having made the greatest contribution to the study of theology and ethics. Aquinas examines closely the question “Does human life have an ultimate end or purpose?” He gives an affirmative answer: for him, the “last end” – perfection, which includes perfect happiness – consists in the vision of God. The vision of God satisfies all desires, spiritual and corporeal. The ethical life is assisted by cultivating the cardinal virtues of justice, fortitude, temperance and prudence and the theological virtues of faith, hope and love, and by the sacraments of the Church, especially the Eucharist, and the life of prayer. All these elements are aspects of the journey towards the vision of God, which includes experience of the presence of God, a sense of communion with God, and contemplation of God. The vision of the divine essence is reserved to the future life, but contemplation of God as revealed in his works is possible for all people and is not the prerogative of the scholarly.

Kirk marks in Ignatius the development of the idea of methodical prayer, seen especially in The Spiritual Exercises, which are distinguished by devotion to the person of Jesus; their central moment is communion with God. St Francis de Sales adapted The Spiritual Exercises for the needs of secular Christians. His ideal was the devotional life which he commended to all lay or “religious”. His work Treatise on the Love of God affirms contemplation as the goal of Christian faith and life. Kirk’s estimate of these writers concludes with this claim: they have shown that the life of prayer and worship is not exclusively monastic.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁶ The Vision of God, p. 412.
¹⁵⁷ “Piety ceased to be the prerogative of the cloister: the barriers set up by the invalid theory of the double standard were broken down for ever”. Kirk, The Vision of God, p. 412.
Kirk begins his eighth lecture with a discussion of the Protestant reformers. His first step is to quote St Paul’s Letter to the Galatians (4: 28) “We . . as Isaac was, are the children of promise”, then follows: “Christianity is in essence not a law but a promise . . which . . we have called the Vision of God. This truth – fully emphasized by a long line of great Catholic theologians . . . – was revived with passionate intensity by the Protestant reformers.”

But Kirk calls this part of the lecture “The Reversal of Tradition” because he claims that the Protestant reformers added something new:

“To them the test of the Christian was not that he was so living as to secure the promise, but that he had experienced in himself the certain conviction that the promise was indefectibly his.” The “something new” was the idea of “assurance”. Kirk cites Luther (from the Shorter Commentary on Galatians):

“He is truly Christian who is solidly persuaded that God is gracious to him.”

Kirk connects this thought with the determinism which he finds in one aspect of the teaching of St Paul and St Augustine:

“Either a man is ‘assured’ or he is not. If he is, he has been transferred from the domain of the devil to the kingdom of God. If he is not, he remains under the divine condemnation. There is no middle way, no bridge, no neutral ground between the two.”

Kirk concedes that the Protestantism of his own day does not resemble this picture.

But he is intent on contrasting Luther’s assurance with Augustine who “left the Christian uncertain to the last whether he was indeed one of the elect” – he may not be predestined to eternal life, and in that case good works, adherence to the Church, perseverance in receiving the sacraments,
even martyrdom would not necessarily secure him salvation. On the one hand, Luther can write: “the believing soul should, by the pledge of its faith in Christ, becomes free from all sin, fearless of death, safe from hell, and endowed with the eternal righteousness, life and salvation of its husband Christ,” and Kirk claims that he assumed an infallibility impossible in this life, but even Luther had qualms on this point: “I do not believe St Paul was able to have so strong a faith on this matter as he asserts. In truth, I cannot, alas! believe so firmly as I preach, talk and write, and as other people think I believe.”

Kirk then cites Calvin:

“We teach that faith is certain and sure; but we do not imagine thereby a certainty free from all doubt and care; the Christian has always to struggle with want of faith.”

Despite these disclaimers, Kirk notes three main results of the Protestant reformers’ doctrine of the personal assurance of the Christian of this standing in an inalienable, immediate relationship with God. In Kirk’s view, these three results are first, an emphasis on the liberty of the individual; secondly, the reversal of tradition, in that law supplanted the element of promise which is at the heart of the Christian Gospel; and thirdly, and most importantly, the reversal of the traditional doctrine of the character of Christian prayer.

First, on the liberty of the individual, Luther, Calvin, Zwingli and John Knox in turn at different times assumed an independence of all ecclesiastical authority. Luther writes: “We are all priests . . . how then should we not have the power of discerning and judging what is right or wrong in matters of faith? . . By ‘Reformation’ I do not mean the reform of this human teaching and spiritual authority; I mean its complete and absolute abrogation, extirpation and destruction”, “The gospel and the church know nothing of jurisdictions, which are tyrannical inventions of
men”\textsuperscript{166}; “There can be no supremacy among Christians; each is subject to the other.”\textsuperscript{167}

Kirk attributes the perceptible indiscipline and antinomianism in the Europe of the sixteenth century to the Reformers’ upholding of the right of liberty of the individual conscience. However, he acknowledges that it would be absurd to accuse Luther himself of deliberately encouraging, or conniving at, antinomianism in others. “The highest art, the noblest life, the holiest conduct . . . is love for God and one’s neighbour.”\textsuperscript{168} But, writes Kirk, “many of Luther’s sayings were more capable of the antinomian interpretation than any other. The world does not forget the \textit{Pecca fortiter}.”\textsuperscript{169} However, in a footnote Kirk completes the quotation: \textit{esto peccator et pecca fortiter, sed fortius fide et gaude in Christo}\textsuperscript{170} “Let him be a sinner, and sin boldly, but more boldly believe and rejoice in Christ”.

Kirk continues: “So when we find Luther saying ‘There is no one who would not prefer to be without perfect righteousness than without the grace of God’\textsuperscript{171} or ‘To a Christian man his faith suffices for everything’ he has no need of works for justification”\textsuperscript{172} we cannot acquit him of stimulating a tendency which he himself was one of the first to deplore.”\textsuperscript{173}

Kirk claims universal support for his criticism to the effect that the reformers’ practice did not square with their theory of the liberty of the individual. “The antinomian results of their own teaching compelled them to rule their several churches with a rod of iron. As the doctrines of justification and predestination severed the Christian from the worldling, and

\textsuperscript{169} ibid.
\textsuperscript{173} ibid.
allowed for none of the lights and shades and gradations of real life, so discipline cut off the church from the world.”

Further, Kirk notes that in matters of corporate discipline the reformers chose to retain the penal and to relinquish the pastoral. Private confession and absolution were allowed to fall into the background; public penance and excommunication were retained. In the eighteenth century, however, a general confession in church, with absolution from the pulpit, became the normal rule. Notwithstanding, the Augsburg Confession insists that communion is to be allowed only to those who have confessed and been absolved, and sets contrition on a level with faith as a condition of reconciliation. But for many centuries, Catholic communion discipline has been similar.

Of Calvin, Kirk writes:

“To Calvin the officers of the Church are school-masters to lead us to Christ; but their tutelage is one from which we never escape.”

Kirk then turns to the second result, in his view, of the writings and actions of the reformers: namely, they reverse tradition by allowing law to supplant the element of promise which is at the heart of the Christian Gospel. He seeks to substantiate this claims thus:

“Melanchthon’s theology centres upon an enthusiasm for the natural law which is little more than a quasi-scholastic Aristotelianism; Calvin’s upon an intellectual conviction of personal predestination, which is easily transformed into confessional acceptance of the doctrine of predestination in general. External tests . . . become the hall-mark of Christianity, and with them, reappears the claim of the body to dragoon its members into conformity. . . Despite all his personal sense of God (Luther) could say ‘By faith we understand that Christ was born and suffered and rose for us’ – an intellectual test . . . replaces an empirical one. We are

174 *The Vision of God*, p. 421.
175 op.cit. p. 422.
177 op.cit. p. 423.
“no longer required to know Christ, but only to know something about him…” 178

In the same vein is Kirk’s critique of the ethics of the reformers, which he describes as “in the main of a Puritan type”179, an outcome of their “complete severance of the Church from the world”. Kirk charges the reformers with both rigorist discipline and rigorist ethics, partly at least explained by Luther’s, Calvin’s and Zwingli’s upholding the doctrines of the total depravity of fallen human nature and the misery of this present life. In Kirk’s view this contrasts with Catholic piety, in which the vision of God is the one and only thing in which the Christian can find his goal, and yet it is his duty to show love for God and his neighbour in active service.

Kirk credits Kant with rescuing the idea of the moral law “from the formalist extremism into which rationalism had brought it, insisting . . . upon the good will as the vital principle of all true conduct.”

He adds:

“Schleiermacher (1768-1834) extended the horizon of the law to its uttermost limits; his ethical scheme forms a network which covers every sphere of human activity, and yet could be summarised by Ritschl (1822-1889) in the single thought of the kingdom of God. Both he and Ritschl, acting upon hints conveyed by Kant, revived the sense of religion; but the place they gave it was one in which it remained uncoordinated with ethics. With Schleiermacher it is a ‘feeling’ of dependence upon God with which the moral man may console himself during the day’s work, or after the day’s work is done; with Ritschl and his disciples the thought of redemption . . . has come to be nothing more than the belief that God has revealed an ideal for man to work towards. Once more the law is primary.”180

Kirk finds Protestants in his own day still speaking and writing of grace, communion and redemption, but suggests that these terms are used not so much to describe experience of supernatural power, illumination and hope of eternal life as to commend an unselfish life of social service. However, it needs to be said that the twentieth century theologians Barth,

---

178 *The Vision of God*, p. 424.
179 ibid.
180 op.cit. p. 428.
Bultmann, and Brunner affirm strongly the doctrine of justification by faith which establishes the right relationship between God and the believer. This is a central theme of Barth’s *Dogmatics*, Bultmann’s sentence “when I hear the word of God preached, Christ is alive in me” and Brunner’s work *The Divine Imperative*, in contrast with Kirk’s suggestion.

On the matter of Kirk’s view that the third and most important result of this post-Reformation development has been a reversal of the entire traditional doctrine of the character of Christian prayer, his source is Friedrich Heiler. Heiler recognizes that Protestantism has had its devotees of the contemplative life; he admits that Luther “passed through the school of medieval mysticism” and never altogether abandoned its teaching, to the “enrichment” of his prophetic and biblical piety. But to Heiler, Luther’s prayer is not in essence contemplative, but practical. “In Luther’s hands it lost even the element of ‘adoration, praise and thanksgiving’ and was reduced to mere petition”. 181

Heiler’s list of the constituents of Protestant prayer comprises “complaint”, “petition”, “intercession”, “appeals to God’s interests, providence and promises”, “confession of sin and frailty”, “expression of confidence”, “self-dedication” and “thanksgiving and praise”. He gives only a little space to “longing and seeing”, and the vision of God is reduced to “community of purpose” and “self-dedication”. 182

Kirk’s judgment is that while all Christian prayer necessarily contains these elements, in the tradition of the vision of God as the dominant *motif* of Christian prayer they cannot stand upon their own merits; they are the fruit of that communion with God towards which the attitude of worship is directed, “and which it does not always fail to attain.” 183 The present writer, in defence of Luther, would cite Luther’s hymn “A mighty fortress is our God” as a triumphant and laudatory proclamation of faith rather than “mere petition”. Among other Protestant hymn writers of the seventeenth century, Neander (“Praise to the Lord, the almighty, the King of creation”),

---

181 *The Vision of God*, p. 430.
182 ibid.
183 ibid.
Schütz ("Sing praise to God, who reigns above") and Isaac Watts produced works of eloquent and elevated praise and thanksgiving, and both Anglicans and Methodists can lay claim to the work of Charles Wesley.

Having criticised the Protestant reformers for reversing tradition in preferring law to promise and petitionary prayer to contemplation, Kirk is distressed to find a similar development within Catholicism. The sixteenth century saw a reaction against mysticism, attacks on the Jesuits and the Carmelites, Carmelite theologians confining “contemplation” to a spiritual elite, and the Jesuits interpreting Ignatius’ *Spiritual Exercises* as a means of self-training in virtue.

For Kirk, so-called “practical” prayer is prayer deprived of the element of worship, as in Protestantism, or prayer subordinated to “action”, as in Catholicism. Among critics of the former type of faulty prayer he cites an Anglican, Lilley, who describes prayer without worship as “merely pagan”184 and a Catholic scholar, Bremond, whose view is that prayer as “self-training” is not prayer at all.185

The concluding theme of the eighth lecture and thus of the Bampton series is the assertion of the primacy of worship as the means to attaining the vision of God as the series’ structural aim. Kirk revisits the relation of worship and service, first examining the question “Is the ‘vision of God’ a selfish ideal?” and secondly, “Is ‘worship’ a higher ideal than ‘service’?” In pre-Christian thought there is a selfish quest for experience, exemplified previously by Kirk as “panhedonism.”186 But Christianity introduces, first, a corporate ideal – Kirk cites the evidence of Christian art and literature, exemplified by Dante’s *Divine Comedy* – and he affirms that Christianity identified “seeing God” with the attitude of worship rather than experience of communion.

In examining, and revisiting, the question “Is ‘worship’ a higher ideal than ‘service’?” Kirk, having noted that the issue arose as early as in the

---

184 The Vision of God, p. 438.
185 op. cit. p. 440.
186 op. cit. p. 442.
beginnings of the Benedictine Order and its rule, observed that the danger of exalting the ideal of service to pre-eminence is that it may encourage the spirit of patronage and thus fall prey to self-centredness. On the other hand, the ideal form of service, unselfish service, is the outcome of a life of worship.\footnote{The Vision of God, p. 448. Since the nineteen-sixties many individual Christians and Churches, including the Anglican, have shown that they find Kirk’s reservations about the ideal of service implausible.}

The tension between human self-centredness and self-forgetfulness, particularly when it pertains to worship and service, is a major concern for Kirk in the later two parts of his final lecture. Under the heading \textit{Disinterestedness and Pure Love} he examines the respective contributions to the subject of Bossuet and Fénelon, both of them bishops and theological giants in the Catholic spectrum of the seventeenth century.

Is disinterestedness possible? Christian mystics have affirmed so, against the assumption that all human beings are wholly creatures of their impulses, universally selfish. Among those who protested most against this assumption in the seventeenth century were the Quietists. In an earlier century Meister Eckhardt, commenting on the text “Blessed are the poor in spirit”, had said, “He alone has spiritual poverty who wills nothing, knows nothing, desires nothing”\footnote{Quoted Kirk, op.cit. pp 453-454.} and in the seventeenth century Madame Guyon went further: “We must suppress all desire, even the desire for the joys of Paradise”. Her Quietism won the sympathetic support of Fénelon but attracted the condemnation of Bossuet. A long and bitter controversy between the two bishops ensued, which ended with the condemnation of Fénelon’s book\footnote{Explication des maximes des saints, forty-five articles setting forth true and false mysticism, published in 1697.} by the Holy See. Bossuet’s position is that “pure love” or perfect disinterestedness is a dangerous and deceptive illusion, and yet he says that the most perfect Christian is he who “loves” most absolutely, \textit{whatever his motive may be}. Kirk states Bossuet’s view thus:
Our actions are bound to be interested; but the Christian will strive to concentrate that interest upon gaining the joys of heaven, rather than upon lesser and lower satisfactions.”¹⁹⁰

Fénelon, however, maintained that some actions may be ethically disinterested, and accused Bossuet of holding the view, in reality, that all actions are equally selfish, “in flat contradiction of all that Christianity stands for”. Kirk holds that Fénelon’s life and practice were an excellent example of disinterestedness in practice, but in his Maxims he criticised the Quietists for believing that disinterestedness could be acquired by human effort.

The example of Bossuet and Fénelon led Kirk to his exposition of the spirit of worship. He deals with two criticisms of the alleged primacy of worship, namely, that worship can be as self-centred as service, and that many Christians are incapable of the spirit of worship. His reply is that, rightly understood, the spirit of worship is the most natural and universal of human endowments; hence there is less danger of self-centredness, and the spirit of worship is not a remote prize but an actual possession. Kirk sums up his position as follows:

“Where the best Christian thought about the vision of God has differed from non-Christian aspiration is in its emphasis upon the attitude rather than upon the experiences of worship. What matters . . . is that we should look towards God, rather than that we should here and now receive the vision. But that there is such a vision, and that it is attainable, theology no less than experience affirms. Not only do the saints see God in heaven – not only has the Church seen him in the face of Jesus Christ on earth; for the inspiration and renewal of the individual it has been insisted that the pure in heart shall from time to time have personal experience of God and intercourse with him, both in their prayers and in the ordinary activities of life.”¹⁹¹

Kirk affirms that worship understood as experience of the presence of God is within the reach of everybody. The vision of God in this sense may be only a glimpse, or partial, or imperfect, but it is real nonetheless. Kirk believes that what Christianity offers, with its fellowship and sacraments, its

¹⁹⁰*The Vision of God*, p. 458.
¹⁹¹ op.cit. p. 461.
life of prayer and service, its preaching of the Incarnate Son of God, is the same vision with increasing fullness. We can encounter God in nature, art, and friendship. For Kirk, wherever and whenever goodness attracts us, it can evoke the spirit of worship. “If a man can remain alive to the goodness in his environment it will draw out all that is best in him . . . what we mean by ‘goodness’ is the invincible grace of God’s love of which Augustine never hesitated to proclaim that it was stronger than death itself”.192

Having examined both the Scriptures and so many centuries of Christian history Kirk concludes that the ideal of “seeing God” is neither selfish, unworthy or meaningless. He maintains its adequacy as compared with other New Testament phrases on the grounds that it emphasises dependence upon God, it focuses thought on the Incarnation, and it insists upon the importance of meditation. “‘Salvation’, ‘the kingdom’, ‘eternal life’ – these phrases cannot be understood apart from the fact of Christ. But they do not carry the mind inevitably back to him. With the vision of God it is otherwise. No Christian can reflect upon it for a moment without remembering that the Church has already seen God in the face of Jesus Christ. At once the whole scheme of Christian life springs into view . . . it is only as worship creates in (him) some likeness to the character of Jesus that the Christian can achieve his goal . . . it is only by studying the nature of God as revealed in Jesus . . that we can effectively prepare ourselves for the vision of God in the next life – hence comes the importance of ‘meditation’ in the Christian scheme of prayer. ‘Meditation’ is not the same as contemplative worship; but it is a stage on the path.”193

Kirk’s aim in this final lecture, as in the whole series, is to present the Christian Gospel as one of promise, not of law – a promise of freedom and ultimate happiness found not in mere self-fulfilment but in seeing God, a phrase which he prefers to “perfection”, “beatitude” and “eternal life.” The second half of the twentieth century has seen developments in moral theology, ethics and spirituality which Kirk may have found surprising. Increasing ecumenism, or at least growing co-operation among scholars

192 The Vision of God, pp 465-466.
193 op.cit. pp 467-468.
biblical, theological, ethical and spiritual has seen unexpected conversations and convergences. The conversations between Hans Küng and Karl Barth on the doctrine of justification by faith are examples; the work of the liberation theologians has given a new dimension to the understanding of the Christian Gospel as a promise that attends to both the Old Testament prophetic teaching on God’s justice and peace and to the doctrine of the Incarnation, of a Christ revealing a God personally interested in the affairs of the world; but in the spirituality of the best writers Kirk’s vision of a transcendental God has not been lost.
CHAPTER 6
MORAL PROBLEMS AND MORAL THEOLOGY


In his introduction to *The Threshold of Ethics*, Kenneth Kirk wrote “[In this book] I have tried to consider . . some of the crucial introductory problems which have to be faced by anyone who proposes to read, think or teach about ethics in general or Christian ethics in particular.” He gives a chapter to each of these subjects: conscience, psychology, evolution, humanism, conscientiousness and religion. He refers to them as seeming still “to require painstaking scrutiny from all to whom the problems of conduct are of serious concern.”

(i)

Conscience

On conscience, Kirk’s definition (“the simplest from which to begin”) is this: “Conscience is the mind of man when it is passing moral, or ethical, judgments.”¹ He prefers this to a description of conscience as a “faculty”, unless conscience is understood as a “special exercise or activity of the faculty of reason.”²

Moral judgment has characteristic words, such as “right”, “wrong”, “duty”, “sin”, “virtue”, “vice”, “ought” and “ought not”.³ After affirming that conscience sometimes acts as a judge, and sometimes as a guide, he claims that the full implications of the word “conscience” were discovered by Christianity.⁴

If we compare actions or characters with standards we have already accepted, and they conform to these standards we call them “right”, “moral”,

---

²ibid.
³ibid.
⁴ibid.
⁵op.cit. p. 15.
“praiseworthy”; if they diverge we call them “wrong”, “immoral” or “blameworthy”. “In such instances . . . conscience is acting as a judge.”5 After this example, Kirk continues: “But . . when a moral judgment [introduces] variations in, or additions to, our accepted standards, and we begin to criticize principles hitherto held without question, (we can properly speak of) conscience as a guide.”6

Kirk continues: “When we speak of a ‘pure’ or ‘clear’ conscience, or . . a ‘guilty’ or ‘insincere’ conscience, we are considering primarily its activity as a judge. When we use the adjective ‘wise’, ‘instructed’, ‘educated’, ‘mistaken’, or ‘misguided’, we are speaking of it primarily . . (as a) guide.”7

Kirk notes that the concept of the conscience as judge is found in Babylonian and Egyptian penitential literature, as well as in that of Israel, and in Greek poetry and rhetoric. But he attributes to Christians the recognition of conscience as a guide: “Christianity has always insisted that within certain limits and on certain conditions the individual has both the privilege and the duty of criticizing the moral system under which he has been brought up, and of framing his own moral standards for himself.”8

“Before the Christian recognition of the primacy of conscience as a guide, the Old Testament prophets Amos, Hosea, Micah and Jeremiah challenged the established customs and traditions of their religion embodied in the law of Moses as determining the conscience of the individual, in particular as interpreted by priests.”9 Kirk cites from Greek literature the figures of Prometheus and Antigone as rebels for conscience’s sake against, respectively, the laws of Zeus and the law of the State; Stoic philosophers used the Greek word syneidesis and the Latin equivalent conscientia to mean “sharing with God the knowledge of his unwritten law.”10

5 The Threshold of Ethics, p. 15.
6 op.cit. pp 15-16.
7 op.cit. p. 16.
8 op.cit. p. 17.
9 ibid.
10 op.cit. p. 19.
Kirk finds the evidence for his claim for the Christian tradition of ethical individualism (mentioned above) in the New Testament record. The teaching found there has Jesus quoting the law of Moses but offering a more radical ethic with the words “But I say to you”. For Kirk, “the revolutionary spirit – the right to criticize even the most sacrosanct of ordinances – has never been more fully asserted.”

Other parts of the New Testament endorse this concept. The apostles insist, in opposition to the authorities, that they must obey God rather than man. St Paul writes of the law universally written on human hearts, which leaves them without excuse however much conventional ethical teaching may fail them. “Henceforward the idea of conscience as a guide, and as a guide whose dictates are paramount, is a commonplace with moralists.”

Kirk cites Origen and John Chrysostom in support and concludes “Here is in germ the primary Christian principle . . . – ‘Conscience is always to be followed’ – to which the greatest of the schoolmen and the most autocratic of the Popes were later to give equally emphatic expression.”

Kirk next considers the relationship of law and morality. He describes as “universal” the recognition that a law can be “unjust” – “can ignore . . . principles of morality to which it ‘ought’ to conform.” But he claims that most moralists recognise the principle of loyalty as among the most binding of the dictates of conscience. “And if it be the case that Christianity first promulgated the idea of conscience in its fullness, it is equally true that the New Testament insists that the powers that be are ordained of God, and that men ought to obey . . . for conscience’s sake.”

Kirk has thus quoted the Acts passages where the apostles say “No” to the State, and Romans 13: 1ff where St Paul is saying “Yes” to the State.

---

11 Matt. 5, passim.
12 The Threshold of Ethic. p. 20.
14 Rom. 2: 14, 15.
15 Kirk, op.cit. p. 20.
16 op.cit. p. 21, see also Kirk, Conscience and its Problems. p. 227.
17 op.cit. p. 22.
18 op.cit. pp 22-23.
Nonetheless, the conception of conscience as a guide makes it possible for law and ethics to be distinguished. “Law prescribes certain courses of action under threat of punishment . . . conscience or the moral judgment, proclaims that such-and-such actions are incumbent on us, whether we shall be punished or rewarded for them or not . . . Law . . appeals to prudence or expediency: conscience recognizes no appeal from its dictates to any other authority.” Kirk notes the appearance of the unwritten law of God over against the written or customary law of the community and the consequent preference to obey the former in order to escape the pains of hell, which were perceived as being worse than persecution, the consequence of defying human law. ‘Doing right’ was the premium paid for the assurance of eternal life.

“It cannot be too strongly emphasized that any such invasion of this sphere of ethics by the idea of supernatural reward and punishment undermines the entire fabric which the idea of conscience builds up.” But Kirk in a later chapter (on Religion) writes:

“Our institutions of justice and injustice force us to recoil from the all-too-common spectacle of the wicked flourishing as a green bay tree, whilst the righteous are worn down by suffering, destitution, and even persecution. Unless the moral consciousness is to be offended in the greatest of all issues – that of the appropriateness of happiness to virtue – there must be a God to whom we may look for the vindication of right against wrong.”

He adds:

“The moral man knows only too well that the demands of conscience are unlimited. . . the short span of his earthly life will never suffice for anyone who aims at fulfilling the law of his being. Once more the principle ‘I ought implies that I can’, comes into play. Conscience tells me that I ought to fulfil all righteousness; therefore my existence must be commensurate with the unlimited demands which conscience lays on me.”

---

19 The Threshold of Ethics, pp 22-23.
21 op.cit. p. 159.
22 op.cit. pp 159-160. cf. Michael Keeling, What is Right? SCM Press Ltd, London, 1969, p.38: (commenting on the Sermon on the Mount, Matt. 5:1-7:28). “The moral teaching of Jesus can be put in just two points, 1. That morality is a matter of our attitude to other people . . an attitude of love, 2. There is no limit to the demands that can legitimately be made upon us.”
On the idea of supernatural reward and punishment, Kirk continues:

Once conduct becomes ‘interested’ or actions are performed for the sake of some . . reward, morality ceases to exist and the use of ethical terms becomes a hollow and hypocritical illusion. ‘Disinterestedness’ – doing right because it is right, obeying the will of God to the glory of God alone – is an essential part of the doctrine of conscience…

Kirk attributes to the influence of psychology the view of some that human beings are incapable of acting except in their own interests, and to the influence of anthropology the view that the “dictates of conscience” are no more than the principles of social self-preservation. As these problems, in his view, come at the threshold of ethics, he considers them in chapters on psychology, evolution and humanism.

He believes it is necessary to correct misconceptions of the idea of conscience. One such misconception is that “intuition” – which he defines as “seeing a thing to be so” – encourages the view that the individual conscience is infallible. “Medieval writers . . could speak of conscience as the voice of God in the soul; but they did not insist that the voice was always correctly heard. Hence – especially since the oracular infallibility of Church and of Scripture is no longer accepted as tenable doctrine – we are free to admit that conscience may make many mistakes, and that it needs constant purging, education and correction.”

Kirk then takes up questions raised by statements in the form “such-and-such a course of action is always wrong”, or “wrong in principle”, or “wrong in itself”. “We are entitled to say that if an action is ‘wrong in principle’ it is wrong whatever the circumstances may be, therefore can never be right”.

Kirk admits that those upholding “traditional ethics” or “orthodox” morality have been criticised for using a code of rules to be applied rigidly to every conceivable set of circumstances. The Decalogue has been accepted

---

23 The Threshold of Ethics, p. 24.
by Christians as “a document that holds good, when properly interpreted, under the new covenant; and the Decalogue admits no exceptions”.26 Kirk cites the examples of telling children that lying and stealing are always wrong, and saying “murder is always wrong”. On this latter statement, he says that the word “murder” has come into existence to discriminate the cases in which homicide is wrong from those in which it is not – at this point he is saying “we are free to determine, by an examination of the circumstances of each particular case, whether in these circumstances the action in question is really wrong or not”.27

Further, on the problem of lying, Kirk says: “Most people agree that on occasion it is permissible, . . . even a duty, to deceive by means of words – to ‘tell a lie’, in fact”.28 He raises the question of the effect of people’s intentions on the morality of their actions. In his later chapter on *Conscientiousness*29 he distinguishes the word “motive” from “intention” or “purpose” by saying that a man’s “intention” is that which he consciously sets before himself as the goal for the sake of which he undertakes an action, whilst “motive” is the emotional tendency (conscious or unconscious) which directed his thought towards *this* intention rather than towards another. He offers the example of a patriot who murdered a tyrant out of love for his country, even though he believed he ought not to do so, as one who might be said to have a “good” motive, and yet it would be “unconscientious” or “blameworthy” . . . “most of us would call the action ‘wrong’ – the ‘good’ or ‘virtuous’ motive of love of one’s country in this case failing to effect its normal result of producing a ‘right’ action – whilst the ‘intention’ (to make my countrymen happy) would undoubtedly be ‘right’”.30

Kirk then turns to the criticism that if morality questions or even abandons the conception of “things wrong in themselves” and admits that circumstances alter cases, they are subscribing to the objectionable doctrines, “Do evil that good may follow”, or “The end justifies the means”. However,
Kirk grants that the first maxim is one on which we all act constantly without any moral qualms – as for example, in the matter of punishment, or of surgical operations. The maxim only becomes objectionable if we understand it to mean “do evil that good may follow, even though the good could be as well secured by other means which no one would call evil”; or “Do great evil to secure even a little good”; or, “Do evil to others to secure a good for yourself with which you could perfectly well dispense”. We should all agree that in such circumstances to “do evil” would be wrong; and therefore the view that the wrongness of an action depends upon its circumstances in no way involves the doctrine, “Do evil that good may follow”.31

When Kirk turns to the maxim “The end justifies the means” he considers the problem whether it is right to lie to save a parent’s life from a murderer. In this case the principle of life-saving and the principle of truth-telling are in conflict. The question is, which of the two has the greater claims to our allegiance? “Whichever we choose”, he says, “the true way of expressing the conviction that we have chosen the right course will not be, ‘The end justifies the means’, but ‘The claim of the one end justified us, in the circumstances of the case, in setting aside for this occasion the claim of the other end’.

“It must be concluded, then, that . . . any moral intuition which takes the form ‘such-and-such an action is always wrong’, is open to the gravest suspicion. The most we seem ever entitled to say is ‘Action of this type is normally wrong, but it depends upon the circumstances whether in any particular case it is right or wrong’. We may . . . be able to add a certain number of examples of cases in which we hold beyond question that such an action would be wrong, and others in which we are certain, or . . . are strongly inclined to think, that it would be right. Beyond that . . . we cannot safely go”.32

---

31 *The Threshold of Ethics*, p. 35.
32 op.cit. p. 36.
This statement needs to be considered with the criticism of Kirk made by Joseph Fletcher: that Kirk was prepared to say that an action normally considered to be wrong may under certain circumstances not be wrong; but he was not prepared to say that under certain circumstances it might be right. “The proper question is: ‘Does an evil means always nullify a good end?’ And the answer is, on a basis of ‘due proportion’ or situational estimate, must be ‘NO’. All depends on the situation, i.e. the relative weight of the ends and means and motives and consequences all taken together, as weighed by love. Bishop Kirk came close to this standpoint when, speaking of the old rule about means and ends, he said ‘the correct form of the maxim, in fact, is ‘circumstances alter cases.’ And this is obviously true . . An act which is right in some circumstances may be wrong in others”. However, be it noted: he did not say that an act which is wrong in some cases can be right in others. “His bid for freedom was too fainthearted”.

Kirk’s conclusion is that the doctrine of conscience needs very careful restatement. Conscience must not be regarded as infallible; reconsideration and restatement will benefit its intuitions; “and we must abandon the hope of reaching universal principles of cast-iron rigidity; for with the limited powers of review and comparison at our disposal the most we are entitled to expect is that we shall attain to a few convictions as to actions which are generally or normally wrong, but which may . . turn out to be right in exceptional circumstances”.

Thus, with a view of conscience as “a capacity of moral judgment advancing slowly and painfully, by the method of trial and error, towards an understanding of the principles of human duty which will never be more than partial,” Kirk turns to consider the contemporary criticisms of traditional ethics, under the heads of psychology, evolution and humanism. We shall consider the work of Hobbes, Dr J.A. Hadfield and Walter Lippmann and Kirk’s reaction to them intellectually as he discusses their work.

