

RESPONSE TO PROFESSOR CURRAN—I

My response to Professor Curran's paper will first set its statement of the issue and argument in a wider context than he does. I shall attempt to identify through the process just what sort of a question he is answering. Once I have made that identification I shall attempt to analyze what I see to be problems in the way he poses it. I shall not here develop my own position.

Curran's paper is entitled "Is there a Catholic and/or Christian Ethic?" The first part of my response takes the form of a question to his question: what sort of a question is that?

Is it an historical question? Curran's paper is basically not an historical paper, though there are some allusions to history in it. Thus it is safe to say that he does not ask it as an historical question. It could be asked as an historical question and how the answer came out might provide some interesting information to be taken into account if the question is asked with a different primary intention. It might be interesting to find out whether historically the moral teachings of the Christian community have been distinguishably different from the moral teachings of other communities. For example, were they distinguishably different from the ethical teachings of Roman religion and Roman culture? From one or another Hellenistic religion? From Judaism? From the Teutonic religion of my Viking ancestors? From Moslem, Hindu, and Buddhist moral teachings in various movements of these religious communities? My suspicion is that most historians of cultures are likely to claim some distinctiveness; certainly Max Weber's work suggests that different religions give different emphases to different human values, moral and non-moral, and thus affect the ethos of each culture.

Let us presume for the moment that historically it could be established that there have been distinctive aspects of Christian moral teachings. Would such data have to be taken into account in asking Curran's question as the sort of question he asks? Whether the answer is affirmative or not would depend upon some other judgments about what the study of ethics is all about. All I can do here is assert that if Christian or

Catholic ethics are significantly distinguishable from other ethics historically, *prima facie* that distinctiveness cannot be ignored when the paper's question is asked as a non-historical question.

Is it a contemporary empirical question? It is almost ironic to ask this, for while the ablest moral theologians in the Catholic Church are working assiduously to indicate that Catholic ethics, if distinguishable from general human ethics at all are not radically distinguishable, most politicians, scientists, and physicians in North America would answer the question as an empirical question with a resounding affirmative. My conjecture is that many persons would observe that the most distinctive moral community (with regard to its teachings) in North America today is the Catholic Church. Now, if the observation is only fractionally accurate, would that have to be taken into account in asking the question as Curran asks it? If the answer is negative, then we have some interesting possibilities. Either Catholic moral teaching in so far as it is distinctive is in error; or general human moral teachings in so far as they do not conform to "distinctive" Catholic teachings are in error. Or all ethics are Christian. If the second is the case we have some other interesting prospects to contend with, the most interesting of which is that while proper moral teachings are one and the same for all persons, Catholics have a better clue to finding out what they are than utilitarians, Kantians, and other sorts of rational persons. This prospect has its own Catholic historical resonance.

Is it an institutional sociological question? Curran notes that in some respects it is. Certainly no other moral community in North America of any wide significance today has institutional teaching authority defining authentic but non-infallible moral rules of conduct. His discussion of this matter in summary is that the grounds for the historic authority of the magisterium is itself a matter under dispute at the present time.

Having circled Curran's question, we might now indicate what sort of a question he intends it to be. I take it to be basically a question of principle. If I might rephrase his title in such a way that it more aptly points to his text, Curran's question basically is the following: "In principle can moral teachings be called 'ethics' and at the same time be modified as 'Christian' or 'Catholic'?" In giving his analysis of various answers to that question, by virtue of the brevity of the paper he tends

to make some very sweeping generalizations about Biblical ethics, Protestant ethics, Catholic ethics, and "human" ethics.

It is with reference to the latter, "human" ethics, that I wish to make a few comments. Curran's "human" ethics refers to what? Or to whom? One can take a number of axes and along them find extraordinary diversity in the "human" ethics that moral theologians are trying to assure us, if distinguishable at all from Catholic ethics, are distinguishable in no morally significant respects. The axis of what are the essential values of human life: think of the varieties of proposals that are made by non-religious persons, all in principle rational, and surely the moral philosophers among them rational also in practice—happiness, intelligence, physical life, freedom, justice, release from suffering, etc. The axis of how these values are grounded, or warranted—culturally, in the subconscious, in an ontological order, etc. The axis of how the right or the good is known: any textbook on ethical theory will suggest a range of positions on the question—intuitively, by a process of rational justification, by social research, etc.

My intention in these comments is not a pedantic one. It is to set the basis for an inference. "Human" ethics, whether referring loosely to whatever moral teachings are around in our culture, or more rigorously to moral teachings or principles proposed and defended by rational persons on the basis of rational principles on which all rational persons ought to be able to agree, are themselves tremendously varied. The import of this inference is that it might be the case that historical, psychological, social, and other factors penetrate the ethics of non-religious parts of the human community at least as much as they do the religious community and that there might be a variety of secular equivalents to faith and its objects among "human" ethics. Thus Curran's problem is more complicated than he poses it. From which "human" ethics is one seeking to distinguish Christian or Catholic ethics? Or in relation to whose human, or even rational, ethics, is one trying to show identity or similarity with Christian or Catholic ethics? The ethics of Erich Fromm, of R. M. Hare, of Henry Veatch, of some hedonistic utilitarian?

