

RESPONSE TO PROFESSOR CURRAN—II

Professor Curran's paper has brought under critical review a good deal of the recent literature on the specificity of Christian ethics, a task that deserves our gratitude but renders comment even more difficult than ordinary. There are so many dimensions that one would like to line up for more careful examination. For instance, one might begin by asking whether the question is really a good question. While I entertain doubts on this point, I shall not delay on them here. Rather I shall turn to Curran's conclusion and, in an attempt to provoke discussion, put some questions to that conclusion.

The heart of Curran's thinking is contained in the following paragraph. "In conclusion, this paper has maintained that there is a Christian ethic in so far as Christians are called to act and Christian ethicists to reflect on action in the light of their explicitly Christian understanding of moral data, but Christians and non-Christians can and do share the same general goals and intentions, attitudes and dispositions, as well as norms and concrete actions. The difference is in terms of the explicitly Christian aspect as such. Likewise there is a Catholic ethic in so far as Catholics act and Catholic theology reflects on action in the light of a Catholic self-understanding, but this results in no different moral data although more importance might be given to certain aspects such as the ecclesial element."

The first question to be generated by this paragraph and the analysis that led to it is a question that has to do with clarity and meaning. Phrases such as "the explicitly Christian aspect as such," "Catholic self-understanding," "no different moral data" remain tantalizingly opaque. Until they are clarified, their relationship to goals, dispositions and norms will be hazy. More explicitly, Curran contends that "Christians and non-Christians can and do share . . . the same attitudes and dispositions." Religious and moral attitudes and dispositions are complex things, generated and supported by a variety of influences. Certainly, however, the model around which one shapes his life has some influence on these attitudes. Jesus Christ, as the explicit model, will have some influence on these dispositions. And if that is so, is it not

possible that these dispositions would be somewhat different than those generated by loyalty-models such as Ayn Rand, Sidney Hook, Richard Nixon? Until we know, therefore, the meaning of "the explicitly Christian aspect" and how it functions in moral thought and action, we shall remain unclear on its influence on attitudes and dispositions.

Next I should like to underline several suppositions that seem to be embedded in and inseparable from Curran's position. The first supposition is this: the manner of knowing has no influence on the ultimate norm, disposition, goal. That must be questioned. We are, as Christians, essentially members of a People. We cannot exist as Christians except in community and we cannot define ourselves except as "of a Body." If we cannot exist as Christians in isolation, neither can we know as Christians in isolation. Colossians states this rather clearly: "You have put on the new [man] which is ever being renewed unto true knowledge according to the image of its creator" (3:10). The "true knowledge" that is being "renewed" is moral insight, and it is not the knowledge of the individual believer, but of the "new man," the Whole Christ.

For Paul, then, moral knowledge is shared knowledge. The *nova mens* is mediated to the individual by the community, through the individual's participation in the community. (This fact is, one could argue, the root of the notion of a magisterium. In this perspective the magisterium is the facilitating vehicle for our shared knowledge.) Therefore, there has been and is in the Christian community in general a manner of moral knowledge, and in the Catholic community a vehicle, not present in non-Christian communities. Now either this manner is a value or it is not. If it is, then is it not to be expected that those who do not share this privilege may arrive at moral postures, norms, policies at variance with those who do? This cannot be excluded in principle, or if it is, one has to question the value of the specific manner of moral knowledge in the Christian community.

The second supposition apparently inseparable from Curran's thesis is that explicit or thematic knowledge (Curran's "explicitly Christian aspect") has little or no influence on dispositions, goals, intentions, norms. If there is such an influence, then this could mean that Christians and non-Christians might arrive at different moral conclusions in certain areas. The crucial question is: is there such an influence? To get

at this question two things must be related: (1) a theory of moral obligation; and (2) explicit Christian intentionalities (a term I borrow from Joseph Fuchs) such as sacramental life, follower of the crucified Christ, etc.

A short comment-response is hardly the place to elaborate this relationship. However I should like to indicate briefly the general lines I would follow in attempting such an elaboration. The first step is the contention that our basic moral or value commitments are pre-thematic, pre-discursive in character. We do not, for example, respect human life, support it, not kill it primarily because of discursive arguments or analyses. That perception and commitment pulses along our veins with being human. Arguments and analyses are used to communicate and qualify (in a world of conflict) the basic judgment about the good of human life. In this sense, discursive reason does not discover the good but analyzes the good that is known in pre-discursive ways. In this I believe Germain Grisez is absolutely correct. However, cultural biases can exert a distorting influence on these pre-discursive value-judgments.

How do the so-called "Christian intentionalities" influence our knowledge of basic human values? They do not, I would argue, originate such knowledge. They rather reinforce it, an assertion that calls for much more explanation than I can give it here. But if this is so, are we not to expect that those with such Christian loyalties and intentionalities may be less vulnerable to long-term cultural distortions of our basic value-judgments than those without such loyalties and intentionalities? And if this is so, might they not at times conclude to different moral policies and norms than those without such reinforcements? To exclude this in principle is to assert that our explicit Christian loyalties and intentionalities have no influence on the pre-discursive knowledge whereby we incline as men to the good.

The third supposition in Curran's thesis is an understanding of "morality," "ethics" and "material content" that undervalues the existential or individual level of morality. Norbert Rigali has pointed this out and Curran has explicitly adverted to Rigali's distinctions. But I think insufficiently. Curran states: "Certainly one must accept the existence of such a personal and individual aspect of morality. I just want to recall that the non-Christian too can perceive personal obliga-

tions of self-sacrificing love and service which are to be carried out in accord with his own individuality and circumstances." That is certainly true, but I do not believe it is the point at issue. The point is whether these personal obligations are the same for Christians and non-Christians. And if they need not be and are not always the same, then there is a specifically different Christian and even Catholic ethic at least at this level. Furthermore, such different conclusions at the level of individual ethics might have repercussions at the level of essential ethics.

In summary, my question to Curran's thesis is this: is his contention not perhaps a hint that Christian moral theology has moved to a position of neo-rationalism that undervalues the *shared, pre-discursive* and *individual* contributions to moral knowledge? Stated more positively, I would suggest that being a Christian means: (1) being human—in continuity with the human but in a context and atmosphere where grasp of the human may be intensified by Christian intentionalities; (2) being social—essentially a member of an *ecclesia* whose knowledge is shared knowledge; and (3) being individual—with existential calls and obligations not shared by others. All three of these dimensions could in principle lead to moral conclusions that are fully human, but that not all who are fully human share or see.

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