---

33 Kirk, ed. The Study of Theology, Harper and Brothers, 1939, p. 383.
35 The Threshold of Ethics, pp 38-39. Cf again Joseph Fletcher’s criticism. Kirk’s sentence is very close to what Fletcher says he should have said: that an act which is wrong is some cases can be right in others.
36 op.cit. p. 39.
Kirk begins his discussion of psychology by describing the word “ought” as one of the keystones of ethics, and quoting the Kantian phrase “‘I ought’ implies that ‘I can’”. ³⁷ For him, this means that moral judgments are only applicable in so far as those to whom they refer have freedom of choice, or free-will. ³⁸ He then examines the determinism of Thomas Hobbes, after observing that some contemporary psychological descriptions of human conduct appear to excuse an offender after physical ill-health, nervous strain, intensity of temptation or provocation, home influences and early training are taken into account. ³⁹ For Kirk, a “deterministic” view of human nature regards all a man’s actions as being “determined” for him by his preceding desires and states of mind, these in turn having been “determined” by a whole series of events going back to his infancy and beyond. ⁴⁰

Hobbes adopts a theory of human nature which makes any appeal to the idea of duty (contained in such words as ‘ought’) illogical because he denies the idea of responsibility. “Man is not a free agent. He is the slave of his appetites”. ⁴¹ On Hobbes’ theory, Kirk continues:

“Man is a highly complex automaton. He is endowed with a curious faculty of self-consciousness, which the beasts have not. He is endowed also with powers of memory, imagination, and the foresight of consequences, greater than theirs. But in all essentials he is no more than a beast. Present him with a stimulus, and various courses of action will at once occur to his imagination. Memory and foresight will tell him what the issue of each course is likely to be, expressed in quantitative terms of resultant pleasures and pains. He will then be psychologically compelled to take the course which offers the greatest pleasure.”

³⁷ The Threshold of Ethics, p. 40.
³⁸ ibid.
³⁹ op.cit. p. 42.
⁴⁰ op.cit. p. 43.
⁴¹ ibid.
“No use saying to such a man, ‘This is your duty’, ‘That is what you ought to do’. The words ‘duty’ and ‘ought’ imply freedom, and man is no longer free.”

Kirk contrasts Hobbes’ theory of pleasure with Epicureanism, which is a free-will doctrine teaching that a man ought to pursue his own pleasures, and with utilitarianism, which teaches that we ought to promote the greatest possible pleasure of the greatest possible number. However, in his chapter on humanism Kirk notes that Hobbs could not avoid the direct appeal to conscience altogether; nonetheless, this is inconsistent with his whole theory of human nature.

Against determinism, Kirk holds that to admit free-will is to admit the incalculable into human conduct, and so to make that conduct inexplicable in terms of strict causation. He next considers the work of his contemporary, the psychologist Dr J.A. Hadfield, contained in his book *Psychology and Morals*. In a chapter entitled *The Determinants of Character*, Hadfield names temperament, instincts and environment. Kirk notes that the will is not mentioned in this chapter as among the determinants of character.

Further, Hadfield holds that heredity and environment combine in a person to form “psychological constellations” which are of three forms, Sentiments, Dispositions and Complexes. “The *sentiments* are those constellations which we consciously accept; the *dispositions* those which are unconsciously accepted; and the *complexes*, those which are rejected as unacceptable and tend to be repressed”.

Moreover, “the most dominant of all our sentiments embody our ideals or aims in life, for it is to these that most of our emotions are particularly strongly attached, and it is these that dominate our will”. Kirk observes that the will is not the *cause* but the *issue* of the acceptance of

---

42 op.cit. pp 46-47.
43 *The Threshold of Ethics.*, p. 47.
44 op.cit. pp 93-94
45 op.cit. p. 49.
47 Hadfield, p.21, quoted Kirk, op.cit. p. 51.
sentiments. He infers that the sentiments are not an act of free choice but something determined for us by instinct and environment.

Hadfield introduces the conception of the “organised self”, which he explains as follows:

“The completeness of the self can only be produced by the harmony of all the sentiments and complexes into one whole, the attainment of which we call self-realization. And the movement and activity of the self towards its realization we call the will.\(^{48}\) The will is the organized self in function, the self in movement.”\(^{49}\)

But Kirk finds no clear statement in Hadfield’s book that allows for any real action of free-will: “It may be that every idea we possess is determined by some previous mental condition; . . we may be compelled to believe in psychological determinism”.\(^{50}\) Kirk, however, finds an inconsistency in Hadfield’s work, in that his use of such words as “accept”, “direct” and “purpose” point to a capacity for free and deliberate action.\(^{51}\) He notes a mingling of deterministic and non-deterministic sentiments in Hadfield’s discussion of sin. He grants that the book was written with a definite moral purpose; but when he deals with questions of practical ethics he emphasises freedom. Of sin, Hadfield writes: “(it) results from a deliberate and conscious choice of the self, the acceptance of a low ideal”.\(^{52}\) He continues: “our ends can be consciously conceived and voluntarily pursued [as] purposes”.\(^{53}\) “There is nothing, not psycho-analysis, not even religion, that can exonerate a man from building up his strength of character by the exercise of will”.\(^{54}\)

Kirk’s conclusion is that the psychology of his day had tried to exclude “that sense of ethical freedom and responsibility which we all possess from its survey of the evidence which it sets out to explain; but the attempt has been a failure. Perhaps the American ‘behaviourist’ school of

\(^{48}\) Hadfield, p.61, quoted Kirk, The Threshold of Ethics, p. 52.
\(^{49}\) Hadfield, p.65, quoted Kirk, op.cit. p. 53.
\(^{50}\) Hadfield, p.85, quoted Kirk, ibid.
\(^{51}\) Kirk, op.cit. p. 55.
\(^{52}\) Hadfield, p. 44, quoted Kirk, op.cit. p. 56.
\(^{53}\) Hadfield, p. 48, quoted Kirk, op.cit. p. 57.
\(^{54}\) Hadfield, p. 82. quoted Kirk, op.cit. p. 57.
research is the only psychological tradition which remains rigidly loyal to the mechanistic interpretation of human nature”.

However, Kirk notes that the study of human nature undertaken in his day has shown that the influences which affect our actions are more complex than previously supposed, and that the claims made for an unlimited range of free-will are excessive and hazardous. Furthermore, human beings have always been tempted to divest themselves of responsibility for their failings, and to say that “the world, the flesh and the devil” were too strong for them on a particular occasion. Kirk believes that the concept of “psychological constellations” has made it harder to “bring home to the sinner what used to be called ‘the sense of sin’ . . . the more I treat myself as a plaything of irresistible forces (automatisms, necessities, compulsions), the more I shall tend to neglect self-criticism and self-discipline; and the less I shall resist the seductive temptations of self-pity, self-excuse and self-justification”.

For Kirk, the tendency to speak of human action in terms of subconscious automation may result in widespread moral deterioration.

For if we have no power of free choice, says Kirk, traditional ethics must be adjudged meaningless. But he argues that when the scientist asserts that everywhere the principle of causal relations is to be discerned – the rule of cause and effect – a wholly deterministic system – and that all human action is to be explained by automatism, he can only do so because he has discerned somewhere in the universe the operation of free causes. “Where have such causes, such freedom, been discerned? There can be only one answer: where the moralist has always asserted their presence – in the human act”. Kirk maintains that assertion of causal relations presumes the operation of “free” causes because he consistently upholds the validity of

---

55 *The Threshold of Ethics*, p. 57. Kirk adds: “the behaviourist refuses to allow us any use of evidence drawn from introspection. Freedom, responsibility, and even consciousness itself are phenomena of which, though we seem to observe them in ourselves, we have no right to assume the existence in others . . consciousness, volition, desire . . are really only movements of particles or currents of energy in the world about us”.

56 op.cit. p. 59.

57 op.cit. p. 60.

58 ibid.

59 ibid.

60 op.cit. p. 62.
the concept of free-will in human beings that makes them morally accountable, in contrast to the views of determinists.

I have quoted extensively from this part of Kirk’s work because he is at pains to establish that although it is necessary to admit more in the way of subconscious automatisms and limitations of the will than traditional ethicists have done, in some at least of his acts, and to some real degree, the human agent is free and responsible.\textsuperscript{61}

(iii)

Evolution

Kirk turns from his discussion of the effect of psychological writing on ethical thought to the impact on it of evolutionary theories. In his view, evolution did not really impinge upon ethics until it coalesced with Hegelian pantheism into the doctrine of “progress”.\textsuperscript{62} From Hegel’s thought two tenets emerged which could be called evolutionary. The first was “Mind is higher than matter”, or “Only the rational is truly real”, the second, “What is is better than what has been”.\textsuperscript{63} Kirk claims that all Christians and indeed all thoughtful people would support the first, whereas the second he regards as open to doubt. “There is no scientific warrant for the supposition that the present age is nearer the ideal than its predecessors”.\textsuperscript{64}

Kirk criticises evolutionary moralists who believed that the western civilisation of the late nineteenth century displayed qualities that had survival-value. Huxley spoke of “adjustment to environment”, Stephen of “health of the social tissue”, Alexander of “maintenance of the social equilibrium” and Urban of “organic welfare”. But Kirk describes some moralists of this period as hedonists, or utilitarians, or democratic political theorists, or new humanists. The fourth chapter of this book is devoted to this last group. “The new sense that science had found sure ground in the slough of moral speculation, and the new conviction that Utopia, or the

\textsuperscript{61} The Threshold of Ethics, pp 62-63.
\textsuperscript{62} op.cit. p. 67.
\textsuperscript{63} ibid.
\textsuperscript{64} op.cit. p. 68.
millennium, or the earthly paradise, was all but realized, produced an optimism and enthusiasm which during their brief day must have cheered many hearts. But that day is over” 65

Kirk did not think that nineteenth century western civilization deserved praise, and in his judgment the “devastating European war and its disastrous aftermath” 66 removed the grounds for optimism. He found a supporter in Dean Inge:

“If Progress means the improvement of human nature itself, the question . . is whether the modern civilized man behaves better in the same circumstances than his ancestor would have done . . . It seems to me to be very doubtful whether when we are exposed to the same temptations we are more humane or more sympathetic or juster or less brutal than the ancients . . . the outrages committed on the Chinese after the Boxer rebellion showed that even a civilized nation cannot rely on being decently treated by Europeans if its civilization is different from their own.” 67

Kirk’s conclusion is that “evolution” can tell us nothing about moral purposes, nor can it throw any new light upon the problem of what is right or what is wrong. 68

Kirk attributes to the scientific study of customs and ideas among primitive races, past and present, the ending of the universal acceptance of the Ten Commandments as the canon of morality that was still the case in the eighteenth century. There were some tribes without words such as “virtue”, “vice”, “duty”, “sin” in their vocabulary. 69 Kirk says: “In this pre-moral stage, through which every race of man must have passed, conscience, with its associated ideas of obligation, right and wrong, was still wholly submerged under law. Then came the gradual separation of conscience from law, of morality from expediency.” 70 The nineteenth century evolutionists placed some precepts within the sphere of conscience, as being moral as well

65 The Threshold of Ethics, p. 69.
66 ibid.
68 Kirk, op.cit. p. 70.
69 Westermarck, Origin and Development of the Moral Ideas, i.p.132, quoted Kirk, op.cit. p. 73.
70 Kirk considered this “separation” in the first chapter of his book.
as legal; to transgress them became a sin as well as a crime.\textsuperscript{71} To almost all of the evolutionary writers, the only test which conscience could apply to the precepts which survived, now regarded as moral, was the test of social expediency. “Hence (so the theory ran) some conceptions, when the test was applied, were rejected as inexpedient and therefore of no moral worth . . . Others . . were retained and confirmed on the ground that they were as useful to society to-day as they had been in the distant past”.\textsuperscript{72} As an illustration of this process Kirk cites the establishment of monogamy which, he says, came about “. . . on the grounds of expediency; and like other surviving customs, received the award of moral approval”.\textsuperscript{73}

At this point in his argument Kirk concludes that the non-utilitarian has no more to fear from this aspect of the influence of evolutionary theory upon ethics than a degree of uncertainty as to the validity of his maxims. He must consent to reconsider them from time to time. The utilitarian is in a more difficult position, as utilitarianism has sought vindication in hedonism.\textsuperscript{74} Kirk acknowledges that utilitarians held right actions to be only those which ministered to the greatest possible pleasure or happiness of the greatest possible number.\textsuperscript{75} However, an individualist could regard his own happiness as more important than that of others.

Kirk next considers the notion that the idea of conscience itself, and with it the conception of morality, and the distinction between right and wrong, are illusions invented by society in the interests of its own expediency – they have no objective validity of their own. He attributes the moral indecision and unrest of his own day to the stigmatization of all moral precepts and of the thought of morality itself, as mere convention.\textsuperscript{76} Kirk criticises the work of the psychological determinist who wishes to treat the soul as an organism wholly subject to natural law, so that he may deal with its ills as successfully as a physician deals with bodily ills. Kirk believes that this attitude to human conduct requires him to treat the notion of moral

\textsuperscript{71} The Threshold of Ethics., p. 73.
\textsuperscript{72} op.cit. p. 74.
\textsuperscript{73} ibid.
\textsuperscript{74} op.cit. p. 79.
\textsuperscript{75} op.cit. p. 37
\textsuperscript{76} op.cit. p. 83.
freedom as an illusion. He judges evolutionary psychologists as being responsible for what he perceives as a lack of restraint in human behaviour and the worsening of the soul’s ills which the psychologists aim to cure. Kirk observed that the idea of conscience and the distinction between right and wrong have been fostered in human society for centuries. The reason for this is that in history most people have held them to be true, apart from all considerations of interest and expediency, and that they were right to do so.

“We have no right”, he concludes, “to compare the central conception of ethics with the central conception of utility and call the former a debased or illusory evolution from the latter. No consideration of its emergence in history can make the moral idea an illusion. It may have arisen late in the evolution of the race; but that does not affect its truth in any way. It is today a primary datum of consciousness; and it has no less right to be treated as such than any other experience or idea which we accept without question at its face-value. Moral ideas may change, be purified, be rejected, as time goes on. But the moral idea as such stands above challenge, as one of those things which have made good their footing in the universe of thought.”

This may be perceived as a dogmatic statement, as an example of Kirk’s not paying sufficient respect to the evolutionary psychology of his day. He discusses further the issue of the idea of morality on evolutionary grounds in the sections of his book on humanism, conscientiousness and religion.

(iv)

Humanism

Following this defence and advocacy of the moral idea, Kirk considers humanism, beginning with utilitarianism, which “professed to eliminate all the questions which had vexed moral philosophers, by putting forward a plain, unambiguous creed which would commend itself at once to the common conscience of mankind. Its purpose was . . to inculcate in all men that type of action, and that type of action alone, which would appear

77 The Threshold of Ethics, pp 83-84.
78 op.cit. pp 86-90
79 op.cit. p. 90.
on examination to promote the greatest possible happiness of the greatest possible number”.

In his chapter on *Conscience* Kirk considered the question “How far, if at all, does the rightness of an act depend upon its consequences?” He contrasts the views of utilitarians with those of intuitionists. As we have noted, utilitarians held that only those actions were right which in the circumstances ministered to the greatest possible pleasure or happiness of the greatest possible number. Intuitionists objected to the suggestion that pleasurable consequences are the only factor to be considered in assessing the rightness of an act. In Kirk’s view, an adequate response to the utilitarian view might be expressed in the form “. . . do not consider pleasurable consequences alone. Consider all consequences . . . and consider attendant and antecedent circumstances as well”.

Kirk puts this question to utilitarians: “Why should I promote the happiness of my fellow-men, even at my inconvenience?” He cites Bentham’s response to the question as a proposal to institute such penalties against egoistic behaviour that even the most selfish citizen would find in his interest to obey. Next he considers Hobbes’ view that for government to be possible, men must have consented to live in harmony as an organized community. This view seems to imply that men recognize a moral obligation to live together in unity. For Kirk, Hobbes is here commending seeking the greatest happiness of others, because life will be intolerable otherwise. “The appeal is still to expediency, not to conscience”. And he finds in John Stuart Mill’s writing an acknowledgement of the importance of conscience: “the sanction of utility is the same as that of all other moral standards – the conscientious feelings of mankind; and therefore the precept of ‘regard to the pleasures and pains of others is intuitively obligatory’ ”. In Kirk’s view, when the issue between expediency and morality is faced, the utilitarian comes down on the side of conscience. His doctrine is

---

80 *The Threshold of Ethics*. p. 91.
81 op.cit. pp 37-38.
82 op.cit. p. 92.
84 op.cit. p. 93.
propounded as a primary moral intuition which must be accepted or rejected but cannot be validated by appeal to any principle beyond itself. So Kirk holds that psychology, evolutionary thought and utilitarianism alike are sceptical of traditional ethics; and in his view humanism, as a successor to utilitarianism in the school of moral philosophy, while professing to maintain something in common with the Christian ethical tradition, does so on a basis of expediency alone, without appeal to conceptions related to conscience. Thus “the difficulties (surrounding) the words ‘ought’, ‘right’, and ‘duty’, still remain”. 86

Kirk distinguishes between the Christian humanist and the non-Christian humanist. The former is interested in politics, art, architecture and literature “because (so) is the will of God – the objective moral law – the ultimate precept of conscience for man . . . but in the sceptical upheaval of the present day . . . [the non-Christian humanist] has abandoned all belief in God, in objective morality, in conscience, in everything except desire and its satisfaction. Yet he aims at propagating a type of conduct identical in all essentials with the conduct of the Christian humanist and this entirely on the basis of self-interest.” 87

Kirk regards Walter Lippmann as the most popular representative of this creed. These words, Kirk believes, express his outlook:

“There has been, in the great Christian tradition, a disposition to believe that behind the visible world of physical objects and human institutions there is a supernatural kingdom from which ultimately all laws, all judgments, all rewards, all punishments, and all compensations are derived. To those who believe that this kingdom exists, the modern spirit is nothing less than treason to God. . . To the modern spirit, on the other hand, the belief in this kingdom must necessarily seem a grandiose fiction projected by human needs and desires. The humanistic view is that the popular faith does not prove the existence of its objects, but only the presence of a desire that such objects should exist . . . To one who takes the humanistic view, the problem is how mankind, deprived of the great fictions, is to come to terms with the

86 The Threshold of Ethics, p. 95.
87 op. cit. p. 96.
needs that created those fictions . . . I take the humanistic view, because in the kind of world I happen to live in, I can do no other.”

Kirk’s response is to say that where desire and the fulfilment of desire are the only things that matter, such words as “right” and “wrong”, “meaning”, “purpose” and “ideals”, are empty. Yet he quotes Lippmann’s use of them; Lippmann favours Confucius’s maxim, “To follow what my heart desires, without transgressing the right”. Lippmann’s ideal of “maturity” is the scientist who sacrifices everything in pursuit of an answer to the problem he has undertaken to solve. Lippmann’s term for this life is “disinterested”, in the sense of “unselfish”. But, says Kirk, if my own happiness is the only purpose I have in view, it is absurd to call me “unselfish”. For Kirk, humanism is a system which can mean no distinction of moral worth between the selfish debaucher and the “disinterested” scientist. Kirk notes that Mill alludes to “higher” faculties and to pleasures more “valuable” than others, and that both Christian and other writers use terms such as “happiness”, “value”, “personality”, “self-expression” and “self-realization”. “We are . . . told that ethics is the ‘pursuit of values’, ‘personality is the key to the problems of life’ . . . ‘self-realization’ is the goal of Christian endeavour”. The humanist, says Kirk, makes the object of life the achievement of real happiness, or of the highest values, or of ideal personality, or the realization of the true self.

For Kirk, those adjectives mean “the kind of happiness which we ought to pursue”, “the kind of personality we ought to express”, the kind of self we ought to realize”; they are ethical terms “borrowed from the world of invisible laws which the humanist has disowned”. Their import is to encourage the individual to pursue not simply his own happiness but his happiness on certain moral conditions; “if in any set of circumstances happiness appears to conflict with the moral requirements envisaged by the

89 W. Lippmann, op.cit. pp 192, 193, quoted Kirk, op.cit. p. 98.
91 J.S. Mill, Utilitarianism, c.2, quoted Kirk, op.cit. p. 103.
92 op.cit. p. 105.
93 ibid.
words ‘true happiness’, then we expect a man to satisfy the moral conditions, and let the happiness go”.

Kirk’s conclusion is that happiness and right action do not always go together; an action is not right simply because it promotes happiness, or good, or values, or self-realization. “An action is right because it is right; and for no other reason”.

Kirk concludes his study of humanism with a discussion of Lippmann’s writing on marriage and sex. Lippmann believes that the scientific discovery of methods of birth control has made it possible to distinguish between “the primary and secondary objects of the sexual impulse”, between “parenthood as a vocation” and “love as an art”. His main point is that the second of these can only make people happy when it is combined with the first. He supports his claim by referring to the work of contemporary novelists in which often unrestrained freedom in sexual behaviour is depicted as ending in tragedy and despair.

It follows from this, says Kirk, that the prudent and happy use of the sex instinct can only be found in the context of parenthood and home-building. Lippmann asserts that this context is only possible where marriage is monogamous and is regarded at the outset as a permanent relationship.

Kirk finds that this is in the highest tradition of sound logic. “As between the ascetic humanism of Lippmann, and the libertine humanism of the modern novel and play, there is no real choice”. Lippmann regards parenthood as a “responsibility”, a “vocation”, a duty for those sexually attracted to each other. For Kirk, this is ethical intuitionism; his humanism cloaks a moral idealism which would not be accepted by “the careless seeker after pleasure”. Kirk’s judgment is that “like all other writers who take life seriously, and set out to place the ethical traditions of Western

---

94 The Threshold of Ethics, p. 105.
95 op.cit. p. 107.
98 op.cit. p. 110.
99 op.cit. p. 111.
100 ibid.
civilization on a solid, even though non-ethical basis, he is, in the last resort, a moralist malgré lui”.

(v)

Conscientiousness

Kirk begins his chapter on Conscientiousness by noting some results of the scientific study of customs and taboos. “It now appears that the ideas of what actions are right and what are wrong vary between nation and nation, culture and culture, age and age, in accordance with variations of belief, superstition, aesthetic interests, economic needs . . . to an apparently unlimited extent”. The new knowledge has made for tolerance. “We are no longer prepared to insist that our enlightened generation must be right – ethical truth, like all truth, has different aspects . . . we put forward our views more tentatively than before; . . we prefer to call them views, opinions, beliefs, rather than convictions, intuitions, creeds . . . This . . is all to the good, but behind it lies a change of outlook nothing less than revolutionary”.

Kirk notes the common opinion that as far as human judgments are concerned, the right and wrong of a particular action are “merely matters of opinion or taste” – we are not permitted to criticize or condemn others’ determinations of right or wrong –” this does not necessarily imply that there is no absolute right or wrong about the matter under review . . (but) even if there is such a final judgment, the knowledge of it is locked up in the mind of God, or is unattainable to man . . . so that for A to attempt to convert B to his own opinion is . . . a waste of time”.

Kirk finds this attitude to ethics enhanced by writers who speak of conscience and its dictates as “feelings” rather than as derived from reason or intuition. This is regrettable: “it . . lends colour to the popular aphorism: ‘as long as a man believes he is doing right, he is doing right’, which is the

---

101 The Threshold of Ethics, p. 113.
102 op.cit. p. 114.
104 op.cit. p. 115.
watchword of . . . subjectivism or relativism . . this phrase is manifestly absurd”. Further reflection leads Kirk to set down two propositions:

(1) If a man does what he does because he is convinced that he is right, his motive is conscientious, and praiseworthy, and

(2) If he does whatever he does in spite of a conviction that it is wrong, his motive is ‘unconscientious”, or blameworthy.105

Kirk holds that moralists have rightly placed the highest value upon “conscientiousness”. The medieval church upheld the maxim: “Conscience, even when in error, is always to be obeyed”. For Kirk, it matters intensely that “men should do what they do from conscientious motives, and should avoid unconscientious action”.106 He found in the philosopher Kant the “all-inclusive ethical principle that ‘it is only the motive that matters.’ ”107

But for Kirk this raises the question “Granted that conscientious motives matter, does not rightness of action matter as well?” “To that the only possible answer is ‘Yes’ ”.108 His ideal is not simply that of a state of society in which everyone acts with praiseworthy motives, but one in which everyone does what really is right because he believes it to be right.109

Kirk asks the question: Is there any connection between praiseworthiness of motive and rightness of action? He cites with approval John Stuart Mill: “The motive has nothing to do with the morality of the action, though much with the worth of the agent”.110 Kirk considers, by way of example, the time when the conscience of the community as a whole had decided that the burning of witches was wrong. But an inquisitor from earlier days was convinced that burning was the only right way of dealing with witches. The community would believe him to be utterly wrong. But every fair-minded man would be bound to respect him for the honesty with

105 The Threshold of Ethics, p. 119.
106 ibid.
107 Immanuel Kant, Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Morals, first section (T.K. Abbott, Kant’s Theory of Ethics, pp 9, 10, 16, 18), quoted Kirk, op.cit. p. 120.
108 ibid.
109 ibid.
110 Mill, Utilitarianism, c.2, quoted Kirk, op.cit. p. 121.
which he adhered to his principles, in the face of social disapproval and personal anguish, if he also abhorred the thought of inflicting pain on others.\footnote{\textit{The Threshold of Ethics}, p. 122.}

Earlier, Kirk had seen reason to avoid the phrase “always wrong”, or “wrong in itself”. But when he considers the sale of children into slavery, and the practice of infanticide, while the customary morality of a particular civilization may have tolerated these practices, most reasonable people would regard them as “morally” wrong, however excellent the motive on a particular occasion. Kirk concludes: “In some things . . everyone holds that there is a standard of objective rightness which claims observance, and \textit{that he knows what that standard is}”.\footnote{\textit{op.cit.} p. 123.} So for Kirk, words such as “right”, “duty”, and “ought”, the vocabulary of moral judgments, are concerned with \textit{actions} – “the right action for me to do”, “what I ought to do”, and “my duty” are all synonymous. But there is another class of moral judgments which has to do with \textit{motives}, using words such as “conscientious”, “unconscientious”, “praiseworthy” or “blameworthy”.\footnote{\textit{ibid.}} For Kirk, the distinction between right actions and praiseworthy motives is of first importance. He regards as unfortunate the variety of terms used by writers on ethics, such as “virtuous” and “moral” for his “right” and “praiseworthy”, for actions and motives respectively; this indicates a lack of an accepted terminology for the distinction to which he refers.

Kirk concludes that in judging the rightness of an action, it is not necessary to take into account the motive of its agent.\footnote{\textit{op.cit.} p. 124. “Motive” here is used in the sense in which a praiseworthy, or conscientious, motive would be guaranteed by an affirmative answer to the question: “Did he do it because he believed it to be right?” and a blameworthy or unconscientious motive by an affirmative answer to the question “Did he do it although he believed it to be wrong?” \textit{ibid.}} Are there other factors which need to be taken into account? Kirk’s view is that only those actions which are conscious and deliberate are proper material for a moral judgment.\footnote{\textit{op.cit.} p. 125.} In answer to the above question, Kirk judges that ulterior purpose or intention (which is different from “motive” as Kirk defines it)
must have something to do with the rightness or wrongness of an action.\textsuperscript{116} He considers the case of an inquisitor who tortures a prisoner with the intention solely to save the prisoner’s soul. Most people, in Kirk’s view, would say of this: “to act for the salvation of souls is to have a right intention, but not even this intention can make torture right. For this case we must adjudge the intention right but the action wrong”. Thus a right intention does not always make the action designed to give it effect a right action. If it is right that in a time of general starvation a millionaire should devote his wealth to feeding the hungry, it remains his duty to do so, even if his intention is solely to obtain a peerage for himself. But from this need for considering the intention it does not follow (as J.S. Mill argued) that the rightness or wrongness of an action can be deduced automatically from the rightness or wrongness of the intention which it was designed to bring into effect.\textsuperscript{117}

Of the case of the abovementioned inquisitor, Kirk’s view is that he believes his action is right because his conscience is ethically immature. Kirk allows for the possibility that the inquisitor may be ignorant of the moral principle that torture is so wrong that even the intention of saving souls cannot make it right. “This ignorance makes him blameless, but it does not affect the rightness or wrongness of his action”.\textsuperscript{118}

Next Kirk considers a kind of ignorance which appears to affect not only the praiseworthiness of the agent but also the rightness and wrongness of the action: the unavoidable ignorance of relevant circumstances. He cites the case of a son away from home on business, when it is normally his duty to stay at work until his proper holidays arrive. But if he suddenly learns that his mother at home (whom, on good grounds, he believed to be in good health) is on her death bed, it is his duty to go home at once. If – through no fault of his – some time elapsed between the moment at which his mother became ill and the moment when he learnt of her illness, Kirk’s question is when did his “duty to go home” begin? His answer is “when the

\textsuperscript{116} \textit{The Threshold of Ethics}, p. 126.
\textsuperscript{117} op.cit. p. 127.
\textsuperscript{118} op.cit. p. 128.
son learnt of the illness” – his unavoidable ignorance of this circumstance prevented his “duty to go home” beginning any earlier.\textsuperscript{119}

Kirk makes the point that he has not taken the view that whatever a man believes to be right is the right thing to do. “We have inferred it to be (the son’s) duty not from the fact that he judges it to be so, but from our examination of the circumstances as they were known to him at a particular moment . . . the son . . . is right in acting as though his mother were perfectly well, so long as he believes her to be so . . . on the grounds of his unavoidable ignorance of the illness”.\textsuperscript{120}

For Kirk, ignorance of relevant fact, however it comes about, must affect the question of a man’s duty. But if he allows us to consider the kind of ignorance that comes from forgetfulness, some modification of the principle may be necessary – as in the case of a man who borrows money: on the above principle it might be thought it is only his duty to repay the money so long as he remembers he has borrowed it. Kirk owns, however, that it is extremely difficult to see what form this modification should take.\textsuperscript{121}

Kirk grants that it is not easy to decide questions of right or wrong on any given occasion: it is understandable that a person may say “I can never be certain what is the right thing for me to do”. “‘I ought implies I can’, and if I cannot know what my duty is, . . . I cannot in any ethical sense do it”.\textsuperscript{122} Some may say that the maxim “I ought implies I can” has really to do rather with praiseworthiness than rightness; that is, that we praise and blame people for their actions implies that we believe them to possess free-will. However, Kirk affirms that the unlikelihood of reaching truth in ethical questions is no greater than the unlikelihood of reaching it in scientific or historical enquiry. In these other forms of enquiry the improbability of reaching anything but provisional judgements is never held to stultify effort. There seems no valid reason, therefore, why it should do in the matter of practical ethics.\textsuperscript{123}

\textsuperscript{119} The Threshold of Ethics, pp 128-129.
\textsuperscript{120} op.cit. p. 129.
\textsuperscript{121} op.cit. p. 131.
\textsuperscript{122} op.cit. p. 132.
\textsuperscript{123} ibid.
Furthermore Kirk holds that it is possible to reach some conclusions that can be called “moral certainties”, that is, that we are morally entitled to assume them as true, and to act upon them . . . “in no normal circumstances can it ever be right to torture a child or to sell it into slavery”. So he varies his earlier phrases slightly: “If a man does what he does because he is *morally certain* that it is right, his motive is conscientious and praiseworthy: if he does it in spite of the *moral certainty* that it is wrong, his motive is unconscientious and blameworthy”.\(^{124}\)

Kirk then raises two questions: What am I to do where I am convinced that by allowing another person to obey his conscience I shall be conniving at a gravely wrong action, or that I can only prevent such a wrong action being done by appealing to unconscientious and blameworthy motives?\(^ {125}\) His response is: “Nothing can ever justify *me* in disobeying *my* conscience. . . . But if I have to choose between allowing a very great wrong to be committed and inducing a man to disobey his conscience, it would appear that in some rare cases the latter may be the right course for me. If my only way of preventing a conscientious regicide from throwing the bomb which will precipitate a world war is to offer him a huge bribe, it may be my duty to offer the bribe”.\(^ {126}\)

Kirk discerns a conflict between two courses of action, each of which is normally “right” or a “duty” – the duty of promoting the greatest happiness for the greatest number, and the duty of promoting conscientiousness. To the question “Which course of action will promote the greatest amount of unconscientiousness?” he answers that a large enough bribe may make it “morally certain” that the regicide may yield to temptation. But it may also be “morally certain” that the throwing of the bomb will produce a world war; the outbreak of such a war is “morally certain” to produce much unconscientiousness, together with the other evil

\(^{124}\) *The Threshold of Ethics*, p. 134.  
\(^{125}\) ibid.  
\(^{126}\) op.cit. p. 138.
effects of such a war. In this case, he concludes it would clearly be right to offer the bribe.\textsuperscript{127}

Kirk grants that it is difficult to decide what action is the right action in any given set of circumstances. The “ideal utilitarian” who says by way of a solution to the difficulty: “Discover which action will promote the greatest good in the circumstances, and you have the right action” fails in Kirk’s view because “the sensualist and the philanthropist have very different ideas of what is “good”, and . . . what is right”.\textsuperscript{128}

Kirk then asks “If war, extreme poverty, starvation, bad housing, produce unconscientiousness, should not the test of the rightness of an action be the degree to which it will produce conscientiousness?” – which theory, called “Perfectionism”, could be stated thus “Right actions are those which help others to become conscientious”.\textsuperscript{129}

But for Kirk this is not sufficient. Conscientiousness must be directed towards securing some objective end or discharging some objective duty which is apart from the conscientiousness with which it is pursued. His illustration is the running of a shop: it is not sufficient for the staff to be conscientious: the objective end of the shop is selling things.\textsuperscript{130}

(vi)

Religion

The final chapter of \textit{The Threshold of Ethics} is entitled \textit{Religion}. Kirk begins it by restating his belief that human beings have free will. “When a man does what he does because he believes it to be right, we say that he has acted from a conscientious motive, and regard him as worthy of praise. This would be absurd unless we supposed him to be in some measure a free agent.”\textsuperscript{131}

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{127} \textit{The Threshold of Ethics}, p. 139.  \\
\textsuperscript{128} op.cit. p. 140.  \\
\textsuperscript{129} op.cit. p. 141.  \\
\textsuperscript{130} op.cit. p. 142.  \\
\textsuperscript{131} op.cit. p. 144.  \\
\end{flushleft}
Kirk recognises that moral judgments fall into more than the two distinct classes which he has hitherto admitted, as he reflects on the view that some people desire to do what they believe to be right. He quotes one of his contemporaries: “When the desire that we act upon is of a kind that usually leads to right acts, and therefore ought to be encouraged, I call it a virtuous act”. The same writer notes that there are some people whose desire to do what they believe to be right in the circumstances is stronger than any other desire which those circumstances arouse in them. In them he says, reverence for the moral law has become a “hunger and thirst after righteousness”, and he describes acts which spring from such a motive as saintly. Kirk accepts this view, to the point of offering these definitions:

“A ‘virtuous’ motive is a motive which habitually leads to the kind of action we call ‘right’; whilst the desire to do right actions as such we call ‘saintly’ . . . where a man is habitually under the influence of motives of this kind, we may say that he has a ‘virtuous’ or ‘saintly’ character . . . just as when he habitually does what he believes to be right because he believes it to be right we . . call him ‘conscientious’ or ‘praiseworthy.‘

Kirk goes on to present a revised definition of an ideal society. Earlier in his book he had said that his ideal was a state of society in which everyone does what really is right because he believes it to be right. At this point he has developed his thinking. “the ideal society . . . will not be made up of conscientious persons . . . struggling against rebellious impulses; it will be a communio sanctorum (communion of saints), where all do right for the sheer joy of doing it.”