Now it may be that the assumption behind Curran's intention can be interpreted in the following way in the light of these comments. In some ideal order, in principle general human ethics and Christian Catho-

lic ethics would either be identical or dissimilar only in marginal respects. We are, however, confronted with the fact that general human ethics have not met that ideal as yet, but in principle they can; similarly religious ethics have not, but in principle they can. But this suggests a research project that is different from Curran's, and one in which many of us should be engaged. If we accept the ideal, why is it that after thousands of years it has never been fully realized? Is it because of biases that are accidental to ethics, and thus can be overcome? Is it because of a human fault that deters humankind in general and moral philosophers and moral theologians in particular from fulfilling it?

The imperative that is derived from the ideal might be given a weaker form. While the ideal always presses upon us the requirement of giving reasons for the moral teachings we approve of, its fulfillment, if ever, will come in that eschaton. What reasons would we give for this more modest aspiration? I believe that Curran gives us a clue to some answers in a sentence that is not fully developed in the paper: "The material content of ethics also includes other elements besides norms—attitudes, dispositions or virtues; goals and ideals." I suppose it might be argued that all rational persons ought to be able to agree on what the proper attitudes and ideals are as well as the proper action guiding rules, but we recognize that at least attitudes and dispositions are not fully determined by the exercise of human reason; there are affective aspects to be accounted for, just as there are affective relations to goals and ideals. I would in addition suggest that moral teachings and the critical and general reflections about their justifications emerge out of *historic* human experience, and not simply out of a rational apprehension of some immutable moral order or out of a process of establishing in a formal fashion certain universalizable moral principles. Curran seems to refer to the historical only in terms of sin. If we account for the affective and the historical, we can judge them to be either sources of error in ethics, or sources of some provisional (at least) morally appropriate substance, or as sources of ambiguity. To restrain my propensities to elaborate what must in this presentation be seen to be marginal points, my main point is to suggest that human experience in its historical and affective dimensions must be taken as data for moral teachings and as data to be taken into account in moral theory. If the affective and the historical are not merely accidental, or only a source of error,

some things follow. First, one need not be so apologetic about the distinctiveness of Catholic, Christian, Jewish, Theravada Buddhist, or any other ethics. This is not to say that there are no ways of judging the moral teachings of these particular traditions, but it is to say that "ethics" always needs a qualifying adjective. The qualifying adjective functions not only to identify a general historic (or philosophic) position like Catholic or utilitarian, but that "Christian" or "utilitarian" is in a strong sense a qualification of the word ethics. Packed into the qualification is historic particularity, and/or affective particularity (in the sense that there are loyalties to values or ways of life that will never be rationally persuasive to "all rational human beings"). I am suggesting that the importance of the question as Curran asks it comes lower in a rank order of things to think about, though to forget it is to slip into the perils of more moral relativism than is tolerable or desirable. To make my point in a dramatic way, we are not going to get ethics unqualified until we get rational minds unqualified by affectivity, or persons unqualified by particular histories; or knowledge of a moral order unqualified by historical and embodied experience.

Second, it follows that one can begin to sort out at what points in ethical theory the qualification becomes significant. Curran has suggested some of these points in the paper. If I were to develop my own view I would suggest others and elaborate upon my reasons for them. My critical remark in this regard to Curran is that he has not sorted out systematically enough what the various aspects of "ethics" are, and that if he did, he could have given a much more sophisticated treatment to his question. For example, I believe "ethics" in the paper most commonly refers to substantive moral teachings, either as rules of conduct or as moral ideals. In my terms, he could have asked "are there Catholic or Christian moral teachings?" And, of course, "are there moral teachings which have distinctive emphasis in Catholicism or Christianity?" And, "are there any unique Catholic or Christian moral teachings?" If "ethics" refers only to moral teachings, the agenda would be complete. But if "ethics" refers also to other aspects or orders of moral discourse, other questions could be raised. Are there Catholic or Christian reasons given for moral teachings, either unique ones, distinctively weighted ones, or those shared with non-religious persons? Or, are there dispositions or attitudes that are qualified in any way by agents being Catholic

or Christian? I shall not elaborate a more extensive agenda. My basic point should be clear. The question of the title is not one question, but it is a bag of questions, and a sorting of items in the bag would have made the paper more complex.

Finally, the question raised, as Curran implies in his answer to it, opens up a whole horizon of basically theological questions. No one could deal with them in one paper. Indeed, I will not even list them, but call our attention to the horizon. But that is another agenda.

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