It is a mistake to assume that if we wish to be saintly people, we can only attain this goal by living conscientiously. “. . . it is evident . . that a conscientious habit of life leads direct to a preoccupation with oneself which is the very reverse of saintliness . . the ideal character . . has about it a certain spontaneity. It is unselfconscious and unreflective . . the ‘saintly’ person

133 E.F. Carritt, ibid, quoted Kirk, op.cit. p. 145.
134 op.cit. p. 148.
135 op.cit. p. 120.
136 from his thinking on conscientiousness on p.120.
137 op.cit. p. 151.
may indeed have still to determine what is the right action in the circumstances before him, but at least he cannot be misled by his emotions, for his dominant desire is to do what is right.”

Kirk says the preoccupation of the self, the mark of the conscientious man, leads to scrupulosity and unnecessary self-reproach. Or it can lead to the kind of self-righteousness and self-complacency of the Pharisee in the New Testament story who said “I thank thee, God, that I am not as other men are” and listed his good deeds and acts of service. This kind of self-complacency may lead to hypocrisy; for example, to the ignoring of known duties which may be irksome, and to the discharging of other duties which are not difficult. Kirk illustrates the danger of self-righteousness and the adoption of an attitude of moral superiority towards others by the service that becomes dominance; as in the case of “creditor nations towards debtor nations – an attitude of paternal benevolence, not unmixed with paternal severity, which . . robs their ‘service’ of everything which can evoke real gratitude, and breeds irritation and resentment in its beneficiaries”.

Kirk offers this contrast:

“Traditional ethics has . . presented us with an ideal – sanctity; and a way of life – conscientiousness. But between the two there is a great gulf fixed; and, if we are not born saintly – it would seem that we cannot achieve saintliness by the way of conscientiousness. Ethics alone is ‘not enough’; we cannot by taking thought for ourselves or exerting effort add even a cubit to our moral stature. The moralist . . . who was supremely conscious of this difficulty was St Paul . . . he was the first to show the world the fundamental dilemma of all ethics, and also to point to religion as the only way of escape.”

Kirk cites two dogmas – the dogma of the existence of God, and the dogma of personal immortality – as having been used to fill apparent gaps in the logic of ethics. A moralist may argue that our intuitions of justice and injustice abhor the sight of the wicked flourishing while the righteous suffer. Despite our best efforts it seems impossible that human action can redress

---

139 op.cit. p. 156.
140 Kirk, op.cit. p. 158. Kirk probably had in mind the text of Romans 7: 14-29.
these readily observable inequalities. “We must then assume . . a life after death . . and a God who shall in the end apportion happiness to merit and punishment to demerit . . . Unless the moral consciousness is to be offended in the greatest of all issues – that of the appropriateness of happiness to virtue – . . there must be a God to whom we may look for the vindication of right against wrong.”

Kirk stated earlier that the idea of supernatural reward and punishment undermines the idea of conscience: once conduct becomes “interested”, or actions are consciously performed for the sake of reward, morality ceases to exist. Yet Kirk acknowledges that for the moralist the demands of conscience are unlimited. However, “it is only too evident that the short span of this earthly life will never suffice for anyone to aim at fulfilling the law of his being. Once more the principle, ‘I ought implies that I can’, comes into play. Conscience tells me that I ought to fulfil all righteousness; therefore my existence must be commensurate with the unlimited demands which conscience lays on me. It is necessary that the soul should have a ‘duration adequate to the complete fulfilment of the moral law’; and the only ‘duration’ which fits this principle is that of eternity.”

Kirk’s point is that the thought of God is not religion, nor is the thought of eternity eternal life: they do not link ethics and religion together. For him, most people who regard religion as essential to morality do so for another reason. “An outraged sense of justice does not demand with them (as it did with Kant) the doctrine of God as the final disposer of human history . . . what moves them is the conviction of their own moral failures; and they turn to religion . . for grace to overcome the temptations by which they find themselves enslaved.”

141 The Threshold of Ethics, p. 159.
142 op.cit. p. 24.
144 op.cit. pp 159-160.
145 op.cit. p. 160.
But for Kirk a view or doctrine of the grace of God is inadequate which sees grace as God helping human beings to discharge their duties and resist temptations but which still required them to make an effort of free will if they are to fulfil their ideals. “... so long as a man’s successful prosecution of his moral undertakings depends ... upon his own efforts, ... self-centredness. ... self-righteousness, self-scrutiny, and self-contempt are as possible ... as before the fact of grace came into account.” Kirk claims that religion provides the solution of his ethical problem because it consists primarily in worship, and that is the view of all great religious thinkers. He admits that this is a paradox, if worship, “which of all else seems to have least bearing upon the practical difficulties of the moral life, appears in the end to offer the only hope of their practical solution.”

But religion cannot achieve anything by making worship the rule of life as ethics makes right action the rule. For Kirk, “worship or the spirit of worship – the love of God ... must be a spontaneous expression if (the practices of worship) are to be of any value. ... It is a debased caricature of worship that men should honour God with their life, so long as their hearts are far from Him.”

For Kirk, behind all acts of worship should lie the motive or impulse to worship, the worshipping spirit; religion claims that behind all acts of saintliness and behind the saintly life as such, the same spirit lies. But the acquisition of this spirit cannot be made a duty, “for the conscientious pursuit of worship like every other conscientious pursuit, must fail to bridge the gulf which lies between praiseworthiness and spontaneity.”

146 The Threshold of Ethics, p. 161.
147 op.cit. p. 162.
148 ibid.
149 op.cit. p. 163.
150 op.cit. p. 164.
Kirk poses two questions: first, is it true that the worshipping spirit, where it is present, will produce saintliness of character? Secondly, since the spirit of worship cannot be achieved by exerting will, of what use is it that religion should draw our attention to it?

On the first question, Kirk’s view is that genuine worship occurs when the worshippers’ whole desires are centred upon forwarding the well-being of the object of their worship. In this worship there is a spontaneity and unselfconsciousness that is the mark of saintliness. Enthusiasm is the outward form of saintliness; the right action which is the necessary content of saintliness derives from worship’s being a form of association. Kirk holds that all forms of association produce assimilation between those who are associated. “But where the association is that of an inferior with one to whom he looks up, the former’s mind is in a receptive state which will result in his becoming like the object of his worship . . . so the worshipper assumes . . . the lineaments of his God, but the lineaments of the deity do not change.”

So for Kirk the task of religion is, together with ethics, to attempt to set before the worshipper’s mind a God whose character realises its ethical ideal. The ethical scheme of Christianity is based upon a revelation of the character of God which Kirk holds to be authentic and authoritative. Christianity claims that God has revealed himself in human form and has lived as a human being among human beings. The claim appeals to records of the life of Jesus Christ almost contemporary with the events which they describe. The historicity of the New Testament Gospel accounts is of great importance. “If true, it is vital that their truth should be established; if false, it is essential that the fiction should be exposed.” Kirk concludes: “Where men worship a God whom they consciously recognize as One in whom all their ethical ideals are supremely realized, the transition from the

---

151 *The Threshold of Ethics*, p. 164.
152 op.cit. p. 165.
153 ibid.
154 op.cit. pp 165-166.
conscientious pursuit of those ideals to their saintly expression will in due course be attested.”

On the second question, as to how the spirit of worship can be obtained, Kirk concedes that while often worshippers’ conception of the God whom they claim to worship may be inadequate and distorted, he affirms that it is possible to widen and correct worshippers’ thought about God until it conforms to the revelation made in Christ; “and once the worshipper is seized by love for the vision of God ‘in the face of Jesus Christ’, his life will begin to conform to that pattern.”

Kirk’s view is that since all things partake of the divine nature, (the belief known as “divine immanence”), human beings can be led from their appreciation of any part of God’s universe to an appreciation of God Himself as He has chosen to manifest Himself to the world. “There is no one without some love or worship.”

One can begin by loving the beauties of nature, serving the needy, working for the wellbeing of one’s country, living for one’s family and children. “In every life there is some such interest which kindles the vital flame of self-forgetfulness, and so is wholly different from a conscientiously adopted duty. The business of religion is to find the crucial interest in each case, and then to show that it is only one aspect of an interest in God, because God is all in all.”

Under such an influence, the focus of worshipper’s unselfconscious devotion moves from its original objective to a personal God, “whose . . . characteristics are . . . purity, holiness, mercy, love and pity. As this transference takes place, the worshipper’s character grows in likeness to the character of his God, and purity, holiness, love and their fellow-virtues spring to life in all the unselfconscious beauty of saintliness . . . worship, though it cannot be achieved by effort, can be evoked and attached to its most satisfying object.”

---

155 op.cit. p. 166.
156 The Threshold of Ethics, p. 166.
157 op.cit. p. 167.
158 ibid.
159 ibid.
Kirk ends his book by summing up his conclusions in avowedly religious language. If it is possible to speak of moments of crisis in people's lives, the most important moment is “that at which the spirit of worship innate in every man becomes centred upon an object of worship – an idea of God – which is strictly adequate to the highest ethical ideals. To this moment the name of ‘conversion’ is habitually applied.”

Worship of such a God, greater and more powerful than the human soul, issues in spontaneous activities of service similar to the activities attributed by believers to the God who is worshipped. “If He is merciful, then the worshipper becomes merciful; if He in His Incarnate life humiliated himself, the worshipper acquires humility; if He is benevolent to all men, the worshipper grows benevolent too.”

This acceptance by the worshipper of the proposition that God is as He is described to be in these respects is described by Kirk as “faith”, as he claims it has always been termed. “Faith” for him also includes the spirit of worship, devotion and service, concentrated in God himself. Such faith issues in the beginning of the life of saintliness. “Actions which have hitherto been performed . . . from conscientiousness alone, are now performed spontaneously and happily . . Thus ‘faith’ will naturally have its fruit and complement in ‘works’.”

The influence upon the worshipper of the God who is worshipped is called “grace”. Kirk compares this influence with the influence of great music, inspiring words, or the exhilarating personality of a well-loved friend. He agrees with those who say that grace is irresistible. “If it be true that love conquers all things, then grace, which is . . the love of God in operation, must in the end be . . invincible.”

For Kirk, religion expects its prophets and pastors to undertake a programme of presenting the thought of God in such a way that it will kindle

---

160 The Threshold of Ethics, p. 168.
161 ibid.
162 op.cit. pp 168-169.
163 op.cit. p. 169.
love and worship, faith and works. This does not include conscientiousness. In Kirk’s view, the man who has been conscientious about his moral duties is most likely to respond to the appeal of religion. “When the moral law becomes embodied for him in a personal God, the transition to full worship and all that it implies is easy and natural.”

The prophet needs to preach conscientiousness to the unconverted, that they may be ready for conversion, and to the converted, that their spirit of worship may cover all aspects of life, resulting in saintliness. “His primary function is to proclaim not so much the duty as the beauty of holiness, to the end that conscientiousness may be absorbed in saintliness. If he fails to remember this throughout his ministry, he may be an impressive moral teacher, but he will never be an agent in helping men to the consummation of their moral possibilities.”

To those who say they would gladly worship the God of the preacher but cannot respond positively to his preaching, Kirk’s answer is that Christianity points to patience and hope, “giving the assurance that those who persevere in the hard task of obeying conscience will receive all the benefits of grace in God’s time . . . ‘He that shall endure to the end, the same shall be saved’. So far as ethics is concerned, there is no higher form of salvation than saintliness; and though conscientiousness seems precluded from attaining such salvation by its own efforts, religion assures us that it will not in the end be withheld from those who follow the stern rule of duty wherever it leads.”

---

164 The Threshold of Ethics, p. 170.
165 op.cit. pp 170-171.
166 op.cit. p. 171.
CHAPTER 7

MORAL PROBLEMS AND MORAL THEOLOGY


In the Introduction to the Second Edition (described by the author as revised and a large part rewritten) Kirk states:

“The first edition of this book was published in 1933. Within three years it was in many respects completely out of date. In 1935 the Convocation of Canterbury and York received an important report on the Church and Marriage from their Joint Committees . . . and by 1936 the proposals which were eventually embodied in the revolutionary Matrimonial Causes Act of 1937 were being widely ventilated.”

The Act permitted clergy to refuse marriage in Church to any divorced person who had a previous partner still living. Accordingly the Convocations resolved that “the Church should not allow the use of the [marriage] service in the case of anyone who has a previous partner still living.”

Kirk then noted a subsequent increase in the annual number of divorce decrees issued which he described as “alarming”, and the willingness on the part of people experiencing difficulties in their marriage to consider divorce as the simplest solution of their troubles rather than attempting reconciliation. One result of the Act had been a deeper division among Church people than had ever before been the case. A minority called for a firm stand by the Church against the remarriage of divorced persons while the majority regarded such a tendency as cruel rigorism.

Secular Marriage Guidance Councils and the Anglican Moral Welfare Councils were part of an attempt to combat what Kirk regarded as a grave moral situation. One secular Council reported enquiries from young

---

1 Kirk, Marriage and Divorce, p.v.
2 ibid.
3 ‘op.cit. p. vi.
4 ‘op.cit.-p. viii.
people seeking advice before marriage; cases of domestic friction where help was possible; the reconciliation of estranged couples; and other cases where attempts at help seemed unsuccessful. Anglican Councils were not only engaged in “rescue” work but in the task of educating young people in a Christian understanding of the character and obligations of marriage. This kind of work was constantly going on in the Diocese of Oxford of which Kirk was Bishop at the time of the publication of the second edition of this book.\(^5\)

These developments, together with what Kirk perceived to be public ignorance of Christian doctrine and discipline on marriage and divorce, drove Kirk to produce the second edition in order to state his view of traditional Christian teaching.

(i)

Conditions of Marriage

Kirk’s concern is with the union of the sexes – the mating of man and woman. He claims that virtually all serious-minded thinkers, whether they claim to hold the Christian view or not, will reject three forms of mating: polygamy, prostitution and promiscuity. They are seen by him to debase human nature in both the man and the woman; women are perceived as the plaything of men, and men are perceived as beasts.\(^6\)

For Kirk, “On the Christian view, for a sex-union between man and woman to be according to God’s will, it must fulfil certain conditions. . . what we mean by ‘according to God’s will’ can be expressed by the words ‘fulfilling God’s highest ideal for man’, or ‘capable of forwarding God’s purposes in the fullest degree.’ ”\(^7\) He allows that there may be various kinds of unions among “backward or uninstructed people” who can be called “blameless” because of ignorance. He cites as an example polygamy among “primitive” tribes. But these unions cannot be regarded as in accordance with the will of God.

---

\(^5\) *Marriage and Divorce*, p. vii.
\(^6\) op.cit. p. 13.
\(^7\) op.cit. p. 14.
The conditions Kirk stipulates are these. First, the union must be deliberate, entered upon by means of a contract, with such *forms* and *publicity*, and before such witnesses, as are required by the communities concerned whether secular, or religious, or both.\(^8\)

The immediate purpose of the contract is the cohabitation of the couple for the procreation of children and for the undertaking of parenthood’s responsibilities if children are born; and for “the mutual society, help and comfort that the one ought to have of the other, both in prosperity and adversity.”\(^9\) One condition of the contract is that both man and woman should *understand* its implications and should *intend* to carry them out. Both must also be *free agents*, not under coercion or compulsion, fully consenting to the contract, and *legally and morally competent* to enter into it. Kirk notes that almost all societies have recognised certain relationships of consanguinity that make those between whom they exist legally and morally incompetent to enter into a sexual relationship (for example, father and daughter, brother and sister). The same applies to other relationships, called *affinities*, (for example, a man with his wife’s mother).\(^10\)

The final condition cited by Kirk has caused divergence both in matters of detail and on the question of principle. “According to the general Christian tradition, the contract must be between one man and one woman, to the exclusion of all others, as long as they both shall live, and this condition – which prohibits anyone from going through the form of a contract with a second partner during the life-time of the first – must be understood and accepted by both parties, if there is to be full and free consent. It is upon the truth or falsity of this last, and strictly Christian, condition that the whole problem of divorce hangs; for it is by virtue of this condition that the Church speaks of marriage as ‘indissoluble.’”\(^11\)

\(^8\) *Marriage and Divorce*, p. 15.
\(^10\) Kirk, op.cit. pp 16-17. Kirk cites twentieth-century legislation which removed some items from the legal list (e.g. marriage with deceased wife’s sister), and notes that the Church of England, after an exhaustive and independent enquiry, agreed that these omissions were desirable, and revised its canons accordingly.
\(^11\) op.cit. p. 17.
(ii)

Christian Marriage

Kirk defines a “Christian marriage” as one in which all the above conditions are met, and both husband and wife are baptized. He adds: “According to age-long tradition, ‘Christian marriage’ is said to be a ‘sacrament’, (that is), it brings with it not merely moral obligations and natural joys, but also supernatural grace to sanctify the joys and strengthen the recipients for the discharge of their obligations.”

To the last of the conditions mentioned by Kirk, the indissolubility of marriage, Kirk devotes the fourth chapter of this book. At this point he says, “what is meant when Christians speak of marriage as ‘indissoluble’ is that no one is acting in accordance with the will of God who enters into a contract of union intending at some later stage to disown it, or reserving to himself the right to disown it in certain events or contingencies. The marriage . . . ought to be treated . . as if it never can be dissolved. Nor is it according to the will of God that any person should attempt to enter into a second marriage contract during the lifetime of a partner with whom he has already made such a contract, even though the State may declare him free to do so.”

(iii)

Heathen Marriage

Kirk notes that most communities, religious or secular, have recognized that the sex relationship is of public interest; hence churches and states have almost always attempted to regulate it by legislation. He deals with questions such as how far may it be assumed that a couple who have made a marriage contract genuinely intended “marriage” in the lifelong, indissoluble sense? On the general principle that a man must always be treated as innocent until he is proved guilty, canonists held that the intention

12 *Marriage and Divorce*, p. 18.
14 op.cit. p. 20.
to contract lawful marriage must always be presumed unless and until the contrary was proved beyond all possibility of question.\textsuperscript{15}

Further, Kirk records that from early in its history the Church regarded marriages\textsuperscript{16} between heathens and people of other faiths as indissoluble. Moreover, if a married heathen or Jewish couple asked for baptism, no new marriage vows were required between them. However, if a heathen couple had been divorced by secular authority, and contracted second alliances with new partners, they were not permitted to cohabit with the second partners after baptism.

But Kirk adduces the permission given by St Paul in 1 Corinthians 7: 12-15, whereby if one of two married heathen asked for baptism, (the other remaining unbaptized) the former was entitled on certain conditions\textsuperscript{17} to disown the heathen partner and marry a Christian. This is a complication: this so-called “Pauline privilege” does not stand on a recognizable basis of principle, but it had the full authority of Scripture and therefore the Church could not ignore it. The complication was evident in the case of a converted polygamist. It was held that he must retain the first wife of his unconverted state, if she were baptized with him, dismissing the others, whether they also agreed to be baptized or not.\textsuperscript{18} However, if the first wife refused to be baptized, by virtue of the Pauline privilege, he might dismiss her, if she was “unwilling to abide peaceably”. Accordingly, if he so dismissed the first, he was free to marry one of the others, but only by a new contract.

In the event of the polygamist’s being unable to remember which of his wives he had married first, he was free to marry any one of the wives who would be baptized with him: \textit{but there must be a marriage ceremony}.\textsuperscript{19}

For Kirk, these instances show how rigidly the Church held to the principle of the indissolubility of marriage – “the principle, that is, that the

\textsuperscript{15} Marriage and Divorce, p. 20.
\textsuperscript{16} duly solemnized according to the accepted ceremonies of the tribe or nation concerned, op.cit. p. 21.
\textsuperscript{17} The heathen partner must be “unwilling to abide” with the Christian partner.
\textsuperscript{18} Aquinas, S.T. Suppl.q.59, a.3.ad 4; Paul III, Const.\textit{Altitudo} (A.D. 1533); Benedict XIV, de Syn. Dioc., xiii.21.2, quoted Kirk, op.cit. p. 22.
\textsuperscript{19} Paul III, Const.\textit{Altitudo} (A.D. 1537), quoted Kirk, op.cit. p. 23.
marriage vows of non-Christians to one another must be presumed to imply the same intention of lifelong fidelity as the Christian ceremony, unless clear and convincing evidence to the contrary (could) be cited.”

Kirk cites several Church authorities expressing this view in these terms: “Marriage is indissoluble by natural law.” Another view has been put by Christian theologians – that “the indissolubility of marriage derives from its sacramental character.” But Kirk notes that sacraments exist only within the Christian Church, and consequently this view implies that the obligation of indissolubility binds only in the case of Christian marriage, and has no force in the case of unions between unbaptized persons. To rest the case for indissolubility on sacramental grounds would violate St Paul’s view, which encouraged the baptized convert to retain the heathen partner, and the view of some Church Fathers who required the heathen partner to be retained if he or she were willing to “abide peaceably.”

Kirk thus regards this view of marriage as a popular rather than a theological statement. “Perhaps it means no more than that many heathen ‘marriages’ do not de facto involve a contract of lifelong fidelity. Perhaps again, it is simply an expression of the supreme dignity of Christian marriage as a sacrament; or a metaphor to express the sanctity of the marriage vow in general.”

(iv)

Due Publicity

Kirk notes that among the conditions required for a true marriage is that of due publicity, and that this question has provoked sufficient discussion to influence the course of ecclesiastical history. Those contracting clandestine marriages in the Middle Ages could not be certain

20 Marriage and Divorce, p. 23.
23 1 Cor. 7:12, 13, quoted Kirk, op.cit. p. 25.
25 ibid.
26 ibid.
that their union might not be declared invalid. As a remedy, the Church endeavoured to ensure that a priest should habitually be present, as the ecclesiastical hierarchy was relatively permanent; if all marriages were celebrated before a priest, there would be some guarantee of stability, and the securing of the highly desirable end that the marriage should receive the blessing of the Church at the earliest possible moment.  

Later, a new position was accepted. For the Roman Catholic Church, the Council of Trent resolved that the presence of a priest was necessary for a valid marriage. English law adopted this principle from the times of Lord Hardwick’s Act of 1753, but the civil legislation of the nineteenth century made marriage valid in England if celebrated after due notice and in the presence of witnesses, before the registrar – a secular official. The purpose of this legislation was to satisfy the consciences of nonconformists and non-Christians, but the Church of England acquiesced in the new situation. No violation of principle was involved.

Moreover, the principle was restated that the essence of marriage, as regards its form, consists in the exchange of vows before accredited witnesses, not in the presence or words of a priest as such, nor in the blessing of the Church. For Kirk, once it was admitted that a marriage before a registrar was a true marriage, the primitive and Catholic doctrine was established once more.

The importance of this fact for Kirk lies in the suggestion often made in his experience that register office marriages are in some sense less binding than marriage in church. In English law only one kind of marriage was recognized, namely the “voluntary union for life of one man with one woman to the exclusion of all others.” As mentioned above in discussing his introduction to this book, Kirk upholds the recommendation of the

---

28 The Act of 1836; by the Act of 1898, marriage may be solemnized by the minister of any regular place of worship (not necessarily Anglican) certified by the Registrar-General, in such place of worship; quoted Kirk, op.cit. p. 27.
29 op.cit, p. 28.
30 Lord Penzance in Hyde v Hyde (1866); i P. and D. 130, p.133, quoted Kirk, op.cit. p. 28.
31 op.cit, pp vii, viii, ix and Appendix, p.150.
Denning Committee’s report on Procedure in Matrimonial Causes presented to Parliament in February 1947, that marriages in register offices should clearly express this principle, and cites the instruction issued by the Registrar-General which gives full effect to this recommendation. In principle, Kirk maintains, register office marriages are on the same footing, for baptized persons, as marriages in church. On this point “Church and State are absolutely agreed.”

Kirk notes that the State allows divorce, in specified circumstances, with the right to a second marriage during the lifetime of the first partner, without differentiating between marriages contracted in church and those contracted in register offices. “The Church, in accordance with the Catholic principle, accepts the register office marriage between baptized persons as … a full Christian marriage; and in so far as it refuses divorce to married Christians, makes no differentiation between the case in which they have contracted before a registrar and the case in which they have contracted before a priest.”

Kirk holds that those who contract in register offices are presumed to have done so with the implication of indissolubility, equally with those who contract in church. But he allows that a time may come when the laws of Church and State will differ so much from each other that it will be morally impossible to assume that those who contract by a civil ceremony have understood, or assented to, the implication of indissolubility. “If such a time comes, the Church will not . . . have the right to insist that a State, of which many members do not accept the Christian tradition, should force them to conform to it in this respect.”

(v)

Biblical Texts

The fourth chapter of Kirk’s book contains a strong affirmation of the Christian doctrine of the indissolubility of marriage. The basis for the doctrine is found in the New Testament texts of Mark 10:9, 11, 12, words attributed to Jesus:

32 Marriage and Divorce, p. 30.
33 Ibid.
34 op.cit. pp 31-32.
“What God has joined together, let no one separate . . . Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her, and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.”

The first sentence is part of Jesus’ answer to some Pharisees who ask him “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?” The second sentence is spoken to his disciples.

Luke 16:18 has a variant form of Jesus’ words:

“Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and whoever marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery.”

Matthew (5:31-32 and 19:3-9) has two versions of this teaching of Jesus which also contain a variant in the form of an exception. The first version reads:

It was . . . said, . . ‘whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce’ But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

The second version is Matthew’s account of the conversation of Jesus with the Pharisees recorded in Mark 10:

“Some Pharisees came to (Jesus), and to test him they asked ‘Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause?’ He answered, ‘Have you not read that the one who made them at the beginning “made them male and female”, and said “For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh”? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.’ They said to him, ‘Why then did Moses command us to give a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her?’ He said to them, ‘It was because you were so hard-hearted that Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for unchastity, and marries another commits adultery.’ ”

Kirk’s view is that in these New Testament texts there is no basis for the suggestion that Jesus sanctioned remarriage during the lifetime of the
first partner even in the case of an “innocent” person who has secured a divorce.\(^\text{35}\)

(vi)

**Divorce and Nullity**

However, chapters respectively on Divorce and Nullity precede the chapter on Indissolubility. Kirk begins his chapter on Divorce by saying that the doctrine of the indissolubility of marriage was “very much a novelty in the world into which Christianity brought it.”\(^\text{36}\) Among all but the strictest sect of the Jews a man could divorce his wife for grounds of varying degrees of triviality.\(^\text{37}\)

But from the third century no branch of the Christian Church [except the Church of England at the time of Kirk’s writing] was without some recognized loophole. Kirk distinguishes separation “from bed and board” from divorce defined as dissolution of a valid marriage by legitimate authority, conferring the right of remarriage with a new partner, during the lifetime of the former partner, on each of the divorced persons, and from nullity. In the case of nullity, it is alleged or affirmed that there never has been a true marriage between the parties concerned because one or more of the necessary minimum conditions was not present at the outset. Either the parties stood to one another within the prohibited degrees of relationship or the consent on one side was not full and free; or an indissoluble union was not intended by one or both of the parties; or the necessary publicity and forms were not observed.\(^\text{38}\)

Kirk cites the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1937 as a threat to the doctrine of indissolubility. It introduced four new specific grounds of nullity: (1) that the marriage has not been consummated owing to the wilful refusal of the respondent to consummate the marriage; (2) that either party was at the time of the marriage of unsound mind, or a mental defective, or

\(^{35}\) *Marriage and Divorce*, p. 70.  
\(^{36}\) op.cit. p. 33.  
\(^{37}\) ibid.  
\(^{38}\) op.cit. pp 36-37.
subject to recurrent fits of insanity or epilepsy; (3) that the respondent at the
time of the marriage was suffering from venereal disease in a communicable
form; (4) that the respondent at the time of the marriage was pregnant by
some person other than the petitioner.\textsuperscript{39}

Kirk holds that the three last grounds confirm the long-established
principles of canon law. But the first ground has caused confusion by
admitting as a ground something which cannot be taken as proving, at the
time of the marriage, the presence of an intention to evade the full
implication of the vows.\textsuperscript{40}

Kirk then discusses the New Testament passages mentioned earlier,
and concludes that there is no case for the suggestion that any New
Testament source credited Jesus Christ with sanctioning remarriage after
divorce, even where the partner’s adultery was the ground of the divorce;
rather these texts represent him as forbidding remarriage.\textsuperscript{41}

Kirk’s view is that the Western Church looked to nullity for its safety
valve, rather than to divorce. For him, the idea of nullity is bound up with
the term impediment, which occurs, it is said, where in a marriage between
two persons one of the necessary minimum conditions is absent. “The most
significant impediments are those as to which, if they are brought to his
notice, the appropriate judicial authority has no option but to declare the
marriage null and void from the outset. Such impediments, in all civilized
communities, are those created by close blood relationships – the
relationship of father and daughter, brother and sister, and so forth”.\textsuperscript{42} Kirk
adds that in English civil law [at the time of writing] the only irremovable
impediments were the prohibited degrees of consanguinity and affinity
[Archbishop Parker’s Table, less the relationships removed from the list in
1753 and 1835 legislation]; prior marriage not dissolved by decree absolute;
and the insanity of either party at the actual time of marriage.\textsuperscript{43}

\textsuperscript{39} Marriage and Divorce, p. 40.
\textsuperscript{40} op.cit. p. 42.
\textsuperscript{41} op.cit. p. 53.
\textsuperscript{42} op.cit. p. 61.
\textsuperscript{43} ibid.
Kirk completes his treatment of the subject of nullity by referring to the practice in the Roman Catholic Church at the time of writing. “There can be no doubt that the abuses of the nullity decrees of the Middle Ages have been in the main removed. But an uneasy suspicion lingers in many minds that nullity suits are still sometimes used as convenient substitutes for that divorce which Western canon law so stringently forbids.”44 He adds: “. . . it must still remain an open question whether the laws of evidence governing procedure in the Roman courts do not tell unduly against presumptive marriages: with the result that the safety-valve of which the Middle Ages availed themselves so freely cannot be said to be entirely ineffective even today.”45

(vii)

Discussion of the Texts

Before he discusses the thinking and practice on marriage and divorce in the Church of England at the time of writing, Kirk confirms his own stance, that marriage is indissoluble.46 The New Testament, he claims, contains no basis that Jesus Christ sanctioned remarriage during the lifetime of the first partner even in the case of an ‘innocent’ person who has secured a divorce. The witness of the first three Gospels against both divorce and remarriage on the above terms is supported, Kirk says, by St Paul.47 Kirk’s belief is that the combined witness of the first three gospels and St Paul establishes that within twenty-five years of the Crucifixion, “there was absolute unanimity in the Church that (Jesus) had proclaimed the indissolubility of marriage.”48

Kirk next deals with critics who maintain that Jesus’ words on divorce cannot be taken at face value; that they are to be taken as statements of an ideal rather than as legislation; or that they are examples of oriental exaggeration, or that they are “counsels” rather than “precepts”; or that Jesus

44 Marriage and Divorce, p. 67.
45 op.cit. p. 69.
46 His fourth chapter, pp 70-105.
47 1 Cor. 7:10, 11, 39.
48 op.cit. p. 71.
expected an early consummation of history to be brought about by God and that his ethical teaching was influenced by this expectation. Kirk’s response is this:

“Even if we believe that (Jesus) taught the forthcoming incursion of eternity into the things of time, and was mistaken in doing so, we cannot infer that he was also mistaken in advocating a far higher standard in marriage than the world has ever been ready to accept. . . he (did this) because it seemed right.”

Kirk prefers to take this teaching of Jesus at face value. His claim is that the Marriage Act of 1937 made upholding the permanence of the marriage bond more difficult in England. “It has long been asserted that ‘adultery destroys the marriage bond.’ This was the truth which underlay the exceptive clause in our Lord’s teaching; this the justification of existing English state law.

‘The Act of 1937 altered this situation profoundly by introducing various further grounds for divorce – desertion without cause for at least three years; cruelty; incurable insanity; unnatural vice subsequent to the marriage on the part of the husband; presumption of death after seven years’ disappearance . . . it is no longer possible to base our English divorce law on any specific New Testament pronouncement. It may be advocated as Christian in spirit, but certainly in the letter it has diverged dramatically from the actual or alleged words of our Lord.’

The critical point for Kirk is the permission to marry a second partner during the lifetime of the first. A divorced person who does not remarry and has no intention of remarrying is not necessarily an offender against the Christian law. Christianity allows the separation of two partners if life together has become intolerable as a necessary evil. But it condemns the remarriage of either during the lifetime of the other “for the very reason that it finally closes the door to all possibility of reconciliation and renewal of the broken vows by involving one of the partners in new legal (and indeed moral) obligations which make return to the first partner virtually impossible.”

49 Marriage and Divorce, p. 78.
50 op.cit. p. 82.
51 op.cit. p. 86.
Kirk notes that the passing of the Act of 1937 was followed by a notable increase in the number of decrees applied for and granted by the courts. He saw this as a menace to national well-being.\textsuperscript{52}

(viii)

Theological Reasons

Kirk takes his stand finally on his claim that Christian theology is an organic whole. He describes marriage as a vocation to an allegiance.\textsuperscript{53} He compares marriage with what he calls Christ’s vocation of allegiance to mankind, the purpose of Christ’s coming into the world being to reconcile humanity with God. This he regards as the central truth of the Christian Gospel as received and taught by the Church. For Kirk it follows that critics of his view of Christian teaching on marriage are abandoning the doctrine of the Atonement and the first principle of Christian ethics which is that it is the duty of Christians to follow the teaching of Jesus.\textsuperscript{54}

Kirk follows this appeal with another based on seeing Christian theology as a whole. He has argued against remarriage on the ground that it rules out the possibility of reconciliation between separated partners. Christian theology for Kirk makes it clear that to deny the possibility of reconciliation between separated partners is to deny the doctrine of the supremacy of God’s grace.\textsuperscript{55}

Kirk rests his case on the New Testament doctrine of sex. This teaching places human marriage in the closest possible relation to the doctrine of the union of Christ with his Church. He holds that to argue for divorce with the right to second marriage is to ignore this theology which relates the union of the sexes to that of Christ and his Church. Kirk regards this as the equivalent of denying the unity of purpose at the heart of God’s activity both in the natural and supernatural sphere and to cast doubt on the

\textsuperscript{52} Marriage and Divorce, p. 87.
\textsuperscript{53} op.cit. p. 97.
\textsuperscript{54} op.cit. p. 98. The doctrine of the Atonement, briefly stated, is that Christ, by his life, death and resurrection effected the reconciliation of humanity and God.
\textsuperscript{55} op.cit. p. 99.
very nature of God and the way in which he has revealed himself to humanity.\textsuperscript{56}

Kirk devotes the final chapter of \textit{Marriage and Divorce} to the effect on the Church of England at the time of writing (1948) of the State’s civil law which allows divorce and remarriage on a considerable number of grounds. He regards the effect of that civil law as a serious moral decline measured by the comparison of the general outlook of society in 1948 with that of fifty years previously. He claims that the ultimate result of this tendency will be a complete disruption of family life and a serious blow at the Christian religion.\textsuperscript{57} For Kirk, it is imperative that the Church continues to uphold the tradition that marriage is indissoluble. One legal right available to clergy is that of refusal of marriage in church to all who have a previous partner living. This helps to make clear “what the church stands for”. This legal right was reinforced by a Resolution of the Church’s Convocations of Canterbury and York (1937) to the effect that the marriage of anyone who has a previous partner living shall not take place in church. Kirk further favours the refusal of communion to a member of the church who remarries during the life time of the first partner, as a means of affirming the traditional view of marriage.\textsuperscript{58} He also favours the establishment of Church courts for the purpose of dealing with difficult cases. He argues against the practice whereby some clergy, though refusing to marry in church any couple either of whom has a previous partner living, hold a religious service for those who have been previously “married” by civil processes in a register office.

Kirk notes that the final chapter of his book has been concerned with discipline. But discipline, for the pastor and teacher, must always be a last resort, to be employed in the interests of the Church’s witness only when all else has failed. Their primary concern is to lead the young, to inspire the betrothed, and to recall the married, to a clear recognition and willing

\textsuperscript{56} \textit{Marriage and Divorce}, p. 104.
\textsuperscript{57} op.cit. p. 107.
\textsuperscript{58} Kirk argues that if remarried 	extit{divorceés} present themselves for communion in a place where the facts of their case are known, scandal is caused to faithful Christians. But he does not rule out the possibility of their receiving communion in places where they are not known.
acceptance of the beauty of the Christian ideal of wedlock.\textsuperscript{59} He concludes his work with a summary of the constructive points in the Christian doctrine of marriage. He sees marriage in essence, as a personal allegiance to one another voluntarily undertaken by a man and a woman as continuous, enduring and exclusive of any other similar attachment as that of the Church to Jesus. Christian marriage requires the highest devotion of both partners similar to that with which Christ loved his Church and gave himself for it. The responsibility for caring for a family will give the parents a new understanding of one another and draw them even closer than before, in Kirk’s view. Kirk sees Christian homes and families as the only possible foundation on which a stable Christian society can be built.\textsuperscript{60}

It would be difficult to find a stronger affirmation of a traditional Christian understanding of marriage, up to the year of the book’s publication. In his previously published major works, such as \textit{Some Principles of Moral Theology} and \textit{Conscience and its Problems}, Kirk has also affirmed strongly traditional Christian doctrines as part of a desire to renew moral theology as a discipline and as an offer of guidance to clergy and lay people in particular of the Anglican Church, especially in the light of their experience of the First World War. But his affirmations are more strongly made, as in the present work, when he perceives that Christian faith and life are threatened by social change and legislation, for example, in the matter of marriage and divorce, or by faulty understanding of the relationship of science and religion, as we shall see in his writings in The Crisis of Christian Rationalism.

\textsuperscript{59} \textit{Marriage and Divorce}. p. 145.
\textsuperscript{60} op.cit. p. 146.
CHAPTER 8
THEOLOGICAL PROBLEMS


1. The Crisis of Christian Rationalism

When Kenneth Kirk wrote the three lectures which comprise this work, he was still Regius Professor of Moral and Pastoral Theology in the University of Oxford. Two years later in 1937, he was appointed Bishop of Oxford.

By this time Kirk had completed major contributions to the study of moral theology. But in these lectures he offers more evidence of his views on the question: What is the task of the moral theologian? Like those working in other theological disciplines, he seeks to explain what Christians believe about God, humanity and the world, why they believe it and how they come to believe it. For the moral theologian there is the additional and specific task of explaining the relation of reason and revelation, of defining and explaining the relation of good and evil, and of explaining further what follows for Christians in the realms respectively of thought and action, of the will and of freedom to choose.

(i)

The Revelation of God;
Reason, Revelation and Christian Rationalism

Kirk begins his first lecture, The Revelation of God, by pointing to several themes which in their day became dominant in Christian thought. Early, that place was occupied by the apocalyptic interest in the immediate second coming of Jesus Christ. Later, the doctrine of indefectible grace ousted the doctrine of human freedom and responsibility from its rightful place in Christian thought. Later again, he writes, the ideas of justification
by faith alone, of double predestination, and (in his own day) of the supreme importance of Jesus’ ministry as a human prophet and teacher, achieved temporary predominance in turn. In each of these ideas, which became formulas, some have believed that they possessed a key to all the problems of religious thought. “But in process of time reflection convinces the world that more is at issue than was at first supposed. The formula is seen once more in its two proportions, as something which does indeed express an aspect of truth, but no more than an aspect; men recognize that it needs to be counterbalanced by equal emphasis on complementary, and sometimes (in appearance) contradictory doctrines”.¹

For Kirk, Christian rationalism is one such formula. Kirk’s writing on Christian Rationalism needs to be considered together with his lecture on the Coherence of Christian Doctrine. For this reason this chapter concludes with an assessment of that lecture.

Kirk uses several terms to describe Christian rationalism. It has a naturalistic outlook. In the field of ethics, he calls it humanism. Philosophically it is a version of monism or absolutism; in theology, it is close to pantheism; the nearest approach to it in formulated Christian doctrine is the concept of divine immanence. The Wisdom literature of the Graeco–Jewish schools anticipated its main principles. In the late nineteenth century, it became popular; it appeared to be conciliatory towards the theory of evolution and so “to bridge over what was commonly conceived to be the gulf between science and religion”.²

John Macquarrie, in the opening chapter of his Principles of Christian Theology³, outlines six factors to be taken into account for the shaping of an adequate theology: experience, reason, revelation, scripture, tradition and culture. These writings postdate those of Kirk. Before him were the eighteenth century poet William Cowper and the nineteenth century artist and critic John Ruskin. One of Cowper’s poems (whose title quotes

² op.cit. pp 4-5.
the opening words of St John’s Gospel: “Without him was nothing made”) includes the words

“Happy who walks with Him! Whom what he finds in nature
. . . Prompts with remembrance of a present God.”

Ruskin wrote “The Spirit of the Lord God is all around you, in the air that you breathe . . .” These men may not have escaped Kirk’s criticism. The French Jesuit priest and palaeontologist Teilhard de Chardin (died 1955) was an exact contemporary. In his writing he combined theories of evolution with Christology envisaging Christ present at the beginning of creation (as John 1: 1ff), at the heart of the evolutionary process sustaining all creation (Colossians 1: 15ff) and bringing all things to fullness in himself (Eph. 4: 1–20). He describes Christ as the Omega point of all things to which all things are moving for their fulfilment in him.

As mentioned above, early in his first lecture Kirk criticises Christian rationalism for its close affinities with pantheism and the concept of divine immanence. This latter word means literally “remaining” or “dwelling within”. Its emergence in Christian history can be explained in part at least as an attempt to do justice to such texts as John 1: 14, which forms a climax to the earlier verses in John 1 quoted above with the words “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory, the glory of the only-begotten Son of the Father, full of grace and truth”.

For Kirk, the rationalists’ attachment to the concept of divine immanence is faulty because it does not do justice to the transcendence of God which cannot be apprehended by reason but only by revelation. He does not mention Teilhard in these lectures but he may in 1935 (had he seen all his writings by that date) have adjudged him as pantheistic. Certainly Teilhard in his lifetime encountered bewilderment and in some cases hostility from his own church’s hierarchy as his language was innovative. I see his word “Noosphere” as showing such respect for the human mind and intellect as to think of it as operating in a province of its own. He writes of the interconnectedness of all things in Christ, of Christ as pervading the universe (Christ as cosmic) and of the whole universe as worshipping Christ.
Teilhard seems at least to be attempting to expound the concept of God as both immanent and transcendent.

However, Kirk was writing these lectures in 1935, and in them he does not name Teilhard nor the process philosophers A.N. Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne. Rather, of the writers whom he does name, William Temple, by 1935 Archbishop of York, is the one who receives most of his criticism in the three lectures (the second entitled The Malignity of Evil and the third Freedom, Happiness and Duty). His writing is consistently cogent and passionate because he believes the rationalists do not understand adequately revelation as revealed truth; they underestimate the seriousness of the problem of evil, and their understanding of freedom, happiness and duty is not sufficiently radical or profound.

In these lectures Kirk emerges as a stout defender of what he calls the “traditional” view of Christian orthodoxy against a rationalism which is at best inadequate and misleading, when, for example, rationalists say that Nature reveals and has always revealed the true character of God to the reflective mind; for them “revelation” is still no more than a pious euphemism for the operation of human reason. He criticises the nature-mysticism of the Lakeland poets under this head.

The traditional view of Christian orthodoxy rejects the rationalists’ equation of reason with revelation. The main plank in Kirk’s platform is this. There is an outstanding example of revelation, the revelation of the nature of God brought by Jesus Christ to the world. Christ could not have been predicted. Apart from Christ’s words, works and character, God’s goodness would have been eternally in question. If Christ has not risen from the dead, God’s power over evil is not demonstrated. Without the life, death and resurrection of Christ we could not be certain about God’s nature.

Kirk sums up the creed of Christian rationalism as follows. As God did at the creation, we look at Nature and find it good. It does not show perfection here and now, but a purpose making for perfection; ultimate self-realisation is certain. History is moving towards a final dénouement which
shall satisfy every aspiration. The universe is getting better and better; some day the best will be.

Purpose implies mind; since the purpose is perfect insofar as we can conceive perfection, the mind must be perfect too. Because the purpose will win over all opposition, it is the strongest of all things. Hence the mind behind the purpose is rightly called “omnipotent”, since he is able to bend to his purposes all that has been, is, or ever can be. Thus, behind the universe of things there is an omnipotent, perfect, purposive, intelligent being, whom we call God.

What are the implications? First, an assertion that “Nature reveals the character of God, or, God reveals his character in and through Nature – ultimately as goodness, beauty and truth; and at every stage of history the reflective mind might have inferred as much”. 4

Kirk says that to speak of God as perfect, omnipotent, purposive and intelligent is “abstract” and “bloodless”. “Rationalism hesitates to ascribe personality to God and prefers … spirit, life-force and the like”. He criticises William Temple, “who has definite sympathies with the type of thought we are considering (and) does not shrink from inferring the personality of God by rational argument from the facts of nature”. 5 Here … he takes a step which many philosophers would regard as hazardous if not … illegitimate”. 6 To buttress his critique Kirk asks whether we can infer the moral qualities of God from an English November day, to say nothing of an earthquake, a hurricane, or the depraved behaviour of so many human beings.

(ii)

The Views of William Temple considered

Before we continue discussing Kirk’s critique of rationalism, it will be important to note Temple’s own words on faith, reason and revelation.

---

6 ibid..
Some of these are contained in an article on Temple by Joseph Fletcher.\(^7\) In Fletcher’s view, Temple was convinced that all human problems and concerns must be theologized, i.e. set in a framework of Christian faith. To do this, a great deal of integrative thought is necessary, since his abiding concern was with the relations of faith and reason. The Christian starts with faith, he held, thus his reason uses faith to illuminate every question. Once the leap of faith is made, reason must come into play as its skilful servant and friendly critic. “Faith is not a conclusion, but a starting point, reason will enrich its content”. Thus, “God is for faith not an interference, but a datum”, because “the man of faith does not reach his faith by scientific inference”.\(^8\) Faith propositions are decisions, not conclusions; thus the so-called logical proofs of the existence of God are only arguments. God is not to be found through a syllogism or a microscope or a telescope. “The primary assurances of religion are the ultimate questions of philosophy”.\(^9\)

Reason is, in Temple’s view, the link between the Christian’s believing and his behaving. In this sense Temple was a rationalist.\(^10\) Fletcher offers in these statements an important insight into Temple’s view of Christian ethics. Temple would not flout or ignore reasonable tests of faith’s consistency. In his method, reason’s service to faith is correlation, not verification. He had no sympathy with Luther’s reference to “Dame Reason” as a whore. On Barth’s statement that “God is not only unprovable and unsearchable, but also inconceivable”, Temple agreed on the first two points but not on the third. He was confident that “by analogy we make progress in our pursuit of theological questions, even though we never reach their ultimate solution”.\(^11\) He declared “I see no alternative to the acceptance of analogy”.\(^12\)

---


\(^9\) op.cit. p. 241.

\(^10\) ibid.


Furthermore, Fletcher notes that Temple’s third primary category along with faith and reason was revelation. In Temple’s view, revelation has two dimensions – divine initiative or self-disclosure, and human response or believing apprehension. God makes His mind and will manifest both in His creation (general revelation or “natural theology”) and in decisive direct action, most crucially in the God-man event in Christ (special revelation or “revealed theology”). But the total process of revelation is “the coincidence of divinely controlled event and minds divinely illuminated to read it aright”.\textsuperscript{13} Even the Bible, the word of God, is refracted or sifted first through the finite personalities of its writers, then through those of its readers. What it reveals depends partly on how it says what it says, partly on how it is “heard”. While this is a theory of revelation by inspiration, it is not a gnostic notion of secret saving knowledge given to some and withheld from others; Temple held that the “believing interpretation” is not a special gift but the work of the Holy Spirit through reason, the fellowship of the Church, the Sacraments, and character-forming experience in human society.

Temple’s starting point in his Gifford Lectures\textsuperscript{14} was that the difference between natural theology and revealed theology is one of method only, not of content. He set aside the division commonly made between “philosophy” and “theology”, claiming that it is intellectually unrealistic to call the first an enterprise of reason, the second of faith. He held that since reason and faith cannot be artificially disconnected from each other, the true task of theology is to reason clearly and fully (i.e. philosophize) about faith.

Temple was convinced that faith is a matter not of holding correct opinions but of having personal fellowship with the living Lord. What is offered in revelation is not a truth or truths about God but God Himself. According to Fletcher, two cardinal principles in Temple’s method of theologizing were (1) man’s finite intelligence can at best only apprehend God, not comprehend Him, and (2) faith is essentially not belief about God.

\textsuperscript{14} Published as Nature, Man and God.
but a relationship of trust, that is, a moral rather than an intellectual matter.\textsuperscript{15} Again, Fletcher here offers an insight into Temple’s combination of theology and ethics.

Temple’s views on faith, reason and revelation as presented here may not be as sharply different from Kirk’s, as Kirk supposes.

A similar view seems possible when Temple’s doctrinal theology is compared with Kirk’s. As we discuss Kirk’s views further, especially those contained in “The Coherence of Christian Doctrine”, their differences and similarities may become more clearly defined. As we shall see, Kirk holds as central to Christian faith both the doctrine of the incarnation of Christ and the doctrine of the atonement (the reconciliation of God and humanity effected by Christ’s death and resurrection). Kirk appears to be critical of Temple on these points. But for Fletcher, Temple’s theology was centred on the incarnation. Affirming Jesus’ statement “He that had seen me hath seen the Father”, Temple saw Christian theology as “God in the light of the Incarnation” and Christian anthropology as “man in the light of the Incarnation”. God became man and preached and taught and died on a cross and rose again. The God who dared to become not only a man but a criminal in a divine act of shocking sacrificial love – this God was his starting-point.\textsuperscript{16}

For Temple, the incarnation was the confluence of deity and humanity, which “raised our humanity to an entirely higher level, to a level with His own”.\textsuperscript{17} He was confident that what had been done for man in the saving effects of the incarnation – this at-one-ment in Christ – would become historical or existential or realized. As to the question of the mode by which the divine and human were to be united, Temple was agnostic. “It would be disastrous . . if there were an official church explanation of the Incarnation”.\textsuperscript{18}

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{15} \textit{William Temple}, p. 242.
  \item \textsuperscript{16} \textit{op.cit.} p. 243.
  \item \textsuperscript{17} \textit{W. Temple, Christus Veritas} (London, Macmillan, 1924), p. 153, quoted Fletcher, \textit{op.cit.} p. 243.
  \item \textsuperscript{18} \textit{W. Temple, ibid.}, p. 134, quoted J. Fletcher, ibid.
\end{itemize}
It is also true that although there are several “theories” of the Atonement, none has ever been made the “official Church explanation”. Moreover, Fletcher points out that in the doctrine of “the Word made flesh”, Temple found a theological foundation for Christian materialism in which the incarnational interpenetration of the spiritual and the material, as of the divine and the human, is the first principle. It was Temple who made the first major break away from idealism in post-Reformation Anglican theology. God acts in history through and by means of material things. Therefore, Temple said, “Christianity is the most avowedly materialist of all the great religions”.19 “Although He had no need of us for the fullness of his being, he has need of us for the satisfaction of his love”.20 Fletcher’s view is that because of His loving nature, God conceives and creates and relates: while he does not need objects, he necessitates them.21

Temple’s view of the interpenetration of the spiritual and the material helps to explain his involvement in political and social reform and his writing in Christianity and Social Order (1942), as we shall see; he believed that God was intensely interested in all aspects of the life of his human creation, as they were created in His image,22 and therefore entitled to adequate income, housing, health services, education and employment.

Further, on the incarnation, Temple wrote, “Christ does not reveal all that is meant by the word God. There ever remains the unsearchable abyss of Deity. But He reveals what it vitally concerns us to know. He reveals God the Father”.23 Fletcher adds that for Temple the concepts of incarnation and atonement were inseparable, that is, he saw the Christ event and its consequences as a unity. Some have held that Temple strongly emphasized the incarnation but neglected the atonement. On the contrary, toward the end of his life, in a time of wars and revolution, he maintained that the contemporary upheavals in human hearts and societies called more for a theology of redemption than one of explanation. He came to emphasize the

21 ibid.
22 Genesis 1: 26-27.
saving effect of God’s incarnation. He insisted that these two “theologies” – the incarnation-centred and the atonement-centred – are only emphases, are actually part and parcel of each other.24

Thus, for Temple, the atonement has both an objective and a subjective side. The objective side is what God has done for man, His taking up of man’s being into His own in a new creation (“redemption”) and his incarnational revelation of Himself by word and deed. Yet Temple did not believe that the incarnation (birth, ministry, crucifixion, resurrection) restored men to a right relation with God as far as God was concerned. “Christ’s death and Resurrection did not cause God to be after their occurrence what He was not before”. Nevertheless, the revelation of His love was an objective event and a new fact without which men could not be “saved”, i.e. enter into the knowledge, worship and service of God. The subjective side of the atonement is man’s response to God’s offer of Himself, a response which is free and uncoerced. The completion of atonement “is accomplished through our realization of the love of God”.25

Temple maintained that every Christian can agree with Abailard that “Christ by his manifestation of His love awakes love in us, and that is the Atonement”.26 The unconquerable and creative love of God is manifested in the objective fact of the incarnation. The freedom of man is respected in the subjective side – man’s ability to say Yes or No, or to say nothing, to God’s redeeming sacrifice. But whether or not men respond, the facts of the “new creation” and the “new life” remain.27

Fletcher sees Temple as a “conversionist”, that is, one who believes that ultimately and progressively God’s grace will convert the whole world to His will for it. In his theology, as in the Gospels, the Kingdom of God is a concept of central importance, understood as God’s rule. Inaugurated by

24 William Temple, p. 244.
25 J. Fletcher, op.cit. p. 245.
27 ibid.
Christ, the Kingdom is eventually to reorder and rule all the structures of life – economic, political, familial and personal.28

The church, as Temple understood it, stands in relation to the Kingdom as a means to an end. He held that the end and aim of God’s creative purpose is the realization of the full personal potential of every human being. In his view personality is the highest and the only intrinsic value, the only value which is always good in itself. Furthermore, he held that there is no good of any kind apart from persons. The goodness of a thing “depends for its actuality upon the appreciating mind”.29 For him, society or fellowship is the matrix of personality; a person is a socialized individual.

The logic of Temple’s understanding of God as purposive will, of creation as a process, led him to a developmental view of history and providence. All things exist in dynamic, ascending grades, developing upward from matter to life to mind to spirit. Each grade, he said, develops only as it is indwelt by what is above, though it also depends on what is below it.30

Temple’s view of history as God’s creative process was not only purposive (teleological); it entailed moral as well as technological and cultural progress. For him, this is what it means to speak prophetically of God as Lord of history. He treated sin (especially “original” sin) as selfishness –“self-centredness and all the wealth of evil flowing from it”. Secularized people of Temple’s day, he found, did not believe there is a power greater than their own to help them. Grace, in his view, is God himself – not something God “gives” but something He is, just as love is not something God “has” but something He is. In our experience of grace God gives Himself, as in the sacrament of the altar. And only God can rescue us from our self-captivity. “Education may make my self-esteem less disastrous by widening my horizon of interest; . . . it is like climbing a tower, which widens the horizon of physical vision while leaving one still the centre and

28 ibid.
30 ibid.
standard of reference”. The Pelagian notion that we can of ourselves overcome our selfishness was in Temple’s opinion the only intrinsically damnable heresy.

The new self that God’s love (grace) has “saved” reaches out for wider fellowship. “The true aim of the soul is not its own salvation; to make that the chief aim is to ensure its perdition, for it is to fix the soul on itself as centre”. At this point Temple and Kirk seem to be in complete agreement, in spite of Kirk’s adverse criticisms of several parts of Temple’s book, Nature, Man and God. For as we have noted in our discussion of Kirk’s The Vision of God, the author warns against a self-centred view of salvation and spiritual progress. Temple and Kirk also seem to agree on the central place in Christian belief which they both give to the doctrines of the Incarnation and the Atonement.

Temple described the “fall” not as an event but as a myth; he discarded all prescientific notions of original virtue. Men in the “garden” were innocent and therefore without virtue morally; their “fall” was a fall upwards to the knowledge of sin and hence to ethical decision and personal responsibility. At the same time, Temple maintained that “none of these evolutionary theories touches the centre of the problem”, for beyond our not always seeing the goals and demands of God’s will, we often do see them yet turn our backs.

Temple was confident that God’s love would win all people to full fellowship with Him by means of their new creation in Christ – if not in this world then another. Like Kirk, he saw through a post-Reformation distortion of salvation by faith, i.e. the notion that we are “saved” by our faith in God, when in fact we are saved by His unshakable faith in us. “All that we can contribute of our own would be the resistance of our self-will. It

---

34 See Kirk, The Vision of God, pp 415 ff.
is just this which love breaks down, and in so doing does not over-ride our freedom but rather calls it into exercise”. 35

When we consider Kirk’s criticisms of Temple’s thought expressed in *Nature, Man and God*, we need to note such points as those mentioned above, where the two theologians appear to come close to agreement.

Fletcher describes Temple’s basic ethical position as relativistic. In his view the good is whatever is right, the right is whatever is good, in the circumstances. The ideal or standard in his ethics was love as manifested in Christ. Reason, serving love, must in every situation weigh the factors as wisely as possible. What is right in one set of conditions may be wrong in another: “an act cannot, strictly speaking, be wrong in itself”. 36 “Universal obligation attaches not to particular judgments of conscience, but to conscientiousness. What acts are right may depend on circumstances . . . but there is an absolute obligation to will whatever may on each occasion be right”. 37

For this reason Temple opposed absolutist pacifism, even though he defended and protected pacifists. 38 As a matter of Christian ethics he identified justice as the social dimension of the love norm. “It is axiomatic that Love should be the predominant Christian impulse, and that the primary form of Love in social organization is Justice. Love, in fact, finds its primary expression in Justice”. 39 In short, Temple regarded justice as love (neighbour concern) facing the fact that we have many neighbours, that rarely if ever is it just one individual whose claims are binding on us.

Although Kirk held that there are absolute standards of good and evil, we have seen in our discussion of his major works, especially in *The

38 Kirk defended the British entry into the war against Hitler in a sermon entitled *The Menace to Faith* (Oxford University Press, 1940).
Threshold of Ethics, that he is close to Temple’s position.\[^{40}\] We have also noted in Kirk’s Principles his advice to clergy when counselling to take the circumstances of particular cases into account.

A second feature of Temple’s ethics was his concept of “natural order”, by which he meant a given God-willed, functional means and pattern of life. He argued teleologically that in the natural order of economics goods are produced to satisfy human needs; when industrialists control and even restrain the supply of goods, ends are subordinated to means, and inordinatio (i.e. sin) results.\[^{41}\] Temple called himself a Christian socialist: in this respect he differed from the more politically conservative Kirk. But with Kirk, he thought that the Church’s task is to teach principles, the individual Christian’s, to try to find their application; he allowed for disagreement in the latter but not in the former. As to the objection that the Church should not interfere with political and economic policies, he counters that through its members it “is bound to ‘interfere’ because it is by vocation the agent of God’s purpose, outside the scope of which no human interest or activity can fall”.\[^{42}\] Consequently, he met strong opposition in business and Tory circles, while many other English people took pride in his leadership.\[^{43}\]

(iii)

Kirk’s Critique of Christian Rationalism continued

Kirk ends this section of his work with a criticism of what he regards as a characteristic statement of the rationalist view: Reason and revelation are not two separate processes – the first an activity of man, the second an activity of God: they are the same process, viewed now from one terminus, now from the other. In so far as it is man who apprehends, we may call the

\[^{40}\] K.E. Kirk, The Threshold of Ethics, p.36. “Any moral intuition which takes the form ‘such-and-such an action is always wrong’ is open to the gravest suspicion. The most we seem ever entitled to say is ‘action of this type is normally wrong, but it depends upon the circumstances whether in any particular case it is right or wrong’. We may be able to add a certain number of examples of cases in which we hold beyond question that such an action would be wrong and others in which we are certain or are strongly inclined to think, that it would be right. Beyond that we cannot safely go”. (quoted supra, Chapter 6).
\[^{41}\] J. Fletcher, William Temple, p. 250.
\[^{42}\] W. Temple, Christianity and Social Order, p. 21, quoted J. Fletcher, op.cit. p. 251.
\[^{43}\] J. Fletcher, op.cit. p. 252.
process reason: in so far as it is God who allows himself to be apprehended, we may call it revelation.44

For Kirk, this is unsatisfactory. We cannot infer the truth about God given our understanding of nature and history; we cannot conclude that God is good by observing nature or by reason; the full truth of God’s goodness is necessarily obtained by revelation, both in the Scriptures as the written Word of God, but supremely in the one described in St John’s Gospel as the Word of God, Jesus Christ. Rationalists claim that at every stage of history, the reflective mind could infer God’s power and goodness, and that therefore the life, death and resurrection of Christ are not essential events. Kirk replies: “Unless we are already assured that God solves all our problems in due time, we cannot predict that he will solve them by incarnation or otherwise”.45 For the rationalists, what was done or altered for the human race would have been done anyhow, without incarnation, by the goodness of God. The Gospel does not change the course of history; it only has accelerated or illuminated the process. At this point in his attack on the rationalists, Kirk agrees with sceptics who declare that it is impossible to prove the existence or the goodness of God, and accuses the rationalists of surreptitiously appealing to the beliefs given by revelation; of begging the question, of assuming the truth of what they set out to prove.

Kirk then makes three crucial points against the rationalists. First, (if we discard Christian or theistic presuppositions), in nature, if it is purposive, the purpose is not omnipotent or wholly beneficent to humanity; witness the existence of waste and evil in the universe. If God is good he is not all-powerful; if he is all-powerful, he is not wholly good. Secondly, nature presents itself to us as a whirlpool of blind, restless chance rather than giving us evidence of intelligent progress. Thirdly, to affirm a “personal” purpose behind creation is to use an anthropomorphism. It is not good enough to think that all runs by reason, by a process broken into by revelation irregularly, unpredictably and unheralded; that a process of cause and effect is normal except for an occasional miracle.

When traditional Christian orthodoxy claims that God has revealed himself in the Biblical writers of psalms, prophecy, law and the Gospel of Jesus Christ as Son of God, Kirk deals with rationalists’ rejection or questioning of this (“How can we know that God speaks through prophets? Only if the prophet speaks the truth, which we examine by reason”) by saying that science and reason must take account of “new facts”. Jesus Christ is one such “new fact”.

To the rationalists’ argument that we learn no new facts about God in Jesus Christ, Kirk replies that we would not believe “God is love” without Jesus Christ: without Jesus Christ we could not believe in the existence of a self–revealing God who is a God of limitless love or believe that this is the essence of the nature of God. As we have seen, Temple and Kirk are in agreement on this point.

The rationalists cannot deny, claims Kirk, that if God were to exist he could produce an event sufficient to reveal the truth of his existence. The new fact of Christ might show this truth. Kirk asserts that his claim on the part of traditional orthodoxy is reasonable: from historical events, of which the events described in the Gospels are the climax, the world has gained vital new knowledge about the nature of God. If we cannot by reason believe that God exists and wants to reveal his true nature to us, the fact of Christ reveals it as true, with new knowledge about God’s nature.

The next question Kirk takes up is whether rationalism or revelation is better able to describe the relation of God and humanity, assuming that God exists. Against rationalism, traditional orthodoxy claims that the “fact” of Christ is unique and primary, not evidence “in every age”. Rationalists maintain that God made a universe which shows that he exists and that he is essentially good; or that he works in history in such a way that in every generation we can reason so.

Traditional orthodoxy criticises the first view as deism and the second as pantheism, on the grounds that they envisage a god who is not involved with humanity after creation, and does not help humanity, but
rather hides himself. This does not square with the love of God for humanity revealed in Jesus Christ, that of a loving father for his children. The Old Testament prophets prepared the way for this revelation. St John’s Gospel describes the Spirit of God as confirming the revelation and “leading into all truth”. In Kirk’s view the greatest truth is that God is a God of love, who reveals himself, or the truth about himself, according to human needs and capacities.

For Kirk, rationalists are not Christian if they believe that God stops acting at creation. Orthodox Christianity claims that God always and continually takes the initiative in the work of human salvation (defined in the person and work of Christ); that God gives more than we desire or deserve, and rejoices in showing generosity to both the just and the unjust. Again we have noted that Kirk and Temple agree on the content of these two paragraphs.

(iv)

The Malignity of Evil

Rationalism creates for Kirk a crisis which grows sharper when he considers the problem of evil as he does in the second lecture in the present series, entitled The Malignity of Evil. For him, rationalists underestimate its malignity. Critics of Christianity identify a classical problem: an omnipotent God “allows” evil: but a contradiction is apparent, if God is good.

Kirk’s response is to say that Christian theology asserts apparent contradictions. “God is both three and one; Christ is both divine and human; revelation and reason are both gifts of God; a Christian is responsible for living his life well, but he cannot do so unless God of his uncovenanted mercy gives the necessary grace; there is no salvation outside the Church, yet the heathen will be saved if they do what in them lies”. 46

Many critics both in Kirk’s own day and since would probably not be satisfied with such contradictions. But Kirk proceeds unabashed to affirm a traditional orthodox Christian stance on the problem of evil. He cites the

controversy between Augustine and Pelagius in the fifth century as a time of crucial debate about good and evil. He finds both faulty, but reminds us that the Church preferred Augustine because of his teaching on the theology of grace; namely, that we can only deal with the problem of evil in ourselves and others through God’s grace, defined as generous, unmerited, forgiving love embodied in the life, death and resurrection of Christ, and conveyed to us by the Holy Spirit of God through the word of God in the scriptures, and in the sacraments and fellowship of the Church. Pelagius, by contrast, believed that such reliance on God amounted to moral failure, laxity and irresponsibility. According to Joseph Fletcher, as we have seen, Temple could not be accused of underestimating the malignity of evil and he and Kirk are in agreement on this point.

Kirk believes that the Church has solved the problem of evil by relying on the affirmation of God’s transcendence. He believes that rationalists who affirm God’s immanence in creation do not give sufficient emphasis to divine transcendence: only this does justice to God’s sovereignty over all things, including evil.

Grappling with the problem of suffering of innocent people through illness or natural disasters, Kirk writes:

“Evil is real and hostile to God. Yet God made man capable of begetting evil, for only so could He create a universe other than lifeless. He allowed, or even caused, physical disaster and natural suffering for their educative value. And if we find an overplus of evil in the universe which cannot be accounted for on either of these grounds, then we are forced to say that even this was allowed by God, though for what purpose or with what benefit it is impossible for the human mind to discern.”

And further

“. . . our expectation that Christianity would proclaim God’s intolerance of evil as infinitely surpassing His tolerance, is amply fulfilled when the doctrine of the atonement is taken under review. Those who find no rational explanation of the apparent overplus of evil in the universe, can be assured that Christianity has taken this problem into cognizance, and asserts unhesitatingly that however real and extensive the

overplus may be, the problem is at most only a transient and intellectual one; all evil in the end is to be overcome by God. This will not solve the problem for those who are oppressed by it; nor will it in itself induce the non-Christian to accept Christianity. But it will at least stifle the possible criticism that Christianity (like rationalism) refuses to face the real difficulties of life and thought, and therefore is a discredited system.”\textsuperscript{48}

On his way to this conclusion, Kirk attacks the definition of evil as “the absence of good”, a definition found among rationalists but also in Augustine (privatio boni). Kirk continues: “For man to be aware of goodness, evil had to exist . . . But God is at once the living principle of goodness, and the creator of all that is . . . Either He had to create, or at least allow, evil, in order that by contrast with it His goodness might become apparent . . . He chose the second. But since his goodness is not yet fully apparent to all men – for if it were, all men would strive after it to the exclusion of all else – it might be said that, so far from allowing an overplus of evil in the universe, God has not allowed enough evil to waken the whole human race to the truth of his goodness . . . we must not be too glib in accusing God of allowing more evil in the world than was necessary”.\textsuperscript{49}

As mentioned above, Kirk affirms that Christianity’s proclamation of God’s intolerance of evil as infinitely surpassing his tolerance of it is founded on the doctrine of the atonement, defined as God’s decisively effective way of dealing with the problem of the human predicament or “human condition”, alienation from God caused by human wrongdoing. By “atonement” we mean God’s taking the initiative in reconciling humanity to himself by means of his love and forgiveness embodied in Jesus Christ’s death and resurrection. The effect of such love and forgiveness is that God and humanity are “at one”.

There are several “doctrines”, views, or interpretations of the atonement. One view that many have described as “classical” is that affirmed by Gustav Aulen in his book \textit{Christus Victor}. Aulen’s understanding is that the atonement is best seen as God’s victory over evil,

\textsuperscript{48} \textit{The Crisis of Christian Rationalism, The Malignity of Evil}, p. 78.
\textsuperscript{49} op.cit. p. 71.
which is real and malign, accomplished by Christ’s death on the cross. Although Kirk is not uncritical of Aulen, he concedes that the New Testament writers support him.\(^50\) Athanasius’ treatise on *The Incarnation of the Word* also sees Christ’s death on the cross as God’s decisive victory over the power of evil. Again it seems that Kirk and Temple agree on the central place of both the doctrine of the incarnation and the doctrine of the atonement in Christian belief.

Kirk is happy to portray Christ as “the warrior-king” fighting and triumphing over evil [an image contrasting sharply with Christ as Prince of Peace but effectively conveying the truth of God’s intolerance of evil]. Kirk’s criticism of rationalism at this point is that its stance on evil is *laissez faire*; for him God’s intolerance of evil has ethical consequences for Christians; because God is intolerant of evil, it is their duty to be intolerant of evil also.

The second half of the twentieth century saw several writers addressing the problem of evil. The Presbyterian theologian John Hick treats it extensively in his book *Evil and the God of Love* (1966). Hick is a universalist who believes that God’s love eventually persuades all people to accept it, if not in this life, then in an intermediate period (before a final consummation) which allows opportunity for maturation and the righting of wrongs and of suffering endured on earth. On the matter of suffering endured by innocent people as a result of natural disaster, Charles Birch, a Christian biologist, believed that God has not only allowed human beings free will but also the universe the freedom to follow the so-called laws of physics. At this point he has some common ground with Kirk, as he notes that the working of these laws will not always be beneficent or favourable to human beings.

---

\(^50\) Colossians 2: 13–15 and Ephesians 2: 13–16.
Kirk’s reference above to duty links us with his third lecture, Freedom, Happiness and Duty. He begins with an attack on rationalists for resting their case on happiness rather than duty as the goal and the norm for human life. At this point we sense that “The Crisis of Christian Rationalism” was written because Kirk believed that urgent action was necessary: by 1935 rationalism and “modern” or “scientific” psychology needed to be countered by a strong affirmation of traditional Christian orthodoxy. The element in rationalism and psychology which he criticises is the emphasis by some of their advocates on predetermination, in the form of maintaining that human behaviour is determined by heredity and environment. For Kirk, this rules out the possibility of human free will. The concepts of true freedom and moral responsibility are only possible and tenable if we have free will to choose either evil or good. The only morally responsible way for human beings to travel is the way of duty. If we followed “happiness” only, our choices could be contrary to Christian morality. The points made in these last three sentences are argued in greater detail in his book The Threshold of Ethics. In his essay on Temple, as previously noted, Fletcher has Temple affirming Christian belief in freewill, personal choice and moral responsibility.

Kirk’s criticism of rationalism is taken further when he maintains that it is too close to utilitarianism in the form of such propositions as “all is permitted provided that no one is hurt”, or “the greatest good of the greatest number” as the goal for human social action. For Kirk this is too vague and impractical. Rationalism’s maxim “living for the happiness of others” is good in itself but it needs to be defined by those who follow it in such a way as to avoid begging the question. We have a higher, better and clearer goal if we accept and follow the revelation of God in Jesus Christ contained in his summary given in the Gospels of the Mosaic law as “love God with all your heart, soul, and mind and strength; love your neighbour as yourself”, and in
his “new commandment” (John 13: 34) given to his disciples: “Love one another as I have loved you”.

Although he does not use either word, in his ethics Kirk has both deontological and teleological elements (the words derived from the Greek “dei” – it is necessary – and “telos” – a goal, a finishing line, an end). Christian morality based on duty is found in right action, done out of love of God and others, performed not because of obligation but voluntarily. Our actions are to stem from a soul which says “I will” rather than from a soul governed by such commands as “Thou shalt”, “Thou shalt not”, or a soul which thinks or acts with a view to rewards such as eternal life. Our lives are best guided by moral principles, to live by justice, honesty and truthfulness. The contemplation of God’s generous, overwhelming love stirs us to a response of loving action in a loving spirit, and in this we find true freedom. Kirk does not actually quote 1 John 4: 7ff (“We love because he first loved us; he who loves God must love his brother also”). But his conclusions follow from such texts as these and other New Testament passages such as Galatians 5: 22ff (“The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, gentleness”), 1 Corinthians 13: 4–8 (“Love is patient, love is kind”) and the ethical passages in Ephesians and Colossians.

These lectures throw light on Kirk’s view of the task of the moral theologian; it includes offering clear teaching and guidance in the difficult and challenging aspects of life that have to do with the choice between evil and good, wrong and right, including the weighing up of the consequences of our thoughts and actions, taking into account the circumstances of cases. For Kirk, such teaching and guidance is found in the revelation of God in Jesus Christ and in the record of such revelation in the work of the Biblical writers rather than in the tenets of Christian Rationalism.

By way of comment on the exposition of Kirk’s views set out above, he stands with the Karl Barth of the Dogmatics who profoundly distrusts human reason as tainted by original sin and upholds the Word of God both in written and Christic form as the only adequate revelation. On these grounds Barth upheld Biblical Theology and criticised Natural Theology. However,
in his later years Barth took a more generous view of the latter; and in the
nineteen sixties the Oxford theologian D.E.H. Whiteley, author of The
Theology of St Paul, recommended observing nature in order to find
evidence of a creator God when expounding the text of Romans 2: 14-16, a
comparison of Jews and Gentiles: “When Gentiles, who do not possess the
law, do instinctively what the law requires, these, though not having the law,
are a law to themselves. They show that what the law requires is written on
their hearts, to which their own conscience also bears witness: and their
conflicting thoughts will accuse or perhaps excuse them on the day when,
according to my gospel, God, through Jesus Christ, will judge the secret
thoughts of all”.

It is interesting and important to note that at least one Oxford
teologian of the late twentieth century, for example, David Jenkins, stated
that the Church had for most of its history emphasised the transcendence of
God at the expense of God’s immanence and that it was time to redress this
imbalance. When lecturing on the development of Trinitarian theology,
Jenkins reminded his students of the teaching of Gregory of Nyssa on the
divine Word’s humanity: “That which he did not assume, he did not heal”.

2. The Coherence of Christian Doctrine
A lecture delivered on the Charles Gore Memorial Foundation on
9 November 1949 in Westminster Abbey (London, SPCK, 1950)

(i)

The Doctrines of the Incarnation and the Atonement

Kirk’s title derives from a phrase which he attributes to Charles Gore,
often used by Gore: “The wonderful coherence of Christian doctrine”. Gore
saw Christian doctrine as a unified whole – the Trinity, the Incarnation, the
Atonement, the Church with its ministry and sacraments. He was convinced
that if any article in the whole scheme was attacked, varied, or distorted, the
attack, variation or distortion would be seen to affect every other article to a
greater or less degree.51

---

51 Kirk, The Coherence of Christian Doctrine, p. .3.
While Kirk grants that the human mind is finite, unable to grasp the full truth about the Infinite, and concedes that no human system of thought about the things of God can be wholly coherent, he claims: “we cannot believe that what God has so far revealed is wholly incoherent”.\(^{52}\)

Kirk cites an earlier book, *The Apostolic Ministry*, which he helped to compose and edit, and a critic who claimed that its theology was not Christian, as support for the view that the doctrine of ministry was seen rightly as inextricably linked with the doctrine of God. This leads him to the main point of the first part of his lecture:

“Because of (this) coherence, if the Christian apprehension of any one doctrine weakens or becomes merely conventional, the disease will spread through the whole body.”\(^{53}\)

The spur to Kirk’s thought which produced the Lecture was his assessment of the attitude of many of his Christian contemporaries to the doctrines of the Incarnation and the Atonement respectively.

These are his propositions:

“(1) Neither the doctrine of the Atonement nor that of the Incarnation is held today with that fullness of conviction and understanding which it once commanded:

(2) This arises primarily from the fact that over a long period one or other has been treated as the fundamental Christian truth, whilst its companion has been regarded as secondary, if not even as irrelevant:

(3) Only as they are brought together once more in their fullness will either of them become intelligible, and the two together have converting power.”\(^{54}\)

His clarification is this:

“. . . to deny or belittle the doctrine of the Incarnation – the doctrine that Christ was, and still is, perfect God and perfect man – will inevitably reduce the doctrine of the Atonement to nonsense . . . to water down the doctrine of the Atonement – the doctrine that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures – will play havoc with any doctrine of the Incarnation which the Church recognizes as adequate to the

\(^{52}\) op.cit. p. 4.

\(^{53}\) *The Coherence of Christian Doctrine*. p. 3.

\(^{54}\) op.cit. p. 4.
witness of the New Testament. The two stand or fall together.\textsuperscript{55}

(ii)

The Decline in Adherence to the Doctrine of the Atonement

Kirk traces the decline in understanding of an adherence to the doctrine of the Atonement first to “eighteenth century . . . ethical theism in the theological outlook of the Church of England\textsuperscript{56} and secondly to the perceived change in meaning attributed to the word “sacrifice”, which occurred in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Kirk acknowledges that “the Church was rescued by the first evangelical revival, and the mainspring of that revival was . . . the proclamation of the Cross”\textsuperscript{57}. But he questions whether the world of 1949, even those who are Christian, can understand this stanza from the popular hymn \textit{There is a green hill far away}:

“There was no other good enough
To pay the price of sin;
He only could unlock the gate
Of heaven and let us in.”\textsuperscript{58}

Kirk explains this incomprehension by noting the decline of evangelical fervour in the second half of the nineteenth century and with it an abandonment of the attempt to expound the doctrine of Christ’s sacrifice of himself upon the cross to win forgiveness for the sins of humanity. He detects a change in the meaning of “sacrifice” from “a costly offering of something to \textit{someone} on behalf of \textit{someone else}” to “something done by a man, at great expense to himself, on behalf of others . . . thereby the doctrine of the Atonement – of the meaning and purpose of Christ’s death – has been radically changed. To judge by most modern expositions of that doctrine . . . Christians are satisfied with the belief that our Lord’s death was caused by his resolute and heroic adherence to the good life . . . If we add . . . the hypothesis that our Lord foresaw . . how the life he lived must end in a death such as he died, yet deliberately persevered in his course \textit{in order to}

\textsuperscript{55} op.cit. p.5.
\textsuperscript{56} ibid.
\textsuperscript{57} \textit{The Coherence of Christian Doctrine}, p. 5.
\textsuperscript{58} quoted op.cit. p. 6.
give us this example with its consequent inspiration to emulate him, we are still able to say that ‘he died for our sins’.”

Kirk then makes two comments. First, a change in Christian teaching about the Atonement (such as “Christ’s death is an example to us”) may have widespread repercussions in the sphere of Christian ethics – “an example of (the) coherence of Christian thought”. I take this to show that Kirk saw an integral relationship between theology and ethics; that a change in the teaching of the doctrine of the Atonement may affect Christian conduct.

Second, “any change in the doctrine of the Atonement affects the Christian doctrine of God”. Kirk notes one criticism of the traditional doctrine is that it implies an angry God “whose wrath against sin can only be mollified, his desire for vengeance and punishment only appeased, by the death of someone, whether the sinner or not”. He suggests that this criticism is unnecessary and undeserved. However, Anselm in the eleventh century had described human sin as an affront to God’s honour, and God’s justice required that compensation be made. And the book Soundings included an essay by Geoffrey Lampe entitled The Atonement: Law and Love, which criticises the “penal substitutionary” theory of the Atonement as summed up above as legalistic and contrary to the doctrine of a God whose love of all humanity and creation would not punish his Son in such a way, nor anyone else.

These points comprise the first two parts of Kirk’s lecture. He declares at the beginning of the third part: “What is incontestable is that by the end of the nineteenth century attention was focussed upon the Incarnation, and the Atonement had slipped into relative oblivion”. He cites Charles Gore’s Bampton Lectures on the Incarnation as evidence of this
tendency; his judgment is that Gore discussed the doctrine with “only the most cursory glance at the Atonement”.

Kirk finds it significant that the great book of essays which Gore edited is entitled *Lux Mundi*, not *Salvator Mundi*. Between the time of these writings and the late nineteen forties, when a Gallup poll of a cross-section of the population reported that only a small percentage of those questioned believed in the divinity of Jesus Christ, Kirk notes that the Nicene Creed’s phrases “God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God, Begotten not made, Being of one substance with the Father, By whom all things were made” had become meaningless clichés of an old-world superstition to modern Christians.

Those who still believed that Christ is the Son of God meant by that “the first-born of many brethren, the best of men, one identical with ourselves in all essentials, though more fully endowed with moral and spiritual quality than any other”.

Why such agnosticism on the divinity of Christ? Kirk cites the belief of some scientists in the uniformity of Nature that rejects the idea of the Incarnation as an unique phenomenon; criticisms of the authenticity of some Gospel texts of Jesus’ sayings and of his claims to Messiahship as signs of megalomania; and contradictions within the Gospels.

Gore’s attempt to solve this problem included insisting on the “self-emptying” (*kenosis*) of Jesus as the method of the Incarnation. But Kirk holds that the main reason why the doctrine of the Atonement fell out of favour in the nineteenth century, as the doctrine of the Incarnation in the twentieth, is this:

“The two doctrines cohere (as all Christian doctrine does); and therefore if one loses its light the other is bound to shine dimly too. It was because eighteenth century theism ignored the incarnate person of Jesus, and regarded him simply as a moral teacher, that the doctrine of the Atonement, after its brief and magnificent renaissance, fell back into obscurity. It was because of the obscurity into which the Atonement had fallen that the new interest in the doctrine of the Incarnation

---

66 ibid.
67 ibid.
of which Gore was a principal pioneer failed to retain the
enthusiasm of English Christianity.”

(iii)

The Implications

The crux of Kirk’s argument, reached in the fourth part of the lecture,
is that if Christ is a mere man, his death is in the same category as that of
Socrates – both illustrations are examples of supreme courage in the face of
suffering in order to stand firm for truth, and conscience and duty, or
necessity. Their example may be inspiring, encouraging and ennobling, but
“if Christ was a mere man, mankind could not be saved by him”. [Later he
states explicitly the traditional Christian view that human beings cannot save
themselves].

Kirk’s logic then requires him to say that if “Christ is not the unique
Son of God, his resurrection from the dead is suspect . . . if the Resurrection
. . . goes by the board, we can no longer speak of the Cross . . as the triumph
of God and of man-in-God over death and sin. The two are equally parts of
the same organic whole . . . the Incarnation is meaningless unless it is
crowned by the doctrine of the triumphal victory of Christ on the Cross . . If
the Son of God came down to earth it must have been to do something
spectacular, unprecedented, final and all-sufficient; something that as a
wholly new factor in human affairs must alter their whole character and that
once for all. Nothing less than this befits the visit of the second Person of
the divine Trinity. The doctrine of the Atonement provides such a unique
purpose; banish that doctrine and the Incarnation becomes meaningless. The
Incarnation is a buttress of the Atonement; but so equally is the Atonement
of the Incarnation. Neither can be weakened except at imminent danger to
the other”.

At this point it is important to note Kirk’s view of the Atonement as
accomplished by the victory of Christ on the Cross over the power of evil.

69 op.cit. pp 9-10.
70 op.cit. p.10.
71 The Coherence of Christian Doctrine, pp 11-12.
This is a belief specifically stated in the New Testament\textsuperscript{72} where the victory is not only over human sin\textsuperscript{73} but also over the shackles on God’s gift of freedom in Christ found in the Mosaic law and its ordinances. In the same books Christ’s victory is described in cosmic terms: his victory is also over “principalities and powers – spiritual wickedness in high places”. In the fourth century Athanasius in his treatise \textit{On the Incarnation} also sees Christ on the Cross as the victor of all forms of evil, such victory enabling humanity to turn back to God, and to be reunited with him, the source and giver of life: this for Athanasius is a vital part of the purpose of the Incarnation. “God became man that man might become God”. Such texts were part of the inspiration of Gustav Aulen’s essay on the Atonement, \textit{Christus Victor}.

(iv)

Consequent Action

Kirk then can rightly be confident that he is standing firm on traditionally expressed Christian belief when he speaks of the Atonement as Christ’s victory. The final part of his lecture has a missionary emphasis . . . “it remains to show that [these two doctrines] . . have still converting power, and indeed are essential to the well-being, moral as well as spiritual, of mankind”. Kirk writes here as an Anglican bishop and a much published writer on moral theology and ethics – for him, theological and spiritual beliefs have ethical consequences.

He finds within the Jewish-Christian tradition two cardinal points which he calls “facts” – human sin as conscious and deliberate rebellion against God, and God’s all-forgiving and all-merciful love to sinful humanity.\textsuperscript{74} “As (Christians) we attempt the dangerous task of awakening the sense of sin, so as to win recognition of the disease for which divine love is the only remedy, and thereby to induce in men a gratitude to God for his forgiveness so overwhelming that, aided by his grace, they will give themselves up to the loyal and selfless service of one to whom they owe this

\textsuperscript{73} as in Romans 5: 6-21.
\textsuperscript{74} \textit{The Coherence of Christian Doctrine}, p. 12.
unspeakable gift”. Right belief requires right ethics demonstrated in right living. If we have offended against our fellow human beings we need to make reparation. Kirk says that this is necessary for our own self-respect as well as for atoning for any damage done to others. It follows from the teaching of Jesus, “Love your neighbour as you love yourself.”

Next, Kirk makes the significant point that in the process of reparation we may need to accept help from others, including even the one whom we have neglected or harmed. Our pride does not set us free from this possibility.

More significant still is Kirk’s next point: if sin is rebellion against God and we wish to make reparation for it [I am assuming that Kirk is thinking of rebellious states of mind, or attitudes, as well as of rebellious actions], it is clear that by ourselves we cannot make the reparation which we desire. “God made man in his own image that he might have joy in him; man has seared and defiled that image until it is all but unrecognizable”.

Kirk finds apt quotations in Romans 3: 2-3 and Psalm 49: 7:

“All have sinned and come short of the glory of God . . No man may deliver his brother nor make agreement unto God for him; for it cost more to redeem their souls, so he must let that alone for ever.”

Kirk’s reference to God’s making humanity in his own image calls to mind Athanasius’ brilliant summary of the purpose of the Incarnation: it is to restore the faded image of God in us as one sometimes needs to restore the faded outlines and colours of a portrait.

Kirk continues: “What is needed is that One should come and, as true man, live the perfect life for which man was made, thereby restoring the image of God before God’s eyes. This, our religion tells us, is what our Saviour did. There is no question here of an angry God who demands that someone should suffer to expiate offence committed; it is a question of

---

75 op.cit. p.13.
76 Mark 12: 31.
78 quoted op.cit. p.14
penitent man who cannot find peace of conscience until reparation has been made.”

Kirk thinks of the death of Christ on the Cross as a sacrifice offered to humanity rather than to God, although as both the act of sacrifice, and the relief it brings to the human conscience, are pleasing to God, it is a sacrifice to God as well.

Kirk sees the death on the Cross not as a mere symbol, but as the climax of a life which has restored the image of God, and is happy with the language of the liturgy: “who made there, by his one oblation of himself once offered, a full, perfect and sufficient sacrifice, oblation and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world”.

“The need for Atonement is clear and certain; the gospel story tells of a life and death which made the Atonement that was needed”, which is the story that Christians offer the world.

For Kirk, the Atonement fortifies, enriches and ennobles the doctrine of the Incarnation, “by giving it a purpose worthy of the self-limitation of the Son of God”. “Self-limitation” echoes Gore’s “self-emptying”, mentioned above. For Kirk, God’s loving forgiveness is manifested in his coming in the person of his Son, to do for humanity what we could not do for ourselves. Both doctrines together express the love of God for humanity as neither of them could do in isolation. God takes the initiative [Kirk quotes 1 John 4: 7ff. “herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins”].

“The acceptance of human limitations imposed upon him by the Incarnation must have been as excruciating to the Godhead-in-the-flesh as the acceptance of the sufferings upon the Cross; but for man’s sake they were accepted, endured and transcended”.

Kirk’s concluding sentences:

“. . . bring these two doctrines and hold them together in their fullness, and they blaze out into the eternal doctrine which the

---

82 The Coherence of Christian Doctrine, p. 15. The New Revised Version of the Bible reads: . . “sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins”.
83 ibid.
Church inherited from the earliest apostolic teaching, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself. By this truth our message stands or falls.”

Kirk is here quoting 2 Corinthians 5:19 which enables us to see the Atonement as reconciliation, initiated by God and offered unconditionally to humanity. St Paul follows his statement with an appeal to his readers to accept the ethical consequences of his theology: “We beseech you, be reconciled to God”, (having declared that not only was God in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting their transgressions against them, but also that God has given us the ministry of reconciliation). These closing words of Kirk based on St Paul’s letters call to mind also the work of D.M. Baillie,85 which is a treatise on both the Incarnation and the Atonement. More than one writer and speaker has noted that God through Christ has made reconciliation possible between humanity and God (We are now “at one”) and between and among human beings.

Thus in Kirk’s lecture we have a clear exposition of classical traditional Christian teaching. The theological ferment of the nineteen sixties which produced Soundings and Honest to God86 arose from a desire to rediscover first principles and grounds for Christian faith, moral judgments and actions; and to correct a perceived excessive emphasis on the transcendence or divinity of Christ at the expense of a necessary emphasis on his humanity. Prominent among the contributors to the ferment were “Cambridge” theologians such as Geoffrey Lampe, G.F. Woods and John Robinson, and “Oxford” theologians such as David Jenkins, E.L. Mascall and Alan Richardson. A further chapter in the story of the ferment and the debate began with the publication in 1977 of The Myth of God Incarnate, a collection of essays edited by John Hick. Even long before it appeared, examiners were fond of asking students whether they believed the Chalcedonian Definition87 was an adequate statement of the truth about Jesus

84 ibid.
85 D.M. Baillie, God was in Christ, Faber, London, 1961.
87 promulgated at the Council of Chalcedon in 451, declaring that Jesus Christ is both fully human and fully divine, perfect man and perfect God
Christ. In 1980 appeared the book *Reasonable Belief*[^88], by Richard and Anthony Hanson, both Anglican clergy, in which they again emphasise the real humanity of Jesus as reported in the Gospels: one who was tired, hungry and thirsty, and not all-knowing, not a God-man walking the roads of Palestine; yet still the one in whom the fullness of God’s love and forgiveness is seen, the love of which Geoffrey Lampe and Kirk both speak as overcoming for all time the power of death and evil, and setting humanity and the whole creation free to reach fulfilment in union with God.

These questions may always be asked: How coherent does the coherence of Christian doctrine have to be in order to be described as coherent? Is “coherence” the right word to use in order to describe the relation of the doctrines of the Incarnation and the Atonement? Kirk may have intended to use the word “coherent” in a limited sense: namely, that an adequate Christian theology requires regarding both doctrines as essential. A further question is this: Is Kirk’s account of Christian doctrine sufficiently open to other interpretations and accounts?

CHAPTER 9
THE INFLUENCE OF KIRK

(i)
Kirk’s Influence on R.C. Mortimer

In this final chapter I shall consider the influence of Kirk’s moral theology. This will include the reactions of other writers to his work and their evaluation of it. I have noted that his successor as Regius Professor of Moral and Pastoral Theology, Dr R.C. Mortimer, in his book *The Elements of Moral Theology*,¹ acknowledged his debt to Kirk. In turn, Mortimer’s successor, Dr V.A. Demant, in an article included in the *Church Quarterly Review*,² offered a picture of Kirk’s work as a whole and an assessment of its significance in the field of moral theology. His essay is a useful example of an evaluation of Kirk, part of the subject of this chapter. It is noteworthy that Demant evaluates positively Kirk’s pastoral concern for both clergy and lay people. This material is relevant as an evaluation as Kirk clearly influenced Demant positively; it is also relevant because Demant notes changes in Kirk’s thinking as he writes and works on his various themes. I have also quoted Thomas Wood’s view that as a moral theologian Kirk has had no Anglican successor of comparable stature, and mentioned that Wood then referred to H.M. Waddams’ book, *A New Introduction to Moral Theology*.³ Waddams makes several references to the work of Kirk and Mortimer as does G.R. Dunstan in his book *The Artifice of Ethics*.⁴ I shall take these writers into account in offering my own assessment of Kirk’s moral theology.

One question which needs to be addressed in considering Kirk’s influence is this. Kirk’s major works and several articles which he contributed to the journal *Theology* over the years from 1920 to 1940 are

---

evidence that his influence was considerable during his lifetime\textsuperscript{5}. But the work of Mortimer and Demant needs to be compared and contrasted with the views of Joseph Fletcher, Paul Lehmann, Ronald Preston and Dr Hans Pütz as critics.\textsuperscript{6} They may help us to understand why Kirk’s influence has declined over the last four decades.

In his book, dedicated to Kirk, Dr Mortimer defines moral theology as “the study of human behaviour from the moral and theological points of view. It is \textit{moral} theology because it is concerned to judge the rightness and wrongness of human actions . . . (to enquire) into the nature of a human act and into the standard of morality by which such acts are judged . . . it is not the same as moral philosophy . . . its special province is that conduct which is enjoined on man by the law of God, in order that man may attain to the end for which he was created. The fundamental subject matter of moral theology is an enquiry into man’s end, into the nature of human actions and their morality, into the law of God to which those actions should conform, into conscience by which man perceives that law and directs his actions, and into the virtues whereby he manifests obedience to God and the sins whereby he revolts from him”\textsuperscript{7}.

Mortimer states that his objects in writing the book were two: first, to provide a simple introduction to moral theology and to familiarise Anglican readers with some of its methods and technical terms. Mortimer had in mind the needs of younger clergy and those training for the ordained ministry. The second object was to offer a starting point for the compilation of an Anglican manual of moral theology. Mortimer held that at the time of writing there was no such manual, and very few Roman Catholic manuals in English. Like Kirk, Mortimer went to their main source, St Thomas Aquinas.

\textsuperscript{5} e.g. K.E. Kirk, “Moral Theology: Some Lessons of the Past”, \textit{Theology}, Vol. 11, January 1921.
\textsuperscript{7} R.C. Mortimer, \textit{The Elements of Moral Theology}, p. v. (Mortimer became the Anglican Bishop of Exeter).
Mortimer acknowledged his debt to Kirk and the themes and content of his book testify to this debt. To add to his definition given above, the virtues to which he refers and with which he deals are those found in Kirk’s *Principles of Moral Theology*: faith, hope and love (theological virtues) and fortitude, temperance, justice and prudence (cardinal virtues)\(^8\).

Mortimer’s first chapter is entitled “The End of Man”. On this he offers these definitions: “Man’s final end is to manifest the glory of God, which he cannot fail to do if he becomes what God intends him to be, perfect. For then . . . he shows the power and wisdom and love of God. And this perfection of his own nature is manifestly his own good and the possession of this good is clearly his happiness. . . because man is made in the image of God, with reason and will, this perfection is only possible in close union with and dependence on God. So far as the limits of our created nature we are to grow into likeness with God… man is bound by the law of his creation, to seek God. This he does by showing towards God honour, obedience and love, for this is to recognise and strive towards God as an end. The whole life of man, his body, mind and spirit, must be dedicated to God, in every action and at every moment”\(^9\).

On the matter of man’s ultimate end, both Kirk and Mortimer follow Aquinas,\(^10\) and the influence of Kirk on Mortimer is clear.

(ii)

V.A. Demant’s Evaluation of Kirk

Dr V.A. Demant’s article in *The Church Quarterly Review*, entitled *Kenneth Kirk as Moral Theologian*, appeared three years after Kirk’s death. He described Kirk’s writings as “a striking and remarkable achievement”\(^11\). First, he noted that since the writings of the Caroline divines (notably Taylor and Sanderson) and Richard Baxter there had been no serious Anglican writing seeking to formulate a moral theology for the Church of England.

Secondly, the Tractarians had written nothing on specifically moral questions except as these entered into their concern with ascetic and devotional theology. “For these reasons Kirk may be regarded as in our time something of a pioneer”.  

Demant’s next point is evidence of Kirk’s influence. “His successors, few as they are, derive their interest and stimulus from him: Dr Mortimer, Dr McAdoo and Thomas Wood, the last two picking up Kirk’s use of Sanderson, Jeremy Taylor, John Sharp and other seventeenth century moralists in his Problems of Conscience”.  

Demant affirms that Kirk was led to pursue Moral Theology and to specialise in its study as the result of his life and work as a chaplain to the Forces in the first World War. His book A Study of Silent Minds published in 1918 showed his “warm humanity as well as the born teacher’s desire to see admirable qualities of those he was ministering to, more consciously understood by them and intellectually guided”.  

In this book appeared the ethical question how far the good life is a proper balance of self-seeking and self-sacrifice. Demant noted that Kirk returned to it in 1933 in two chapters entitled “Conscientiousness” and “Religion” in his book The Threshold of Ethics. His writings show him wrestling with the question of the place and meaning of self-renunciation in the Christian life and whether it is contrary to self-development or saving one’s soul, together with his repeated effort to clear up ambiguities in the use of the adjectives “interested” and “disinterested”. Demant credits Kirk with having read Bishop Butler on Self-love and Benevolence.  

Demant’s view is that it was as Kirk dealt with his own difficulties in offering pastoral guidance to soldiers that his main interests were directed to Moral Theology and its problems. Kirk’s first book, Principles, grew out of lectures on these subjects given to Chaplains’ training schools. We have

---

12 V.A. Demant, Kenneth Kirk as Moral Theologian, p.423.  
13 ibid.  
14 op.cit. p. 424.  
15 op.cit. p. 425.
noted that in his biography of Kirk, published two years after Demant’s article, E.W. Kemp records that Kirk’s experiences as a Chaplain to the forces in France and Flanders during the First World War led to the publication of his first book, *A Study of Silent Minds*, and directed his thoughts to the subject of moral theology.

Demant cited as a second factor influencing Kirk in the same direction the frequency of discussions on questions of moral theology, ascetic theology and pastoral guidance of souls in the early post-first-war years. He noted Kirk’s meetings at Cuddesdon with Streeter, Hawkes, Seaton, Shabbeare, Rawlinson and Dr J.A. Hadfield, and his interest in the relation between the work of the physician and the priest, the analyst and the confessor, which matter Kirk raised in the Preface to *Principles*. Demant observed that Kirk discussed the question of the will and the deterministic assumptions of psychotherapy in the chapter on Psychology in *The Threshold of Ethics*, a criticism of Hadfield’s *Psychology and Morals*. The Cuddesdon group discussed the Roman Catholic distinction between precepts and counsels and the same Church’s treatment of the doubtful conscience; the definition of Moral Theology; the Anglican practice of leaving much to the individual conscience; and the question of vows and promises.¹⁶ Demant saw a distinction in Roman Catholicism between confession and direction and implied that it was a mistake for Anglicans to confuse them.

Demant traced the influence of these discussions on Kirk’s writings. “It seems to me that as he worked further on the subject, he deliberately tried to adopt sufficient of the Roman tradition to earn the respect of the Roman moralist and to commend his work to the Catholic-minded clergy of the Church of England, and at the same time to restate the tradition in a way more acceptable to the broader and liberalist tradition supposed to be characteristic of Anglicanism. But he was all along bothered about the relation of authority and liberty, and . . . never quite to his own satisfaction stated an Anglican theory of authority – as indeed who else has ever

---

done?" Demant noted that in his *Ignorance, Faith and Conformity* Kirk discussed one aspect of the question: the book was an attempt to assess the soundness of the doctrine of invincible ignorance.

Demant described *Conscience and its Problems* as probably Kirk’s greatest book as a moral theologian, while he thought *The Vision of God* would be accounted his outstanding work. “*Conscience and its Problems* marks a change in his approach for he had by then (1927) fully assimilated that particular version of the Anglican tradition represented by the Carolines, Sanderson, Jeremy Taylor and Hall – to which was added that of Richard Baxter”.

Demant believed it was possible in reviewing Kirk’s work to identify some dominant themes of interest and some changes of emphasis during its course; that behind all his work lay a deep pastoral concern and a desire to guide the clergy in sound thinking and in practical equipment for their work as guides, teachers or confessors. Demant found the *Principles* to be an exposition of the material of that part of the pastor’s task which is concerned with ethical teaching, the growth of the Christian character, life in Christ, the training and healing of the soul, and the treatment of sin, with one chapter only on Moral Theology proper ("Conscience, Law and Casuistry"). Demant quoted Kirk: “. . . the standing problem of all ethics is the reconciliation of the two apparently opposed principles . . . of law and liberty, or of authority and individualism. Particularly is this the case for Christian ethics”. Demant’s view is that Kirk would later have revised this and said that this was the standing problem of Christian ethics only; that in this statement Kirk was reading into what he called “the standing problem of ethics that is the perennial worry of the Anglican mind”. Demant noted that Kirk had turned to St Thomas Aquinas for guidance on this question; Aquinas had recognised the dialectic of law and conscience. He cites Kirk’s assertion that the Roman Catholic Church had not followed Aquinas but had become completely authoritarian; that the only true successors of Aquinas

---

17 Kenneth Kirk as Moral Theologian., p. 426.
18 ibid.
19 ibid.
20 op.cit. p. 427.
were the theologians of the seventeenth century – Hooker, Jeremy Taylor, Sanderson, Hall and their fellows.21

Demant observed that Kirk took up the matter of authority and liberty in *Ignorance, Faith and Conformity* with special reference to the case of “invincible ignorance”. Kirk raised this question: “Do the conditions of the Church of England make it legitimate for a member of the body conscientiously to refuse conformity in any matter of weight and still retain his membership with all its rights and privileges?” Starting from the argument that ignorance of the law is no sin (the case of “invincible ignorance”), Kirk affirms that the heathen is not the same as the heretic. The next matter for Kirk was that of the large number of deviations from the rule of the Church in faith and morals which do not constitute formal heresy.

Demant observes: “This is a peculiar problem of the Church of England where the laity tend to take the clergy, in moral questions at least, as advisers rather than authorities. How far can a church member go in ‘conscientious non-conformity’ without incurring excommunication? Can such ‘conscientious non-conformity’ be put down to ‘invincible ignorance’ – and if it can, then though it carries no moral censure, may it allow its holder to retain active church membership, however far it goes?”22

Demant notes from these questions that Kirk is aware of the English tendency to regard departure from orthodoxy in faith as much less regrettable than violation of the Church’s moral standard.23 He quotes Kirk on this difference between Roman Catholicism and Anglicanism in the matter of authority and the individual conscience, the former extending the sway of promulgated law to the utmost at the expense of custom, the latter reducing the domain of law to a barest possible minimum, and leaving all else to the regime of custom.

---

21 i.e. in attempting to carry out Aquinas’ ideal of combining the principle of authority with that of freedom. But Demant suggested that these theologians did not seem to be very interested in this question.
22 *Kenneth Kirk as Moral Theologian*, p. 428.
23 ibid.
Demant’s view is that Kirk wrote those words before he became a bishop. But, on the principles of moral theology concerning invincible ignorance, these divergencies need not require excommunication or schism. On the matter of where the line is to be drawn Kirk concluded that each church must make its own body of canon law, and thus know how to decide pastorally cases of conscience where a member is conscientiously unable to conform to the law and custom of the Church. “A lame conclusion perhaps, but a lameness inevitable so long as any church does not slide out of the tension of law and liberty by denying the validity of one of them”.24

On the matter of Kirk’s influence on Demant, it is noteworthy that that influence is seen in what Demant thinks are the points which Kirk makes that are worth mentioning as important and the questions which he raises.

Demant’s view of Kirk’s next book, *Conscience and its Problems*, is that it is technically excellent as it seeks to give a scientific backing to casuistry. But in this work Kirk makes two important points. The first is that the problem of conscience versus human or ecclesiastical authority is peculiar to Christianity. “This is due . . to the significance attached to the individual person who has a direct relation to God, an individual life in Christ (beside) his relation to them through the terrestrial community and the visible body of the Church . . . Kenneth Kirk saw that Christianity in practice must by its own nature encounter the problem of conscience, which is there long before Reformation protest and post-Tridentine casuistry. The individual moral judgment may at any time be at variance with the mind of the Church – or the mind of the Church may not be declared unambiguously on a particular issue before the individual member”.25

For Demant the second point to emerge from *Conscience and its Problems* is a clear statement that the development of casuistry, for forming a moral judgment upon a particular act, was an effort to support the

24 *Kenneth Kirk as Moral Theologian*, p. 429.
25 ibid.
conscience and not to override it. This is the case when the law is doubtful. We have noted that in our discussion of conscience and its problems that Kirk offers three main answers. *Tutiorism* advises in cases of doubt the adoption of the stricter course or inaction until all doubts are resolved. *Probabiliorism* gives the benefit of the doubt if divided opinion shows one course more probably right than another which may then be followed. *Probabilism* allows you to disregard a law if there is one probable opinion in favour of its invalidity.

Demant acknowledges that Kirk is aware of the dangers of this last view but knows that it is the only useful casuistical principle as “whenever there is genuine doubt (with some exceptions) only probabilism avoids scrupulosity. Genuine doubt means there is real ambiguity in the formulation of the law, the undoubted tolerance by authority of its neglect, the definite exception of its operation of certain categories of cases into which that under consideration may reasonably be held to fall, the emergence of an important fact which . . never entered into the calculations of those who formulated the law – nothing less than this would appear to constitute a ‘doubt’ in the technical sense”.

Demant then states the view that probabilism is the only theory which would justify the Christian pacifist in refusing to bear arms, and would justify a church in supporting a government which respects that conscientious refusal. “It is a probable opinion – and a minority one . . that the non-resistance texts of the Gospels are meant to regulate the relations of men in a settled community”. Demant and Kirk both represent Anglican views; it would be interesting to hear the views of the Christian Pacifist Society of Friends (Quakers) on that point.

On the matter of there being no developing tradition of Anglican moral theology after the seventeenth century, Kirk suggested that the Caroline theologians were *probabiliorists*; in their concern to educate the individual conscience on the basis of Scripture and Natural Law they would

---

26 Kenneth Kirk as Moral Theologian, pp 429-430.
27 op.cit. p. 430.
28 ibid.
allow no decision to be conscientiously made – where the application of the law was not obvious – except after a prolonged weighting of pros and cons.

Demant refers to some questions raised by Kirk which concern Anglicans, under the heading of doubt. One such question is whether the Churchman is bound by the western Church’s rules about fasting Communion, confession and clerical celibacy. Other questions are the problem of birth control (which was left by the 1930 Lambeth Conference of Anglican Bishops to individual conscience), betting and gambling. He mentions Kirk’s treatment of problems of perplexity – as distinct from doubt, or uncertain conscience; choice between two alternatives for and against which much can be urged; when you may lie; commercial honesty; and general strikes. “Kirk’s interests were always practical and pastoral however much he enjoyed unravelling a complicated moral point”. 29

On the meaning of conscience, Demant notes a change in Kirk’s language. In Principles, conscience is that tendency of human nature which leads both conative and cognitive elements to seek unsparingly for satisfaction in the good, the beautiful, and the true. In The Threshold of Ethics it is expressed more theologically. In his essay on “Moral Theology” in The Study of Theology, his last piece of major writing, he defines conscience as the mind of man attempting to reach greater certainty in regard to right actions, moral intentions and virtuous motives, either in general or with reference to some particular case “ . . . ‘the mind of man making moral judgments’ – not a special faculty but a special exercise of the faculty of reason – applying the general ethical truths he accepts to particular cases … The task of conscience is eminently casuistical in the right sense of the word”. 30

In his concluding estimate of Kirk, Demant observes that Kirk was quite used to receiving cynical remarks about the evasions of moral theologians and their frequent refusal to give a plain answer to a plain question. But Demant recalls being consulted by a parish priest who had to

29 Kenneth Kirk as Moral Theologian, p. 431.
30 op.cit. p. 432.
give a decision to a member of his congregation about “conscientious nonconformist” opinion he had concerning some of his marriage problems. “I was able to send the pastor away free of perplexity, but only because I had familiarized myself with the treatment of problems of conscience under the guidance of Kenneth Kirk and ‘other typical moral theologians’”.

Demant continues: “I conclude that Kirk’s contribution has been immense; in as far as it may seem irrelevant to many Anglicans, that is a measure of our Anglican weakness”. He cites the criticism of moral theology that it rests on the distinction between “counsels of perfection” and “moral precepts” and is concerned only with the latter – a kind of low gear religion for the majority which is false to the Gospel injunction to seek perfection. But *The Vision of God* shows Kirk to be not only a moral theologian: in this work he dealt fully with the search for perfection. Demant believes Kirk produced a version of the doctrine of two standards which he regarded as two stages in the Christian life rather than alternatives. Demant regards this as an unsatisfactory solution which Kirk never revised. But he cites S. van Dobschütz (*Christian Life in the Primitive Church*) as pointing out that the double standard theory of morality arose in the Church as a reply to the rigorous demand of the Gnostics for universal asceticism; it was a large concession to dualism but Kirk affirmed that the distinction saved the vital evangelical conception of morality, and saved Christianity from becoming the religion of an introverted sect.

Nonetheless, in *The Vision of God* Kirk took a firm stand against the notion that a higher standard of Christian faith and life was to be expected of those who entered on the religious (monastic) life than of Christians living in the secular world. He maintained that Christianity was a Gospel of promise rather than of law; that the spiritual journey to the vision of God was open to all people and accessible to all.

Demant believed that the Anglican Church of his day still had to deal with the effects of the perception of “precepts” and “counsels”. “The

---

31 *Kenneth Kirk as Moral Theologian*, p. 432.
32 op.cit. p. 433.
33 ibid.
[Church of England] proclaims a strict Gospel, and treats the reception of Holy Communion as implying that the recipient proposes whole-hearted service . . . Yet except in cases of openly and notoriously unchristian life, we leave it to the individual to decide upon his own fitness. . . the Anglican mind is set against making the Church of England . . a Church exclusively of the converted. We have . . . admitted in various ways to responsibility for the morality of the unconverted, over and above the primary responsibility of seeking their conversion, and this without entangling ourselves with the doctrine that this Gospel contains counsels as well as precepts. What we have not succeeded in producing is a clear statement of the principles involved in our practice. Whoever takes a hand in that will have to start where Kenneth Kirk left off”.

(iii)

Michael Ramsey’s References to Kirk

In 1960 Arthur Michael Ramsey published the Hale Memorial Lectures of Seabury-Western Theological Seminary which he had given in the previous year. His title was “From Gore to Temple: the Development of Anglican Theology between Lux Mundi and the Second World War 1889-1939”. At the time of the book’s publication he was Archbishop of York, subsequently Archbishop of Canterbury.

Ramsey, in a chapter entitled Liberal Catholicism, mentions Kirk as one of the writers of Essays Catholic and Critical (1926). He accredited Kirk with having broken new ground in works on moral theology and described The Vision of God as a great study of Christian spirituality. This is a significant evaluation. Ramsey continued: “In retrospect it is apparent that Kirk was detached from much of the prevailing liberal spirit of the time. While he had a competence in New Testament criticism akin to his

34 Kenneth Kirk as Moral Theologian, pp 433-434.
contemporaries, he was in reaction from the pragmatism and the immane
ntism which he sensed as faults of the period. In lectures on *The
Crisis in Christian Rationalism* he criticized Hegelian influences which still lingered in Anglican theology; and later in a Gore Memorial Lecture entitled “The Coherence of Christian Doctrine” he pleaded for the unity of dogma which the later liberal Catholicism tended to obscure”.  

In an appendix, “The Doctrine of the Trinity in Anglican Theology”, Ramsey notes the difficulty felt by critical minds about the relation of the Holy Spirit to the Risen Christ. Does the New Testament invariably distinguish them? Are we to understand the Spirit to be personal in the sense in which Christ is personal?

Ramsey cites Kirk’s writing on “The Evolution of the Doctrine of the Trinity” in the volume *Essays on the Trinity and the Incarnation* (1928). “Kirk here faces the question: allowing that there was in early Christian thought both a binitarian and a Trinitarian strain, was the adoption of the latter by the Church due to presuppositions and philosophical influence? His answer was to show that intellectually a binitarian presupposition was strongly present in Hebraic and Greek thought, and the victory of the Trinitarian position was due to the force of the distinctive Christian experience.

“There is the other question: in that experience is there a real distinction between Christ and the Holy Spirit? Kirk sees it in the relation of ‘communion’ (Christ) and the relation of ‘possession’ (the Spirit), both being distinct though bound together in the Christian’s relation to God. ‘Man recognizes in the “Son” and in the “Spirit” the respective termini of relations between himself and God, so real that they must be dignified with the title of hypostases’.”

Ramsey’s assessment of Kirk seems to be comparable with that of Demant. Kirk’s thought on the Trinity shows him defending a traditional Anglo-Catholic orthodox view; when applied to his writing on ethics and

---

38 K.E. Kirk, Essays on the Trinity and the Incarnation, p. 236, quoted Ramsey, op.cit. p. 180. *Hypostasis* is the term used especially from the middle of the fourth century onwards in discussions about Christ and the Trinity to mean “person” or “individual reality”.

266
moral theology it bears on his view of the effect of the Christian’s relation to God on his character and conduct and the influence of Christ and the saints on both.

(iv)

Paul Lehmann’s view of Kirk: a Reformed Protestant Perspective

In 1963 Professor Paul Lehmann published his book Ethics in a Christian Context. At that time he was Professor of Systematic Theology at Union Theological Seminary, New York. He is a writer and expositor from the Reformed tradition of Christianity. In this book he sets out to answer the question: “What am I as a believer in Jesus Christ and a member of his Church to do?”

Lehmann’s view of Christian ethics is rooted in the koinonia, the new community of believers which, he affirms, God has created in history through Jesus Christ. Lehmann addresses the question of how Christian faith affects the behaviour and brings to full stature the life of those who accept and undertake to live by that faith.

He differentiates Christian thinking about ethics from the way of dealing with ethics which has emerged in Western thought through the tradition of moral philosophy. Further, he finds a distinctive way of thinking about ethics from within the community of Christian faith and life in the tradition of moral theology. He believes that this tradition offers a kind of koinonia-ethnic which seeks to clarify ethical theory in particular through considering the question of conscience. His study leads him to a critique of Anglican moral theology and the work of Kenneth Kirk.

Before he takes up that work Lehmann refers to several Roman Catholic moralists who he regards as expressing dissatisfaction with their tradition of moral theology. Lehmann holds that this dissatisfaction has been interpreted in Anglican moral theology “both in the past and in the

present. It is the peculiar character and office of Anglican thought to hold together, so far as this may be possible, both Catholic and Protestant insight and experience of the one, holy, apostolic but divided church. Moral theology thus also comes under the ‘law of Anglican existence’, this . . . devotion to a via media”.  

Lehmann places Kirk in the Catholic wing of Anglicanism and cites him as having given authoritative attention to the task and responsibility of moral theology and as one who had noted the wisdom and validity of a mediating course.  

He continues: “Bishop Kirk’s attempt to formulate a sound and useful moral theology, at once free of the weaknesses of the Roman tradition and faithful to the wisdom and strength of Roman Catholic ethics, has produced three comprehensive books on the subject”.  

These are Some Principles, Ignorance Faith and Conformity, and Conscience and its Problems. He quotes Kirk’s view of the task of moral theology as having to steer a course between excessively rigid definition and vagueness of definition; as requiring enough exactness as will offer clear guidance to the priest in dealing with problems of human conduct, without giving him the arrogance and obstinacy stemming from a sense of absolute rightness.

Lehmann says that Kirk rightly recognizes the concern of Christian ethics with the bearing of divine revelation on behaviour, and its failure to deal with the problem of reconciling the tension between authority and individualism, between law and liberty. Roman Catholic moral theory has failed to meet this problem owing to a too rigorous emphasis on authority and law, and Protestant ethics has made the contrary mistake of overstating the case for liberty and individualism.

Lehmann reviews Kirk’s attempt to correct these errors by turning to what he called the first business of Christian ethics, namely, “to enumerate the main duties of a Christian in normal circumstances”.  

He notes Kirk’s

---

41 ibid.
42 ibid.
faulting of the theologians Ambrose, Aquinas, Gregory and Augustine, for basing their account of the Christian ideal of life on a pagan view of virtue rather than on the insights and directions of the Bible. He cites Kirk’s view that virtue as an ideal needed to be derived from the biblical view of the love of God, human nature, and the Christian’s relation to Christ. Hence Kirk’s emphasis on the psychological roots of the cardinal virtues, on intelligence, appetite, and will, and on the theological virtues seen less as the crown of the cardinal virtues than as characteristics of the Christian life.\textsuperscript{45}

But Lehmann holds that Kirk’s exposition of the implications for behaviour of the biblical view of the Christian ideal of life leads him to return to the anthropology and the penitential practice of the Roman Catholic tradition. Moral theology presupposes, according to Kirk, free will and conscience. The soul is free to choose between good and bad, right and wrong; in all its actions, however tainted and corrupted by sin, the soul retains an innate power [conscience] both of perceiving what is good and aspiring to it. On these presuppositions, moral theology seeks to bring together the ideal of character which God desires for each man and the means which enable the soul to progress toward that ideal.

“The task involves a detailed account of the laws of responsible action and their appropriateness to the natural endowments of the human soul . . an account of the hindrances to spiritual progress, natural or acquired, and the means by which these hindrances can be either eradicated or counteracted. . a discussion of the principle by which morally dubious actions are to be regulated, of the means by which the priest can co-operate with God in stimulating or fostering spiritual progress, and of the qualifications demanded of a priest in his capacity as spiritual director or guide of souls.”\textsuperscript{46}

Lehmann’s critique is that before Kirk has gone far with his renovation of moral theology, the biblical context of the Christian ideal of life has been transformed into a law of spiritual progress in obedience to which the soul’s desire, intelligence and will are transformed through purification, illumination and union into the image of Christ.\textsuperscript{47}

Lehmann finds Kirk’s thought penitential in tone and content: “the more . . . Kirk moves from the renovationist intention and starting point of his analysis, the more difficult it is to see that he departs at all, except for alterations in language, from the . . manuals of Roman Catholic moral theology”.48

Lehmann continues: “The outcome of this elaborate attention to moral theology and its problems is the more regrettable and surprising since Kirk reckons himself standing in the tradition not of Roman moral theology but of Caroline divinity”.49 Lehmann quotes Kirk’s preface of his Principles in which he claims that the only successors of Aquinas who have carried out his idea of combining the principle of authority with that of freedom are the Anglican theologians of the seventeenth century, Hooker, Jeremy Taylor, Sanderson, Hall and their fellows.50

Lehmann holds that the Caroline theologians were applying to Roman teaching much the same kind of criticism which was later to come from some Roman moralists themselves. The Caroline theologians were concerned about a less formal and schematic programme of moral guidance derived from a more faithful adherence to Scripture. “They laboured for an ideal of Christian discipleship in terms of a renewed human being, an ideal which had been obscured by the tradition of moral theology. What contemporary Roman Catholic critics have been exploring as a more intimate connection between the life of virtue and life in the love of God, the Caroline moral theologians were exploring in terms of a more intimate connection between moral theology and ascetic theology . . (they) were dedicated to a spirituality of ‘holy living and holy dying’”.51

This comparison of Lehmann’s view of the Carolines with that of Kirk has to do with Kirk’s evaluation of the Carolines, especially as Lehmann compares the Carolines with the Roman Catholic critics of Lehmann’s day. These critics were criticising their own tradition for the

---

49 ibid.
51 Paul Lehmann, op.cit. p. 306.
same reason as the Carolines criticised the Roman Catholic tradition of their day. Kirk also criticised the Roman Catholic tradition of his day, but Lehmann maintains that he did not escape their faults in his own work.

(v)

Herbert Waddam’s Response to Lehmann and his Evaluation of Kirk

Lehmann’s criticism of Kirk is far-reaching as Kirk’s principal works clearly show that he saw the importance of a close connection between moral theology and ascetic theology. However, Lehmann is himself criticised by Herbert Waddams in his book *A New Introduction to Moral Theology*.\(^5^2\)

Waddams notes Lehmann’s view that the only kind of Christian ethics which ought to be accepted is *koinonia* ethics. He quotes Lehmann: “The ethical question – in the *koinonia* – is not ‘what *ought* I to do’ but ‘What am I to do?’ because in the *koinonia* one is always in an *indicative* rather than in an *imperative* situation”. Waddams responds to this statement by granting that it is desirable for Christians to start from what God has done for them and proceed from this fact, rather than starting from some theoretical moral obligation.

He continues: “But this does not abolish the moral claim upon us, nor do away with the sense of moral obligation which has everywhere been accepted as having a valid content for man. It would be impossible to try to evacuate the New Testament of this claim, for it is an ever-present assumption of everything which Jesus and the Apostles do. The appeals which Jesus makes to his hearers are not relevant, if the moral sense is thought to be absent or to be something which ought to be ignored”.\(^5^3\)

Waddams says that Lehmann is right to criticise tabu law, fear and conformity as reasons for moral behaviour. But Lehmann’s conclusion that moral laws have no use at all does not follow from his criticism. Waddams cites Lehmann’s wish to abandon traditional Christian teaching about

---


\(^{53}\) H. Waddams, *A New Introduction to Moral Theology*, p. 16.
sexuality. He points out that a proper freedom of choice in no way affects the aim which should govern all sexual teaching, “namely that its fulfilment can only be found in conforming to the will of God, and that will has been plainly stated by Jesus himself in the New Testament as being permanent lifelong marriage with one partner. There is guidance in the shape of a moral principle, and it is plainly incorrect to suggest that there is not”.

Waddams quotes Lehmann’s criticism of moral theology, in which he finds Lehmann assuming that the aim of moral theology is to free the believer from the ethical predicament by taking him out of the ethical situation to which the problem of the right or good action is intrinsic; this attempt assumes that the moral counsellor is in a different situation from that of the person under instruction and guidance.

Waddams counters thus: “This may be true of some kinds of moral theology, but it is certainly not true of moral theology properly understood. Its aim is not to free anyone from the ethical predicament, it is to help the man in the ethical predicament to think rightly about the situation in which he finds himself”. To Lehmann’s view that a koinonia-ethic is concerned with functions and relations, not with principles and precepts, Waddams’ response is that there is no necessary enmity between these two groups. “So long as principles and precepts (in a general sense) are subordinate to personal relationships with God on the one hand, and with other persons on the other, they can be of the greatest service and help to people in making the choices which inevitably face them in everyday life”.

To support his statement Waddams takes the example of the human family. The important and overriding aim of the family must be to promote the best possible relations between all its members. But there are rules within the family which provide guidance for the children as well as for the adults. “There are principles in the family which are to be applied in relationships outside the family also. These can be, and usually are, laid down in some way by the parents, who may discuss with the children how

54 H. Waddams, A New Introduction to Moral Theology, p. 17.
55 ibid.
56 H. Waddams, op.cit. p. 18.
they apply to their relations with others. The purpose of this is to help them in the practical choices which they have to make. In doing this parents and children are engaged in the work of moral theology, which is a form of teaching and learning derived from Christian experience and thought in the past.\textsuperscript{57}

Waddams says that Lehmann is correct in stressing the fact that each moral situation has to be dealt with as it arises and that each is unique, but that he ought to recognise that, although each moral situation differs from every other, there is much in common between one and another. Waddams maintains that no one who has been engaged in trying to help people in their personal problems can fail to see that both sides are true. Moral questions have to be decided in the context of the church as Lehmann states, but this means not only the local congregation, which he mentions, but also the Church at large and throughout history. History can never be ignored in Christian life, for the historic events of the Gospel stand at its centre.

Waddams’ affirming of the importance of principles for moral theology seems to support the stance of Kirk’s major works, especially the \textit{Principles}. Waddams’ book includes several references to the work of Kirk, but they are not uncritical. Waddams holds that “Christian Ethics” and “Moral Theology” belong together – they should be two parts of one study dealing with Christian principles of behaviour and their application. Moral theology takes the principles and tries to relate them to concrete situations.\textsuperscript{58} But he has found that the study of moral theology has often become a highly technical discussion of the application of moral principles to particular cases, without reference to other aspects of Christian life. “When such separation occurs it always means that moral theology becomes legalistic, and that it puts too much emphasis on finding out what are the minimum requirements of the Christian moral law, and how much can be evaded”.\textsuperscript{59}

Waddams cites Kirk as defending the thesis that it was right for moral theology to be concerned with minima, and pointing out that in

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item\textsuperscript{57} H. Waddams, \textit{A New Introduction to Moral Theology}, p. 18.
\item\textsuperscript{58} H. Waddams, op.cit. p. 24.
\item\textsuperscript{59} ibid.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
practice it is essential to have minimum standards; it is necessary to decide what are the minimum requirements for Baptism. Such minimum standards are an inescapable part of having a visible society called the church and of belonging to it.  

But Waddams doubts whether the minimal approach is necessary or desirable. When laws affecting church discipline are being considered, moral theology is the study which should make the largest contribution to their framing. “For it is the business of moral theology to translate Christian beliefs into the common coin of every day behaviour”. Waddams points out that there are many occasions when the parish priest has to make a decision as to moral standards: for example, should he present a person to the Bishop for Confirmation, when the candidate is engaged in activities which are generally thought to be dishonest? “Moral theology has as its duty the guidance of priests and others who are faced with this kind of problem but it is doubtful whether it is a good thing to proceed on the basis of laying down moral conditions”. Kirk’s Principles were written with a similar view of the duty of moral theology but these two Anglican clergy writing in two different generations have different opinions on the way that duty of moral theology is to be worked out in practice.

However, Waddams supports Kirk in his opinion that the danger of modern religion was vagueness evident in a lack of clear principles, which leads to the attitude that it does not matter what anyone believes or does as long as he is sincere. “Kirk maintained that this kind of woolliness could only be overcome by a new investigation into ‘the principles of human action, the nature of conscience, the character of divine law, the distinction between virtue and sin; and a reassertion of whatever certainties can be discovered as to the nature and rules of Christian life’. This question brings out well the central purpose of moral theology”. 

---

61 H. Waddams, op.cit. p. 25.
62 ibid.
Waddams gives Kirk credit for undertaking such a new investigation in the form of a comprehensive study of moral theology. He describes *The Vision of God* as Kirk’s best known work, in which he finds Kirk has maintained the earlier tradition of bringing together moral theology with the whole Christian life and its progress in the ways of God. “In other books and frequent lectures he did much to spread interest in the subject, and it is to be regretted that there have been few successors of his calibre, though there have been various minor studies of problems of human conduct”. 64

This is a positive assessment of the general influence of Kirk as a moral theologian. Waddams also regards as excellent the exposition of the general position of moral theology in relation to the movements of his own time given in an essay by G.F. Woods, entitled *The Grounds of Christian Moral Judgments*, considering the situation in relation to non-Christian approaches to moral questions. 65 The views of Woods are relevant for our discussion of Kirk’s influence as a moral theologian for the following reasons. Woods as a contributor with other Cambridge theologians to the book *Soundings* is part of an enterprise aiming to rediscover the first or guiding principles for theological discourse. Woods is a moral theologian who discusses some of the subjects central to Kirk’s work, such as the use of New Testament texts and the concept of natural law as a basis for moral theology. As Kirk does, in *The Threshold of Ethics*, Woods mentions praiseworthiness and blamelessness. Woods’ work was published in 1962: Waddams, writing in 1964, gives his book the title of *A New Introduction to Moral Theology*.

It is interesting that both Woods and Waddams are attempting to do something new, and that Waddams sees a connection between the work of Kirk and Woods and assesses them both positively. Waddams and Woods are writing a generation after Kirk had completed his major works. Waddams is countering the writers of his day who have tended to dismiss the traditional approach to moral theology and Christian ethics. He maintains that we should revive and reform moral theology, not abandon it. He grants 64 H. Waddams, *A New Introduction to Moral Theology*, p. 36.
that moral theology has been spoiled by the wrong kind of legalism. He contends that it is essential for the church to recover what is best in the old tradition: a clear sense of principles and a practical approach to ethical problems.

Albert T. Mollegen’s view of Waddams’ book is that it is precise but not legalistic, modern without breaking continuity with tradition, and provocative without being radical.

In his essay Woods points out that the old method of using New Testament texts to support detailed moral behaviour has become increasingly difficult to use, with the historical examination of the make-up of the New Testament itself. While the authority of the New Testament has in some respects been strengthened rather than weakened, and while the person of Jesus Christ is no less decisive for moral and spiritual standards, it has become impossible to isolate small portions of the New Testament writings to prove some moral point.

Woods noted the tendency in certain circles to emphasise the importance of sincerity and integrity and to ignore the possibility of objective moral standards. But Waddams regards it as impossible to define sincerity and integrity without some outside measuring rod, and says that Woods was right when he wrote:

“A sheer emphasis upon sincerity and integrity, while supremely relevant in assessing praiseworthiness and blamelessness, does not provide any clear ground for distinguishing between acts which are good and those which are bad.”

Waddams states further that one of the changes in thought which has most affected attitudes towards moral standards has been the diminishing appeal of the idea of the natural law held to be knowable by unaided human reason. He quotes Dr R.C. Mortimer:

---

“The natural law . . . is the pattern of conduct laid down for men by the Creator, which they must follow if they would attain to their true end. It is perceptible by reason.”\textsuperscript{67}

Waddams acknowledges that this is a time-honoured method of dealing with the basic ideas of moral theology, but he maintains that it has been much weakened by the evident fact in the modern world that this law is not actually perceived by “the reason of men who would normally be considered intelligent and reasonable by any standards, apart from their failure to hold the Christian faith”.\textsuperscript{68}

In the time of Aquinas and that of Hooker there was universal acceptance of the basic Christian teaching that the world was created by God; and the popular attitude to natural law derived from that atmosphere of thought and belief. In the twentieth century the movement of opinion has been away from such assumptions, or at least it has refused to accept such assumptions as axioms of thought. Many people do not find it easy to establish or accept a framework of moral principles simply by using their reason, unless they have adopted a belief about the origin of the world which makes such a framework follow from that belief. Waddams again quotes the essay of G.F. Woods: “The view taken of the facts of any moral case is bound to differ when the observers take different views of the world”.\textsuperscript{69}

Waddams continues:

“Such differences run right through men’s moral attitudes. But if it is difficult, and perhaps impossible, to say that there are any moral laws which all men of reason, whatever their beliefs, will accept as binding, it is possible still to maintain that every man has some sense of right and wrong which he cannot altogether escape. This is perhaps the most important basic truth of human morals. It is interesting to see how those who have completely deserted Christian morals still appeal to the sense of right and wrong to maintain their own societies and to justify their actions.”\textsuperscript{70}

\textsuperscript{68} ibid.
\textsuperscript{70} ibid.
Waddams gives as an example the Communist world. It is interesting to note in Waddams’ writing both an acknowledgement of the questioning of the world view that he finds in Kirk’s work, and possible evidence of Kirk’s influence in his view that everyone has a sense of right and wrong.

However, Waddams is critical of Kirk’s upholding of the distinction in moral theology between mortal and venial sins; in fact he favours the abolition of the distinction. His reason for saying so is that to divide sins in this way is bound to give the impression that there are some sins which matter and some sins which do not. “Of course some sins are more serious than others, and the pastor or theologian must be able to distinguish between them for his own purposes, but sins vary as much in gravity as the persons of the human race vary in temperament and character”.

Waddams objects also to the teaching that a mortal sin puts the immortal soul in jeopardy, whereas a venial sin does not. He claims that it is impossible to say what sin has this effect. For him, sin can only have meaning in relation to the love of God. He faults the mortal/venial division as it suggests an approach which distracts attention from the love of God and focuses it upon the legal requirements of external actions. Those who know the love of God and are growing towards a closer unity with God wish to avoid anything which will hinder such growth or cause sorrow to God who is loved. If people sin, says Waddams, it is because they have failed to respond to God’s love as they ought, and their penitence shows the measure of their love, as God’s forgiveness is the measure of divine love. They cannot discuss sins in legalist terms, for such discussion betrays the meaning of God’s love for them.

It would be interesting to know how Kirk would respond to Waddams’ words. Although they criticise Kirk’s distinction between mortal and venial sins, they make good sense, and they seem to be in excellent harmony with Kirk’s own principal ideas and purposes in writing. And

---

71 H. Waddams, A New Introduction to Moral Theology, p. 100.
72 H. Waddams, op.cit. pp 100-102.
Waddams, in this same context, still describes Kirk as “the most distinguished of modern Anglican moral theologians”.

When Waddams discusses the question of the lesser of two evils, he observes that it has long been the rule of common sense that, if a man has an inescapable choice so that he must choose one of two evil courses, he should choose the lesser evil. He cites Kirk’s view that it was first officially stated by the church at the Council of Toledo in A.D. 653. He points out that the condition of the world is such that people often find themselves in situations where no choice before them is good, but all possibilities involve them in evil to some degree. In examining such circumstances, it is important to remember that absence of action is as much a choice as a decision to do something actively. Failure to act can be just as serious a fault as acting wrongly. “We might quote in support the condemnation of such failure by Jesus Christ implied in the parables of the Good Samaritan and of Dives and Lazarus”. It was not a wrong action that deserved condemnation, but the failure to exercise love when given an opportunity to do so. The same teaching can be found in the parable of the sheep and the goats; the goats are condemned because they did nothing when there was a chance to do something.

Waddams’ other references to Kirk are included in the chapters of his book dealing with Marriage and Sex, the Sanctity of Life, and Problems of Wealth. In the first of these, on the subject of contraception, Waddams finds that of the Anglican moral theologians both Kirk and Mortimer took a negative view about the use of contraceptives except on the smallest possible scale. Mortimer, speaking of the purpose of the sexual act, mentions only the procreation of children. Waddams says that this oversimplifies the matter and does not provide an adequate basis for reaching a firm conclusion. “There are other ends of the sexual act for men and women, e.g. the physical expression of married love, the increase of that love through the

73 H. Waddams, A New Introduction to Moral Theology, p. 100.
75 ibid.
76 Matthew 25: 31-46.
77 R.C. Mortimer, Elements, p. 178, quoted H. Waddams, op.cit. p. 146.
physical union, the fulfilment of the physical compulsion in sex itself, the complete unity of the personalities in the mystery of sexual union, which forms a sacramental act, apart from the begetting of children”.

In his chapter on *The Sanctity of Life*, Waddams devotes sections to the cardinal virtues of temperance, fortitude and prudence. He describes fortitude as the opposite of fear, or rather, its conqueror, and as being primarily the virtue of courage, “steady readiness to face the difficulties and dangers of life in the service of a high cause”. It includes the basic instinct of self-protection and the protection of one’s dependents. When it is wrongly used this instinct becomes the capital vice of anger, “and perhaps we may associate it with another root emotion which Kirk thought ought to be included with the other capital vices – that of fear”.

Under the heading of *Problems of Wealth*, Waddams includes a section on the subject of property. He begins the section with a quotation from the Encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931) of Pope Pius XI which states that the right to own private property is an absolute right of the natural law. Mortimer supports this view, but Waddams affirms that there have been such changes in the social structure of modern life that it is artificial to try to apply principles enumerated several centuries ago, as if they applied directly to the modern world. He cites Archbishop William Temple as pointing this out forcibly, reminding his readers that traditional principles were first formulated in a feudal and peasant society and that the forms of that society had vanished. But he recognised that important principles were embodied in the earlier outlook “of which perhaps the chief is the close association of status, and of wealth as conferring status, with social functions. . . There was no recognition of irresponsible power, such as may now be wielded by the inheritors of great wealth, either in land or industrial shares”.

79 H. Waddams, op.cit. p. 207.
82 William Temple, op.cit. quoted H. Waddams, op.cit. pp 222-223.
Waddams refers to Kirk’s treatment of justice, gives it a wider connotation than Mortimer and includes within it the giving to everyone his due, including God and oneself. Thus it includes truthfulness, benevolence, forgiveness, compassion as well as the duties of religion – reverence, devotion, obedience and gratitude to God. Waddams is critical: “It is possible to stretch justice to include these attitudes, but it seems a little artificial. All the virtues which (Kirk) enumerates do have an element of duty within them, but they are better considered as the consequence of a living and active love, rather than as falling within the compass of duty”.

In sum, Waddams’ book is interesting and important evidence of the influence of Kirk whose views are, however, not accepted uncritically.

(vi)

The Views of Joseph Fletcher, R.H. Preston and G.R. Dunstan

In 1967 Joseph Fletcher, then Professor of Social Ethics in the Episcopal (Anglican) Theological School at Cambridge, Massachusetts, U.S.A., published his book Moral Responsibility, subtitled “Situation Ethics at Work”. An earlier book, Situation Ethics, gave rise to considerable controversy on its first appearance. The first chapter in the later work lists six propositions which sum up the position of the earlier. They are as follows:

**Proposition I:** Only one thing is intrinsically good, namely love: nothing else. Right and wrong depend upon the situation.

**Proposition II:** The ultimate norm of Christian decisions is love: nothing else.

**Proposition III:** Love and justice are the same, for justice is love distributed.

**Proposition IV:** Love wills the neighbour’s good whether we like him or not.

---

83 H. Waddams, A New Introduction to Moral Theology, p. 223.
Proposition V: Only the end justifies the means: nothing else.

Proposition VI: Decisions ought to be made situationally, not prescriptively.  

There is a clear difference in the positions on moral theology and Christian ethics of Kenneth Kirk and Joseph Fletcher respectively. They both agree that on moral questions, circumstances alter cases. In his book Fletcher has several references to Kirk. There is an important one in his first chapter, entitled The New Look in Christian Ethics, in the section headed Proposition V, “only the end justifies the means: nothing else”. In this section Fletcher affirms that once we realise that only love is intrinsically good, and that no action apart from its foreseeable consequences has any ethical meaning at all, only then will we see that the proper question is “Does an evil means always nullify a good end?” For him, the answer on a basis of situational estimate, must be “No”.

“All depends upon the situation, i.e. the relative weight of the ends and means and motives and consequences taken together, as weighed by love. Bishop Kirk came close to this standpoint when, speaking of the old rule about means and ends, he said: ‘The correct form of the maxim, in fact, is “circumstances alter cases. And this is obviously true. An act which is right in some circumstances may be wrong in others’’. However, be it noted, he did not say that an act which is wrong in some case can be right in others. His bid for freedom was too fainthearted”.  

When our task is to assess how far Kirk succeeded in his aim of undertaking a new investigation of moral theology, and renovating it as a discipline, we need to take Fletcher’s criticism into account.

Fletcher maintains that for the Christian conscience the total context of decision, the whole situation, is always “circumstances under the law of love”. In a footnote he adds:

---

86 ibid.
The situational approach to ethical decisions has at least a parallel in the classical tradition – in the ‘epicheia’ or equity discussed, e.g. by Aquinas in Summa Theologica ii,2,Q.120, a.1. Kenneth Kirk (Some Principles of Moral Theology, p.208n;) calls it ‘a just interpretation of the law with due reference to the circumstances of the particular case’. Henry Davis (in Moral and Pastoral Theology, Vol.1, p.187) quotes Aristotle’s definition: ‘Equity makes allowance for human weakness, looking not to the law but to the meaning of the law giver, not to the act but to the intention, not to the part but to the whole’. However, many Christian legalists will not apply equity to ‘natural’ or ‘divine’ law, holding that God is their author and has foreseen every situation!  

Fletcher notes that the “love” of the New Testament commandment to love God and one’s neighbour is the translation of the Greek agape. In his chapter entitled Love and Justice are the Same Thing he quotes Herbert Waddams’ offering of a definition of this love:

“... love in the Christian sense is not primarily a matter of the emotions, although the emotions may be engaged. It is a matter of choice, choosing to submit to the will of God and to follow his path, and as a matter of choice its essential nature consists of an act of the will.”

Fletcher continues: “Almost all writers in the Anglican tradition have said the same, starting with Jeremy Taylor’s assertion in Holy Living that love is purpose rather than passion, that it is not liking. Another, more modern moral theologian, Bishop Kirk, reiterates the same point. Still another, R.C. Mortimer, puts it this way: ‘The theological virtue of love is not primarily an emotion, its seat is in the will’ and therefore ‘man is enabled to love God in the sense that by an act of will he prefers God above everything else’.”

It is interesting and important that Fletcher has quoted three authors whom we have already noted as substantial contributors to the study of moral theology. Fletcher takes the view that it is only by seeing love in this way that we can comply with the requirement for Christians to love the

87 J. Fletcher, Moral Responsibility, pp 243-244.
88 H. Waddams, A New Introduction to Moral Theology, p. 122, quoted J. Fletcher, op.cit. p. 47.
89 K.E. Kirk, Principles, p. 43n, quoted J. Fletcher, op.cit. p. 47.
90 R.C. Mortimer, The Elements of Moral Theology, p. 137.
unlikeable, and so can make sure that we grasp the meaning of “Love your enemies”. I believe that he cites the above writers’ views of love as supporting his view that “justice” is conative, volitional, decision-oriented, purposive, dispositive – as agape is.  

The fourth chapter of Fletcher’s book is entitled The Ethics of Natural Law. He believes that it is wrong to regard the doctrine of natural law as a fixed feature of Anglican theology. The Caroline divines, he says, were inclined to trace with Aquinas the sequence from eternal law to natural law to “right reason”.  

Fletcher finds it remarkable that Kirk, in his Principles, “a very complete, systematic and learned Anglican treatise on moral theology” gives only one and a half pages to natural law, in the course of which he describes it as “the accepted Christian belief” even though moral standards among cultures “vary almost indefinitely”. As to its content, Kirk says that its precepts may be deduced from the “cardinal” virtues.

Moreover, Fletcher notes that in his The Threshold of Ethics, Kirk developed a phenomenology of moral experience without referring to natural law. Fletcher cites R.C. Mortimer’s writing on moral theology as containing “the most positive affirmations of natural law in formal Anglican treatises but as admitting that it may seem that there is little of value in natural law”.  

Part of Fletcher’s discussion of natural law includes the figure of William Temple. In Fletcher’s view, most of what Temple wrote about moral values and social policies was constructed by dogmatic derivation, drawn by logic out of Christian doctrine. He tended to use “natural law” and “natural order” interchangeably. By “natural order” he meant a logical relation between appropriate means and “true” ends, for example, subordinating private profit to social need. He was influenced by the idea

---

91 J. Fletcher, Moral Responsibility, p. 49.
92 J. Fletcher, op.cit. pp 59-60.
94 J. Fletcher, op.cit. p. 65.
95 In his book Christianity and Social Order (Penguin Books, 1942, reprinted SPCK 1976) Temple argues that all people are entitled to adequate housing, food, clothing, education and employment on the basis of the Christian doctrine of creation – all people are created in the image of God, therefore deserve to be treated with dignity and respect.
of Aristotle’s “final cause”, where “true ends” are given as ordained in the nature of things.

Fletcher attributes to Temple the assumption that natural order can be discerned through universals, or what people generally hold to be good, and through the use of reason to discern the true purposes of life. His principles of natural order were expressed in terms of obedience to God, respect for human dignity, freedom, fellowship and service. In Fletcher’s view, he founded these principles not on natural law, but rather on the implications as he saw them of such doctrines as creation, the Trinity, the incarnation, resurrection and atonement, the Church and the sacraments.96

In 1942, Temple convened a conference at Malvern on The Life of the Church and the Order of Society. The conference was intended to shape Christian thought for “a new society” as part of the British nation’s aims for the Second World War and the eventual peace.97 One of the groups participating was “the Christendom group”, comprising some Anglo-Catholic clergy and lay people devoted to the intellectual tasks of “Christian sociology”. Fletcher regards this conference as an effort to revive the concept of natural law, as he believes that Temple wanted to get from the participants a set of working formularies, based on their deductions from the natural law. (Among those who read papers was V.A. Demant). In Fletcher’s view, nothing substantial emerged from the conference. Temple spoke of “derivative maxims worked out by theologians” but they were to come from doctrine, not nature. Demant wanted churchmen “to develop a theology of the natural law” for social criteria, but according to Fletcher he himself produced none.98

Demant believed that natural-law precepts and rules are needed. In Prospect for Christendom, a symposium by the Christendom group published in 1945, he pleaded for a natural-law ethic, joining “natural law”

96 J. Fletcher, Moral Responsibility, p. 62.
98 J. Fletcher, op.cit. p. 63.
and “natural order” in a way which Temple would have recognised. In his *Theology of Society* Demant argued that “only a theological conception of a natural order can identify the permanent central data”, but he did not identify what those data were or might be. According to Fletcher, theologically regarded, this is an interesting inconsistency; it demands that natural law be theologically supported and made a part of theological ethics, thus abandoning the classical doctrine that natural law ethics are a part of God’s providence known by human reason, rather than a part of God’s redemption known by divine revelation.

Fletcher traces what he called “growing disaffection” with the concept of natural law and concludes:

“... in Anglicanism generally for the past twenty years, as well as in English and American Protestantism, natural law has suffered the same scant treatment it was given in 1950 by the group appointed by the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches to re-examine it in relation to international order: they quickly by-passed the natural law ideal altogether. After much hesitation most non-Roman Catholic theologians, Anglicans included, are inclined to agree with Ronald Preston on traditional moral theology.”

“There is too much law in it, too many hair-splitting legal distinctions, too little attention to empirical evidence (for instance in psychology and sociology), too simple a notion of the term ‘natural’, and too little concern for perfection as against minimum obligations”. Preston noted that Kenneth Kirk had set out on a new investigation of the study of moral theology and had sought to renovate it; however in his view, while Kirk allowed that in moral questions or situations circumstances alter cases, he had not been able to move further than the moral stance of the Caroline divines, and was still affected by legalism in his judgments.

---

99 Temple died in 1944.
101 J. Fletcher, op.cit. p. 63.
102 Ronald Preston, Anglican priest and Professor of Moral and Pastoral Theology, University of Manchester, in Fletcher’s time. Part of his work at the University was done at the William Temple College of Social Ethics.
103 J. Fletcher, op.cit. p. 68.
Preston wrote the Introduction to the 1976 edition of Temple’s *Christianity and Social Order*. In it he notes Temple’s reference to “derived maxims worked out by theologians” in his introduction to the report of the Malvern Conference, *Malvern 1941*. Preston uses the term “middle axioms”, which he describes as follows:

“[they] are an attempt to proceed from the basic ethical stance deriving from a theological or philosophical world-view to the realm of the empirical by seeing if there is a consensus among those with relevant experience of the matter under discussion [both ‘experts’ and ‘lay’ folk] as to the broad moral issue raised, and the general directions in which social change should be worked for, without getting as far as detailed policies. These in most cases involve so many uncertainties of interpretation of evidence and estimates of possible consequences that it is most unlikely that a Church as a whole, or any Church group of any size, will agree. At this level Christian men and women must use their own judgment as workers and as citizens and, as Temple says, nine-tenths of effective Christian social impact on the social order is to be found here, not in Church pronouncements or the activities of ecclesiastical bodies or persons as such.105

Nevertheless, middle axioms, if available, are a help to the formation of the mind of a Christian, and it is at this level that most of the ecumenical social study, which as been such a notable feature of the last fifty years, has for the most part operated”106

Another Anglican theologian, G.R. Dunstan, a contemporary of Preston’s, produced an interesting review of the development of moral theology in his book *The Artifice of Ethics*.107 He believes that the revival of moral theology was a product of the Tractarian movement108 resulting in the establishment of a Regius Professorship of Pastoral Theology in the University of Oxford in 1842, later renamed the chair in Moral and Pastoral Theology. “Two of its most distinguished occupants in (the twentieth) century, K.E. Kirk, later Bishop of Oxford, and R.C. Mortimer, until 1973

---

106 ibid.
Bishop of Exeter, searched back into the tradition, patristic, medieval and Tridentine, and produced notable studies. Kirk’s *The Vision of God* is the most comprehensive work of English moral and ascetical theology in this century.

“But until the tenure (1949-71) of Professor V.A. Demant, this tradition made little contact with the range of social concern which descended from F.D. Maurice, J.M. Ludlow and the Christian Socialists through Bishop B.F. Westcott, Bishop Charles Gore, Henry Scott Holland and C.E. Raven to Archbishop William Temple. The claims of a social morality adequate for this century expressed themselves in such ‘unofficial’, non-academic activities as the Conference on Christian Politics, Economics and Citizenship, the Christendom Group and the Malvern Conference; they found academic expression also in the founding of a lectureship in the University of Manchester¹⁰⁹ (elevated in 1970 into a chair), and of the F.D. Maurice Chair of Moral and Social Theology at King’s College, London in 1967”¹¹⁰.

Dunstan grants that a revival in the study of moral theology took place, that Kirk and Mortimer were distinguished contributors to the study and that their successor Demant did have some contact with those Anglicans who wanted to broaden the Church’s interest and involvement in social questions. Mortimer and Demant can rightly be considered by their statements as strongly influenced by Kirk. But Fletcher and Preston expected him to go further than he did in his own avowed intention to free moral theology from the legalism for which he criticised the Church of Rome.

From that Church three theologians who have written doctoral theses on the moral theology of Kenneth Kirk are Francis Frost, Michael Prieur and Augustinus Pütz, O.S.B. All three writers have examined closely and comprehensively Kirk’s works. Frost finds Kirk’s thought a return to a fundamental approach to moral theology combined with a quest to enlarge the scope of enquiry into moral problems similar to that of certain Roman Catholic theologians of Frost’s own day. Frost notes the task of applying principles to specific cases with a scholastic approach which is not unduly restricted. Secondary principles, he holds, will not be simply deduced from first principles, but will be worked out through a comparison of what is given by revelation with insights furnished by experimental psychology and the reflections of moral thinkers on specific cases.

Frost’s survey includes the work of other Anglican theologians of his time: J.A.T. Robinson, G.F. Woods’ essay “The Grounds of Christian Moral Judgments”, and R. H. Preston. Frost notes Preston’s criticism of Kirk that he has not actually revived or renovated the study of moral theology. He observes Preston’s call for a new casuistry less restricted, permitting the working out of middle axioms, moving on from the traditional principles of moral theology in order to deal with specific cases. But Frost asks the question: Is this not precisely what Kirk has sought to do? Frost also notes Paul Lehmann’s comment that Kirk, in spite of his declared intention to renovate the study of his chosen discipline, does not depart from the thought of the manuals of Roman Catholic moral theology; regrettably, in

---


Lehmann’s view, as Kirk saw himself as standing in the tradition not of Roman moral theology but that of the Carolines. 113

In 1968 Dr Augustinus Pütz, O.S.B., completed a thesis entitled *Patterns of Pastoral Thinking in Kenneth Escott Kirk*. 114 He undertook a comprehensive study of Kirk’s works both as moral theologian, ethicist and diocesan bishop. He also took the published works of Dr Frost into account. He traced carefully the various meanings given to the term “pastoral”, noting the different interpretations given it by Kirk himself as he developed his thinking, compared with other writers such as Martin Thornton.

Pütz noted first that in 1920 Kirk wrote on the work of the priest in fostering spiritual progress as being part of Ascetic Theology, the theology of training or educating the soul, more usually in England called Pastoral Theology. 115

Secondly, in 1924 Kirk combined Pastoral and Ascetic Theology again and defined it as the general principles of that branch of conduct concerned with the innermost life of the Christian with God, and their application to special needs and situations. 116 He used Pastoral Theology in the same sense in 1927. 117

In 1936, Kirk defined it as the formal application of psychology to the problems of daily life. 118 Pütz noted Kirk’s connecting closely pastoral theology and psychology earlier in the *Principles*, in particular with the psychology of education, 119 and his observation that new light and new problems continually emerged as the result of psychological research. In 1934 he was asking for Pastoral Psychology as “a theological discipline . . .

---

designed to help the spiritual physician of souls in the discharge of his vocation”.

Pütz believes that when Kirk uses such phrases as “pastoral work”, “pastoral office”, “pastoral effort” and “pastoral guidance” he means them to be understood in the ascetic sense, as guidance of souls. But he notes that in The Vision of God (1931) there is a development in Kirk’s concept of “pastoral”. In that work Kirk points out that the “evangelistic temper” is prone to produce rigorism whereas the “spirit of the pastor” is able to help all people to come to their true goal. Therefore he contrasts a “pastoral discipline” with a “penal discipline”; discipline is good while it is used for pastoral and remedial purposes. If it is employed not pastorally but penally the moral code becomes an instrument of tyranny. In this sense Kirk speaks of the pastoral care of the Church.

Pütz observes a further development in Kirk’s writing during the next decade and subsequently. In The Apostolic Ministry “discipline” is used in a penal and judicial sense when he describes the office of the bishop in earlier times as being “the fountain head of disciplinary authority and of pastoral care”. This contrast is consistent with Kirk’s words in Marriage and Divorce where discipline is described as applicable only where people have failed to live according to the Christian ideal; however, Kirk holds that teaching and pastoral guidance are necessary at all times and for all persons.

In Kirk’s later writings Pütz finds further distinctions, such as “missionary pastor”, “prophets and pastors”, “pastor and evangelist”. Further, when writing about vocations to the ordained ministry in the Oxford Diocesan Magazine of 1948, Kirk distinguishes the pastoral qualification of

---

candidates from their evangelistic fervour and zeal for a sacramental ministry. Kirk uses the phrase “pastoral care over a clearly defined flock”.126

Pütz examines further Kirk’s writings in the Diocesan Magazine that appear to reveal an opposition between his pastoral and administrative work as a bishop. Pütz notes that one of Kirk’s predecessors as Bishop of Oxford, Bishop Wilberforce, considered it was part of his pastoral responsibilities to visit the parishes and clergy of the diocese in situ, and to increase the frequency of contact with his clergy by convening conferences.127 Kirk’s biographer E.W. Kemp described Kirk as a skilful, efficient and dedicated administrator maintaining “pastoral contact with every part of his diocese”.128 This notion of “pastoral theology” embraces clearly more than the field of “pastoral theology” mentioned earlier.

In Pütz’s view, the term “pastoral” in Kirk’s writings can be understood in two ways. The one is documented in Kirk’s early theological work, the other in his ministry as a bishop. In its first sense, “pastoral” defined the discipline of guiding individual souls, that is, pastoral theology. In its second sense, “pastoral” describes the ideal of the ministry as Bishop Kirk had it in mind, influenced by his predecessor, Wilberforce.129

Pütz refers to Martin Thornton’s book Pastoral Theology – a Reorientation, published ten years after Kirk’s death, as emphasising “pastoral” in its more limited sense, referring only to spiritual guidance . . “ascetical theology with moral theology as its correlate, is the true core of pastoral practice, and in view of the extraordinary range of subjects which creep under the head of pastoral theology, this needs stating very clearly and very firmly”.130

By contrast, S.L. Greenslade, in a series of lectures entitled Shepherding the Flock, uses the term “pastoral” in its wider sense. He

---

127 Pütz, op.cit. p. ix.
129 Pütz, op.cit. p.ix.
distinguishes between “pastoral” on the one hand, and ministry of Word and Sacraments, evangelistic mission and worship, on the other. He calls the bishop’s ministry pastoral: in doing so he agrees with Kirk’s later use of the term.\textsuperscript{131}

In Pütz’s view, Kirk was not a pastoral theologian in the same sense as he was a moral theologian. He did not aim at a coherent system of pastoral theology. On the other hand, “his books were concerned with a wide range of subjects, he was an eager observer of the pastoral scene and exercised a pastoral ministry himself”.\textsuperscript{132}

The “patterns” of Pütz’s title are discussed under the heads of Education (the pattern of teaching education), Co-operation (the ministry of the laity and its relation to that of the clergy), Fatherhood (spiritual fatherhood and its pastoral expressions) and Administration, under which Pütz includes a chapter on Kirk and the Religious communities. He includes an Appendix entitled “The Natural and the Supernatural in Pastoral Work” and the final section of the work is a Comparison of the Pastoral Patterns of William Temple and Hensley Henson.\textsuperscript{133}

Pütz traces a sequence in Kirk’s thought on education that can be found first in \textit{The Study of Silent Minds}. His work with soldiers in the First World War encouraged and stimulated him eventually to call for a national reform of British education in order to maximise the potential of every individual. For Kirk it was vital that the Church of England, through its own schools and through co-operation with Government in secular schools, should play a central part in such reform. Kirk’s work with the Woodard Schools is part of the pattern of teaching and education which Pütz discerns. In the \textit{Principles} Pütz finds that Kirk’s theme of spiritual progress in the believer’s knowledge of God and love of God [through the building of Christian character based on the Ten Commandments, the cardinal virtues of

\textsuperscript{132} Pütz, op.cit. p. x.
\textsuperscript{133} Hensley Henson (1863-1947), Bishop of Hereford (1918) and Bishop of Durham (1920-1939).
justice, temperance, fortitude and prudence, together with the theological virtues of faith, hope and love] is based on the idea of the education of the soul that requires the education of the will, and zeal to act for the right and the good when the believer has discerned it.

Pütz notes the attention Kirk pays to the role of the priest as spiritual director of the progress of individual Christians, and finds Kirk’s view of direction very much influenced by his educational thinking and experience as a teacher. His main criticism of Kirk turns on Kirk’s response to the “New Psychology”.\textsuperscript{134} he questions whether Kirk takes into account sufficiently the findings and views of these writers. Kirk himself mentions in the Preface of the Principles that his observations on the relation of psychotherapy to spiritual direction are the outcome of a private conference between Canon B.H. Streeter, the Revd S.F. Hawkes, the Revd A.E.J. Rawlinson, Dr J.A. Hadfield and Kirk himself.\textsuperscript{135}

Kirk acknowledges the importance of being open to new evidence from enquiry on the part of scientists into human nature and conduct. Similarly, we have noted Kirk’s discussion of the issue of the authority of the Church and the freedom of the individual. His later criticism of the psychologists (who appear to him to dismiss the importance of free will in making moral choices, favouring the view that heredity and environment determine moral choices) is seen by Pütz as a charge that they are making excuses for what is a weakness of will power. But Pütz raises the question whether Kirk’s description of the spiritual director’s role is not in danger of emphasising too much the director’s will rather than that of the person who is being counselled.

Nonetheless, we have also noted Kirk’s view, stated in the Principles, that the priest as pastor or spiritual director needs to ensure that no matter how serious the moral problem that is being discussed in any


\textsuperscript{135} K.E. Kirk, Principles, p. xvii, quoted Pütz, Patterns of Pastoral Thinking in Kenneth Escott Kirk, pp 45-46.
particular case, the conscience and the soul of the individual must be respected and the priest must never give any person the impression that his or her case is hopeless and beyond redemption.

Kirk’s treatment of the relationship of clergy and lay people within the Church as a whole bears on this question of authority and freedom of the individual. Pütz’s view of Kirk’s vision of the priest as teacher, pastor, shepherd and father, notes the importance that Kirk attaches to the ability of clergy to show sympathy and love for the people for whom they are appointed to care. This has to do with the other pattern of Kirk’s pastoral thinking which Pütz discusses, following his treatment of the pattern of teaching and education. On the matter of co-operation between clergy and laity and their respective ministries, Pütz notes Kirk’s listing of the advantageous position of lay members of the church as being in closer contact and rapport with their fellow citizens than the clergy may be for that purpose of commending their faith to those who do not share it.

There is a link in Pütz’s treatment of Kirk’s pastoral thinking connecting the themes of Co-operation (clergy and laity) with the themes of Fatherhood and Administration and the Appendix on the Natural and the Supernatural in Pastoral work. Kirk, in the Principles, is encouraging clergy to love their people, especially those whom they counsel, with paternal love but warns them against being paternalistic. Pütz notes Kirk’s comments, both in the Principles and in Beauty and Bands, on the unwillingness of some lay people to accept the teaching of the clergy. But Kirk’s biographer, E.W. Kemp, observes Kirk’s ability and willingness to engage in conversation with parishioners at confirmations and baptisms, and testifies to the evident affection in which his clergy held him, shown by the number who attended his funeral.

These points support both Pütz and Kemp in their view that in practice as a bishop Kirk accepted the view of Wilberforce of the bishop’s administrative work as part of his role as pastor. Pütz’s Appendix indicates the difficulty of finding a dividing line between the natural and the supernatural in pastoral work. Kirk’s view of the whole Church as a divinely
appointed instrument for bringing all people to know and love God leads him to maximise the role of clergy as encouraging lay people to see their Christian faith and life as a journey of spiritual progress through making good moral choices. Such encouragement is to stem from the priests’ own natural gifts of wisdom, experience, teaching and warmth of personality, the whole of their ministry originating in and sustained by God’s Holy Spirit, seen by Kirk as the ever-present source of God’s grace, defined as generous and unmerited love. Kirk acknowledges that no priest is perfect, but his pastoral theology allows him to see God the Holy Spirit as remedying mistakes either independently or through the ministry of other people, whether clergy, lay members of the Church or people who are not members. Throughout his writings Kirk shows his awareness of the importance of the relation of authority and liberty; pastors must earn their moral authority and must always respect the liberty of the individual’s conscience.

Pütz’s comparisons with the pastoral thinking of William Temple and Hensley Henson are important. Henson is described\(^\text{136}\) as “not long after ordination (abandoning) his High Church sympathies for a latitudinarian view of the Church of England”. Pütz\(^\text{137}\) finds in Henson an advocate of theological freedom, the freedom of the individual to dissent from the authority of the Church if his conscience so dictates.

Pütz cites Temple’s writings\(^\text{138}\) on the relation between Church and society as “outward-directed” pastoral thinking. We have noted his contribution to the Malvern Conference of 1941. He was convinced that everything that touches the life of the nation is the concern of the Christian; that the Church exists for the sake of those who are not its members. By “the Christian contribution to the new order” he meant that the Christian contribution aims at a transformation of the world, at a redemption of social life by Christ. The process leads to an increasing unity revealed by history. Such an outcome is to be effected by “influence” rather than “predominance and authority”. It is also to be effected by co-operation with all other forces.

\(^{137}\) Pütz, *Patterns of Pastoral Thinking in Kenneth Escott Kirk*, pp 151ff.
and organisations which work for the common good, even if they do not share the basic Christian faith.¹³⁹

Kirk, by comparison, in Pütz’s view, is largely concerned with seeing the Church as a family or a house which needed to be kept in order, dependent on the relationship of the clergy and laity; the theological reason for this relationship’s being at the centre of his pastoral thinking is Kirk’s emphasis on the “apostolic ministry” which requires the maintenance of the succession of bishops.

Kirk’s biographer, with Pütz, has noted that this difference of outlook lies at the root of the tensions between Temple and Kirk on the questions of Christian unity and ministry affecting the reunion of Churches.¹⁴⁰ If Temple’s pastoral thinking is called “outward-directed” and “foreign” and Kirk’s “inward-directed” and “domestic”, in Pütz’s view these comparisons may shed some light on Kirk’s approach, the conservative and unspectacular appearance of which often hides its necessity. If the Church’s own house is well-ordered, its witness and help to the outward world will be proper and effective. On the other hand, the life of the Church becomes sterile if it only concerns itself with its own structures and is not prepared to encounter the world or the other Christian communions.

“Thus, both approaches supplement each other, and to argue that Kirk worked more in one direction and Temple mainly in the other cannot mean that the one ideal excludes the other. Both of them have their necessary place in the pastoral ministry of the Church”.¹⁴¹

Further, the present writer is encouraged in his estimate of Kirk by the positive appreciation of him found in the work of several more contemporary theologians. I shall refer in particular to the work of Alan Suggate, Nigel Biggar and Timothy Sedgwick.

¹⁴⁰ Pütz, op.cit. p.150.
¹⁴¹ ibid.
Suggate, with Bayer and Oswald, co-edited the book *Worship and Ethics: Lutherans and Anglicans in Dialogue*. He contributed the book’s first chapter, entitled *The Anglican Tradition of Moral Theology*. In his Introduction to the chapter, Suggate echoes Kirk in stating that Christian ethics has its roots in worship and doctrine and is properly focussed only in that context. It must also be engaged in dialogue with the world. In the course of such dialogue it must not isolate itself from, or capitulate to the assumptions, ideas and practices of modernity, but address itself to them critically and constructively.

Suggate upholds the view, shared by many Anglican writers, that Anglicanism’s roots are found in a combination of attention to scripture, tradition and reason. In the history of the Christian Church this combination has been seen as the *via media* between the theology and ethics of the Roman Catholic Church and those of the Reformed Churches.

He begins his survey with the work of Richard Hooker (c.1554-1600) and the Caroline divines of the seventeenth century as upholders of the *via media*. He regards Bishop Joseph Butler (1692-1752) as the greatest moral theologian of the eighteenth century and F.D. Maurice (1805-1872) as the most eminent theologian of the nineteenth. Suggate believes that Maurice’s Christian socialism influenced many writers and thinkers, particularly Charles Gore (1853-1932) and B.F. Westcott (1825-1901), the editors of *Lux Mundi*, subtitled *A Series of Studies in the Religion of the Incarnation*. Suggate describes Gore and Westcott as “liberal Catholics” within the Anglican Church. He sees *Lux Mundi* as an attempt “to put the Catholic faith into its right relation to modern intellectual and moral problems.” He judges that Liberal Catholics were very much influenced by the Oxford

---

143 A.M. Suggate, op.cit., p.xii.
144 ibid.
145 A.M. Suggate, op.cit., p.11.
146 A.M. Suggate, op.cit. p.11.
Movement. “They tried to combine the deep hold of that movement on the givenness of the faith with a profound aim to live with intellectual integrity within it.”\textsuperscript{147} He regards \textit{Lux Mundi} as remarkably successful, deeply impressing many Christians struggling with the challenges of traditional beliefs presented by biblical criticism and the theory of evolution.\textsuperscript{148}

Suggate then traces the contribution to Anglican moral theology of two distinct bodies or groups within the Anglican Church, Anglo-Catholics (descendants of the Oxford Movement) and Evangelicals, such as the Earl of Shaftesbury (1801-1885). This leads him to discuss the Anglicanism of the twentieth century.

He finds that it presents a complex picture. Until the twentieth century Anglican tradition had been self-contained. But in the course of that century ethical studies became impossible except when conducted ecumenically and internationally. In a context marked by two world wars, spectacular developments in science, technology and communication, the various traditions and denominations within the Church have struggled to attain greater mutual understanding and unity. In the course of this struggle the Anglican tradition has been opened to a greater diversity of currents of thought than ever before.\textsuperscript{149}

Suggate notes within Anglican writing of the twentieth century differing emphases in the treatment of scripture, tradition and reason, and differing evaluations of the Enlightenment and the growth of secularism since that time. He finds that one effect of the Enlightenment is the dissolving of ties with particular historical contexts and traditions including religion. The twentieth century has seen an increase in the number of areas of life withdrawn from the tutelage of the church, and more people adopting atheistic, agnostic or neutral stances in religion.\textsuperscript{150}

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{147} A.M. Suggate, op.cit., p.11.  \\
\textsuperscript{148} ibid.  \\
\textsuperscript{149} op.cit., p.13.  \\
\textsuperscript{150} ibid.
\end{footnotesize}
Anglican moral theologians of the twentieth century have played their part in debates on such issues as the relation of science and religion, divorce, abortion, censorship, the age of consent, the scope of law in a liberal society, and the justification of Christians’ trying to put their norms into the law.\textsuperscript{151}

In this context, Suggate traces the development of Anglican moral theology found in the work of Kirk, Mortimer, Waddams and Dunstan. He notes that Dunstan’s Chair at King’s College, London, was established in honour of F.D. Maurice. The work of all four theologians shows these hallmarks of moral theology: concern for the end of human life found in the vision of God and the means of its attainment; the nature of the moral act; objective and subjective aspects of morality; the virtues; moral principles and their application; the morality of actions, especially when assistance is required with difficult cases; and the location of moral theology in worship and the sacraments. In varying degrees those four writers have updated the tradition.\textsuperscript{152}

Theologians who have followed Kirk have been encouraged by the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) to engage more fully with the contemporary world. Suggate cites two Anglican reports which showed the influence of the traditions of moral theology. The first was \textit{Putting Asunder} (1966, the work of a committee chaired by Mortimer) which played an important part in the revision of divorce law in England and Wales. The second was \textit{The Church and the Bomb} (1982) which included a discussion of the morality of the just war theory.

Suggate notes that the development of Liberal Catholic viewpoints was most influential on writing in the field of social ethics. He lists William Temple and Ronald Preston as leading exponents of the view that moral theology and Christian ethics necessarily includes a theology of social justice and a public role for Christianity. Temple sought to refine a method of relating faith and social order; to fashion a set of social principles affirming

\textsuperscript{151} A.M. Suggate, op.cit., p.14.
\textsuperscript{152} ibid.
the freedom and dignity of the individual; the social nature of the human personality; and the need to pursue the common good through mutual service. Such social principles were grounded in reason and the Christian doctrines of creation, incarnation and the nature of the church as the Body of Christ. For Temple, these doctrines implied a critique of contemporary society, and the suggestion of directions in which society might be guided, in keeping with the ideals of a Christian Society.153

Suggate, in referring to Temple and Preston, is dealing with first, a theologian with whom Kirk disagreed, and secondly, a theologian who in the decades following Kirk’s death, was one of his critics. Further, in respect to Temple, Suggate noted that he recognised the role of reason in analysing social forces, and in weighing the consequences of various possible forms of action. In presenting his method Temple tried to be sensitive to ecumenical thought, seeking common ground with Roman Catholicism, but rejecting Roman Catholic moral theology which he perceived to be dominated by Thomism.154

Suggate describes Ronald Preston as the most notable exponent of a modified Temple tradition. He notes Preston’s training as an economist in the London School of Economics of the 1930s, a radical place in a turbulent era. In forming his theology, Preston sought to discover how the resources of the Christian faith could be brought to bear on economic life. He was thoroughly conversant with the tradition of moral theology, but he was also open to the thought of the contemporary secular and theological world. He critically imbibed the thought of Temple and Reinhold Niebuhr on the nature of human beings, and the Christian social concern of R.H. Tawney, author of Religion and the Rise of Capitalism. He also absorbed the social theology of the ecumenical movement generally and the World Council of Churches in particular, together with the spirit of aggiornamento, generated by Pope John XXIII at the time of his inauguration of the Second Vatical Council.155

153 A.M. Suggate, op.cit., p.16.
154 ibid.
155 op.cit., p.17.
Like Kirk, his work was firmly set in the worship and sacraments of the Christian Church – he was an Anglican priest – and he saw his theology as grounded in the biblical concept of the Kingdom of God.

“In his engagement with a pluralistic and secular world, he has sought for basic continuities between reason and revelation whilst recognising the distinctive shape of the Christian faith.” 156

In sum, Preston was willing to accept what he called “the economic system” for its benefits, while seeking to free its practice from the cruelties which it inflicts on the powerless in the market place. 157

Suggate completed his chapter with an estimate of the work of other Anglican theologians of the second half of the twentieth century, including John Macquarrie, Peter Baelz (another of Kirk’s successors in the Oxford Chair of Moral and Pastoral Theology), Ian Ramsey, Basil Mitchell (both Oxford Professors), Don Cupitt, Kenneth Leech, Oliver O’Donovan (a most recent successor to Kirk’s Chair) and Donald Mackinnon. He concludes by referring to the emergence of feminist ethics as an important development in Anglicanism, especially notable in the work of Grace Jantzen and Anne Borrowdale.

Suggate’s work is thus an important and positive contribution to a proper assessment of the contribution of Kenneth Kirk to moral theology.

(ix)

Nigel Biggar

Nigel Biggar is an equally important contributor to our estimate of the work of Kirk. I shall consider two examples of Dr Biggar’s works. The first is an article entitled “A Case for Casuistry in the Church”. 158 At the time of writing Biggar was working at Latimer House, Oxford. The second work

---

156 A.M. Suggate, op.cit., p.17.
157 ibid.
158 Nigel Biggar, A Case for Casuistry in the Church in Modern Theology 6, no.1 (October 1, 1989).
is his book, *Behaving in Public; How to Do Christian Ethics*.159, which he wrote while occupying the Chair of Moral and Pastoral Theology at Oxford, as another of Kirk’s successors.

We have noted above the great deal of attention which Kirk gives to casuistry in his major works. Biggar begins his article with these words:

“Casuistry’s reputation in the contemporary world of Christian ethics is generally not high; and the quality of Christian ethics is so much the poorer for it . . casuistry’s name can be cleared.”160

He states that suspicion of casuistry has its deepest roots in the Protestant world; only recently (at the time of writing) has its place in Roman Catholic moral theology been questioned.161 Casuistry had flourished briefly in the Protestant world during the seventeenth century, but Biggar quotes Kenneth Kirk: “(in the late seventeenth century) Reformed casuistry died as sudden a death as any in history.” 162

He cites Kirk’s suggestion of three reasons for this: in Holland and Germany, the emergence of Pietism and of a measure of complacency about the making of particular moral judgments, and in England, the preoccupation of theological intellect with resisting the tendency, pioneered by Hobbes, to reduce morality to prudential considerations. He quotes Kirk again:

“Nothing else can account for the fact that the ingenious mind of Bishop Butler so completely ignored the complexities of the moral problem.”163

Biggar finds in the writing of J.F. Buddeus evidence of the role of Pietism in the decline of Reformed casuistry. Buddeus, described by Kirk as “the greatest Protestant theologian and scholar of his age”164, was professor of moral philosophy at the University of Halle (1694-1705). Writing of

161 ibid.
seventeenth century Reformed casuists, he complains that they were unable to deal with “the inner cultivation of the Spirit”.165 Biggar also finds in Buddeus’ writing evidence to support Kirk’s suggestion that complacency about moral decision-making was a cause of the disappearance of Reformed casuistry in Europe.166

Further, Biggar supports Kirk’s view on the cause of the death of Reformed casuistry in England. He cites such eighteenth century moralists as Butler, Hume and Paley as being more interested in theories of natural law, conscience, moral sense and utility than in normative ethical analysis.167 When Biggar sets out to clear casuistry’s name, he begins by listing several charges that have been levelled at casuistry. “The first is the classic Protestant association of casuistry with a theology of salvation that is moralistic, that casuistry is legalistic in its proliferation of rules and that it distracts from the moral and spiritual life of devotion to the God by whose grace we have been saved.”168

Biggar denies that there is any necessary link between casuistry and a moralistic theology of salvation. He concedes that casuistry may be motivated by a desire to assign a penance sufficient to restore the sinner to a state of grace; and it may be motivated by the desire to avoid sin and remain in that state. But it may equally be moved by the desire to discern how best to respond in grateful obedience to the God by whose gracious act in Jesus Christ we have already been saved.169 Such a casuistry will not oppress the conscience with petty rules that must be observed for salvation’s sake, but will seek to educate the conscience in the specific kinds of disposition and action that are and are not faithful to given principles in certain kinds of situation. Provided that casuistry is of this kind, it will not cause the casuist’s attention to be obsessed with the observance of rules; and it will be concerned for the cultivation of spirituality and of moral character.170

166 Biggar, op.cit., p.32.
167 ibid.
168 Nigel Biggar, op.cit., p.40.
169 Nigel Biggar, op.cit., p.41.
170 ibid.
In these last two sentences it is possible to see Biggar running parallel with Kirk, who devoted much attention to the role of casuistry in the education of the soul in his *Principles*.

The second charge is that casuistry has tended to describe moral cases in terms that show little connection with the Christian “story”, that is, with Christian theological convictions. Biggar’s reply is that the Christian casuist must be careful to think theologically at the level of basic ethical concepts and then to fashion his tools for moral analysis in a manner consistent with his concepts; that is, there is no inherent necessity that drives casuistry to desert the basic convictions of the Church.\(^{171}\) In this respect also Biggar’s thought resembles Kirk’s.

The third charge is that we make our moral decisions not with direct reference to moral rules but for the sake of certain goods that we value. Biggar grants that we are not motivated to act rightly because we would otherwise break a moral rule; we are so motivated partly because we know the abhorrent effects of doing wrong, and partly because we desire to retain certain goods that we love.

“Principles and rules do not motivate us; but they do help us to explain why we acted as we did and so to communicate moral wisdom from one situation to another, and from ourselves to other persons. The significance of this point . . . is that casuistry is only a part of Christian ethics, which also . . . involves the cultivation of love for what is good.”\(^{172}\)

Again, at this point Biggar is very close to the thought of Kirk’s *Principles*. And when he deals with a fourth accusation made against casuistry, that it is sophistical, more concerned to ease the conscience than to govern it, he denies that there is any necessary connection between casuistry and a morally lax sophistry; and he cites the point which Kirk makes clearly in *The Vision of God*, namely that casuistry can just as easily be rigorist as it can be lax, and it need be neither. It can indulge in the making of specious moral distinctions; and it can also refrain from such indulgence.\(^{173}\)

---

\(^{171}\) Nigel Biggar, op.cit., p.41.

\(^{172}\) ibid.

\(^{173}\) ibid.
Biggar turns next to the modern objection that casuistry is incapable of coping with historical uniqueness and novelty because it is too much like a rational machine. He notes that there has been a movement in the Roman Catholic Church that has found in Thomas Aquinas a heightened appreciation of the role of prudence, equity and the counsel of the Holy Spirit in the application of principles to cases. This casuistic tradition admits that only the first principles of moral reasoning are certain, and that no set of derivative rules can possibly cover all cases. Consequently, it acknowledges that casuists must expect to encounter novel cases – that is, cases that do not readily fit the rules that are to hand; and that they must expect to have to refashion secondary principles and rules in reaction to them. This kind of casuistry sees the relationship of moral reason to particular historical situations not simply in technical or mechanical terms, but rather as a dynamic dialectical affair in which rules are used to bring particular cases within rational scope, while novel cases are permitted to modify given rules.

Biggar cites Kirk as an Anglican who has attempted to recover this kind of casuistry.

“In his book, _Conscience and its Problems_ (1927), Kenneth Kirk argues that moral principle is intelligible in terms either of known instances in which it holds good – that is, normative illustrations – or of a definition that generalises from those instances. It is the specific task of casuistry to compare a new case with the given illustration in order to determine whether they are analogous in all morally relevant respects. If not, then the definition of the principle concerned will have to be revised in response to this new case, either to include or exclude it.”

In this article, then, Biggar emerges as a critic who has a more positive evaluation and assessment of Kirk’s contribution to moral theology than some of those who preceded him in the twentieth century, such as Fletcher, Lehmann, Preston and Pütz.

174 Nigel Biggar, op.cit., p.42.
175 ibid.
176 ibid.
Biggar refers to an article by Paul Ramsey, *The Case of the Curious Exception* (1968) in which Ramsey speaks of norms, principles, rules and cases where Kirk speaks of principles, definitions and illustrative instances. According to Ramsey, the casuist does not compare a new case with a given instance but with a pertinent rule (equivalent to Kirk’s “definition”).\(^\text{177}\)

Biggar then deals with the Protestant complaint that casuistry is a function of an authoritarian theology of the Church; and the complaint by Liberation Theologians that it makes moral intelligence the preserve of a philosophically educated elite. He points both to the fact of a revived Reformed casuistry and to its popularity, which strongly suggest that casuistry may be presented in a form accessible to literate lay people, and designed to educate or advise rather than prescribe.\(^\text{178}\)

Casuists may be best equipped to justify or criticise a proposal or decision to act in a particular way in a given situation. But in the Church, casuists will allow for the possibility of their own self-deception, of their being too clever by half; they will acknowledge that it is possible to be clear, precise, logical and quite mistaken, even perverse.\(^\text{179}\) This thinking is very close to that of Kirk in the *Principles*, where he warns pastors and confessors against arrogance and an assumption of moral superiority.

“Further, in the Church, where a casuist knows himself to be a member of a community, he will not easily dismiss the . . . moral intuitions of his (technically) inexpert brethren, some of whom will express the wisdom born of the agony of learning the meaning of what is right and good by the practice of virtue.”\(^\text{180}\)

Finally, Biggar turns to the complaint that casuistry proceeds theoretically and so in a manner oblivious to matters of *praxis* (practical action). The claim is that casuistry is unconsciously political and that its politics, being conservative in a situation of injustice, are immoral. Biggar concedes that casuistry is capable of morally irresponsible prejudices or negligence. He cites Kirk’s *Conscience and its Problems*, in which Kirk

\(^{177}\) Nigel Biggar, op.cit., p.43.  
\(^{178}\) op.cit., p.44.  
\(^{179}\) op.cit., pp 44-45.  
\(^{180}\) op.cit., p.45
provides an instance of this when he reports Raymond Thamin’s account of how, when he presented a class composed largely of children of small property owners with some hypothetical moral cases, he found them to be “rigorist in matters which did not touch them personally but lax in matters concerning the duties of landlords.”

Nevertheless, states Biggar, if casuistry, like any other human activity, is in principle vulnerable to morally irresponsible prejudice or negligence, and if in practice it is sometimes guilty of these, it is not therefore guilty by necessity. Theory and ortho-praxis may be alternatives, but they need not be.

In a later work, his book Behaving in Public: How to Do Christian Ethics (2011), Biggar makes a brief but appreciative reference to Kirk on a theme similar to the main content of this article. He quotes Kirk:

“All . . . principle is partially illuminated by the known instances in which it holds good: without such known instances it would remain a mere unmeaning formula.”

In his concluding chapter, Biggar extends this line of thought:

“The Anglican moralist Kenneth Kirk was (in 1927) the first person, as far as I am aware, to give considered expression to the insight that the experience of particular cases and their circumstances is not just the passive matter to which several norms are applied, but may sometimes react against principles and rules to provoke their reformation. That is, experience can be formative of moral reasoning; it can exercise a kind of legitimate moral authority.”

Biggar adds a footnote:

“Kirk says that the process of moral knowledge ‘consists in the discovery, modification, and application of principles’ (p.111 italics added), and that ‘the process of continuous revision, amendment, and extension of the Christian code’, as given moral principles negotiate with significantly novel

182 ibid.
cases, is ‘an inevitable feature of the Church’s life’ “ (p.108, italics added.)

In sum, Biggar takes a much more generous view of Kirk’s contribution to moral theology than do Fletcher, Lehmann, Preston and Pütz, especially on the question of whether circumstances alter cases when the morality of human thoughts or actions is being considered.

(x)

Timothy Sedgwick

I turn now to an article by Timothy Sedgwick entitled The New Shape of Anglican Identity. This article discusses the characteristics of Anglicanism; the formation of an Anglican identity through information from the scriptures, tradition and reason; the establishment of the historical identity of Anglicanism by Richard Hooker, and Kenneth Kirk’s post-establishment vision.

For Sedgwick, in Anglicanism Hooker and Kirk provide two distinct accounts of Christian faith and the Church. For both, the challenge is to form a Christian people. For Hooker the concern is not to be divided by the particular beliefs or practices of either Roman Catholics or Protestants. For Kirk the concern is not to narrow faith to an individual experience. Most importantly, together they prevent narrow conceptions of Christian faith which result in claiming a particular Anglican identity that is abstract from its own historical context, and is inadequate to address the challenges of another time or place.

Sedgwick’s contrasting of what he calls Hooker’s Establishment Vision with Kirk’s Post-Establishment Vision is striking. He notes the importance of the English Reformation for the shaping of the historical identity of Anglicanism. In Hooker’s time England was a nation of both Protestants and Catholics.

“Those who moved towards the establishment of Roman Catholicism or of a Reformed Christianity threatened the peace as well as the independence of England as much as they violated the consciences of their fellow citizens. Hence the Elizabethan Settlement”. 188 The Act of Supremacy abolished the jurisdiction over England of any “foreign prince, person, prelate, state or potentate, spiritual or temporal”. The Act of Uniformity required the use of the Prayer Book of 1552. This is the context which Hooker addresses in his work Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity.

Sedgwick sees Hooker as rejecting an exclusive focus on the will of God especially as this is expressed by a view of scriptural authority in which God is known only through scripture, where scripture is the self-interpreting will of God. This is a radical Protestant view. Hooker’s understanding of God in terms of law means that God is not apart from this world. God’s will is an order which is known through participation in the life of the world. Faith, as justification by grace, as being made right with God through acceptance of the gracious will of God, is not simply a matter of the will. Faith is trust and acceptance of an order or ordering will that is not our own. It is always, as well, a matter of participation in that order or ordering. 189

A Tridentine Roman Catholic understanding of faith and law is also rejected. Faith is not seen as a deposit, that may be stated in the universal truths of dogma given to the Church which, as truths, legitimate the authority of the Church to speak and demand obedience. Drawing upon the common law tradition, knowledge of the order of things comes from the historical experience of a people. The law is not a matter of first principles to be applied and obeyed as a matter of legislation. Law is an order and ordering arising from the experience of a people as a whole. We know and are reconciled to God not through obedience but through our participation in the divine order and ordering of life. It is not then Church teaching any more than scripture that is alone central to Christian faith. Such participation is

188 Timothy Sedgwick, p.3.
189 ibid.
essentially linked with the sacraments. Sedgwick describes this account as a classic account of Christian faith.\footnote{190}{Timothy Sedgwick, op.cit., pp 3-4.}

“Hooker’s vision of Christian faith in general and Anglicanism in particular is . . . a vision of church and society, two realms that he could only envision in an organic relationship made possible by the establishment of right religion . . The danger, however, (of this vision) is that this formulation of Anglican identity may be assumed adequate to answering once and for all how the faith is to be passed on . . New challenges to passing on the faith are lost from view.”\footnote{191}{op.cit., p.5}

Sedgwick’s treatment of Kirk’s Post-Establishment vision takes account of a changed context in which Anglicanism has become a worldwide communion. He offers an exposition of Kirk’s account of Christian faith as found in *The Vision of God*; while this study is sometimes described as a history of Christian ethics, for Sedgwick, Kirk’s interest is not a matter of Christian ideals or principles of life. Kirk’s concern is the experience of faith and how faith is known and deepened; making sense of the faith, not as a matter of the nature of things but as an experience that invites and fulfils all of life. He chooses to focus on “the vision of God”:

“Christianity had come into the world . . to offer (persons) the vision of God and to call them to the pursuit of that vision.”\footnote{192}{K.E. Kirk, *The Vision of God*, p.1, quoted Timothy Sedgwick, op.cit., p.5.}

Sedgwick identifies worship as the central focus of Kirk’s work, as the whole of a life offered to God. He names the questions that Kirk regards as central to the Christian life. First, “what demands shall the church make upon her members?” and “by what methods should she attempt to secure conformity?” Second, “what demands am I, as a Christian to make upon myself?” And “what methods shall I employ?” Third, “what is the place of renunciation, self-denial and detachment?” and “what is the place of self-love and enjoyment of the world?”\footnote{193}{K.E. Kirk, op.cit., pp 4-8, quoted Timothy Sedgwick, op.cit. p.5.} Sedgwick notes that these questions pose the problems Kirk calls institutionalism and tolerance, formalism and laxism, rigorism and humanism.
Sedgwick offers a thorough examination of these themes, and notes that Kirk identifies institutionalism, formalism and rigorism as specific issues concerned with the larger question of discipline. At the centre of discipline is the question “How is the Christian faith formed and effected?” He sees *The Vision of God* as a classic account of the history of Christian faith and ethics.

“The account is at least classic in that it is read broadly not only by Anglicans but more generally by scholars and doctoral students in theology and ethics.”

Sedgwick finds that Kirk, contrasted with Hooker, is anxious about how faith may be communicated, shared, lived and deepened. He is concerned with the experience of God and all that leads to and from that experience. He sees Christian identity in terms of discipline in relation to worship as the offering of the self to God; as culminating in the experience of God in worship. Sedgwick states that Kirk’s account is addressed to the church in order that it may give expression to the basis of faith and ensure that the resources are present in order that what is proclaimed may be nurtured and deepened.

Sedgwick believes that for Kirk Anglicanism is not defined as mediating between extremes, as some balanced centre. Anglicanism is not a middle way between Roman Catholics and Protestants.

“In their own struggles to articulate an understanding of Christian faith and how it is to be passed on and deepened, both Hooker and Kirk mediate between a received tradition and the formation of a people . . . For Kirk the context in which the Church is challenged to mediate faith is a context of religious freedom and the breakdown of traditional authority in the modern world . . religious authority is not legitimated institutionally. Religious authority is dependent upon the judgment of individuals. Individuals follow the voices of others because their voices make sense to them. In this context, the church mediates faith only as it can make sense of faith, and in that light prescribes rather than compels personal disciplines or practices that may express and deepen that faith.”

---

194 Timothy Sedgwick, op.cit., p.6.
195 ibid.
196 op.cit., p.7.
Sedgwick finds that both Hooker and Kirk demonstrate understandings of Christian faith and the Church which are not narrowly a matter of opposition to Roman Catholic and Protestant views as a matter of truth against error. Instead, the larger issues of mediating Christian faith are informed by Roman Catholic and Protestant responses and sources.¹⁹⁷

He concludes his analysis of Kirk’s work by stating that Kirk identifies the central challenge of the church in a society in which religion is a matter of personal choice and commitment as being to make sense of the faith and in that light to indicate the practices that express and deepen that faith. Traditions of spirituality need to be combined with the practices and disciplines that shape the Christian life in community.

“In short, Christian ascetics or ethics need to be brought together, not as a focus or prescription, or duties and obligations, but in a unified account of the character of a life lived in relationship with God. . . The task, however, is broader than Kirk imagined.”¹⁹⁸

Sedgwick is, therefore, with Suggate and Biggar, a significant critic, who offers a positive appreciation of Kirk as a major contributor to the study of moral theology, especially from the Anglican tradition.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter we have sought to assess the extent of Kirk’s influence as a moral theologian. The whole thesis is an attempt at a descriptive analysis of his work. Kirk stated that his purpose was to undertake a new investigation of the study of moral theology. V.A. Demant’s description of Kirk’s contribution to that study as “immense” seems perfectly fair. In his work we find extensive investigation of primary sources, Christian, pre-Christian and secular. One can agree with Dr Pütz that Kirk’s own education encouraged him to see the potential in others and the possibility of developing that potential through education, especially through the cooperation of Church and State through schools. So there is a line of

¹⁹⁷ Timothy Sedgwick, op.cit., p.7.
¹⁹⁸ op.cit., p.9.
development in Kirk’s thinking from *The Study of Silent Minds* to the *Principles*, in which work education of the soul and the will is a vital theme.

Kirk’s attention to classical and theological virtues based on biblical sources lays the foundation for a distinctive reflection on the building of Christian character as a basis for moral and spiritual progress. His study of casuistry and conscience is similarly extensive. He travelled a considerable distance on these themes in the *Principles*, but was stimulated to go further in the two major works which followed, *Ignorance, Faith and Conformity*, and *Conscience and its Problems*. In all three works, Kirk takes into account the question of the relation of authority and liberty of the individual conscience *vis-à-vis* traditional Christian Doctrine, which, as we have seen, he believes to be coherent. Its basis is belief in the Incarnation of God in the person of Jesus Christ and the Atonement or Reconciliation between God and humanity based on God’s forgiveness of human sin, effected through the death and resurrection of Christ. *The Vision of God* is still regarded widely as a distinctive contribution to the study of moral and ascetical theology through its focus on the *summum bonum*, based on an extended exposition of the way in which several writers on spirituality have interpreted the saying attributed to Jesus, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God”. Kirk has developed extensively the concept of Aquinas that the greatest good is the vision of God; that this is the ultimate and happiest end or purpose of human life; although the vision of God in its fullness is not possible in this life but is promised in the next life. Meanwhile, Christians’ faith and life of worship and service in the present world enables them to grow in the knowledge and love of God that will lead them to ultimate happiness in union with God. Christianity is therefore a gospel of promise rather than of law: Kirk warns against the errors of formalism and legalism. The scope of Kirk’s writing and the distinctiveness of his thought lend support to Demant’s view of his contribution to moral and ascetical theology.

---

199 We have taken “seeing God” in this life to mean “experiencing the presence of God” (for example, in worship, in the fellowship of the Church, in the beauty of the natural world, in music, literature and the arts).
Nonetheless, some of his critics find him too conservative in his response to the “new psychology”; although he states clearly that in judging moral questions and cases, the circumstances of each case need to be taken into account, he is not sufficiently willing to relinquish his defence of traditional teaching and adapt the approach of “middle axioms”. On the matter of the “new psychology”, in his *The Threshold of Ethics* he claims that the psychologists are too much influenced by determinism at the expense of the free will of the individual. He is critical of Temple and others, whom he describes as Christian rationalists, for being too willing to embrace the statements of scientists at the expense of traditional Christian teaching.

His ethical teaching on social questions extends to such matters as betting, gambling, industrial strikes and contraception. But on the question of marriage and divorce, while some Christians, especially Roman Catholic leaders making official pronouncements, still support Kirk’s position,\(^{200}\) including a reluctance or even refusal to admit divorced persons to communion, many Anglican bishops and priests since Kirk’s day have preferred to see this statement as teaching an ideal at which to aim. They have even coined the phrase “the pastoral approach” to serve as a basis for understanding the Gospel of God’s love, forgiveness and new life as a basis for releasing people from marriages which have become destructive, especially where children are involved. Such an understanding also permits remarriage and admission of divorced persons to communion.

Further, especially since the political and social ferment of the nineteen sixties, more Christians from all major Churches have believed and in some cases declared publicly that pastoral theology and pastoral care necessarily include social justice as well as the care of individual souls.\(^{201}\) This development invites again the comparison, which we have noted, of the

\(^{200}\) Based on the saying attributed to Jesus Christ in Mark 10: 9, “What therefore God has joined together, let no one separate”, taken by Kirk as intended to be an absolute rule.

\(^{201}\) For example, at the World Council of Churches Assembly at Uppsala, Sweden (1968), attention was given to speakers from African nations and other developing countries who dealt with such issues as poverty and racism. Previously the WCC had paid most attention to matters of Christian faith and order.
pastoral and moral thinking of William Temple with that of Kenneth Kirk, and the inference that Temple’s influence has been the greater.

However, the breadth of the scope and content of Kirk’s writing on moral, pastoral and ascetical theology leads the present writer to conclude that it is essential reading for any person seeking to gain an adequate grasp of the history of such study. The moral, pastoral and spiritual practice of the Christian Church, if it is to be true to its Gospel, will still need to teach and live by the virtues of faith, hope and love, applied both in relationships between persons, and in the relationship of the Church with the secular world.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Baillie, D.M., God was in Christ, Faber, London, 1961.


317


Kirk, K.E., “Four Cases of Conscience”, *Theology*, July and August, 1925, pp 24-31 and pp 76-85 respectively.


