

A RESPONSE (II) TO JOHN P. BOYLE

We are in Professor Boyle's debt for a rich historical account of the context within which the discipline of moral theology has developed in the United States and for a challenging statement of criteria that must be operative in present and future practice of the discipline. In my response I shall first make some observations about the history that comprises the main portion of Boyle's paper. I shall then articulate some connections I see between the historical section of his paper and its briefer normative conclusion, in the process adding my own reflections on some matters suggested by his address.

As I read Boyle's narrative, I felt much appreciation for the way his reviewing of certain aspects of our past has set current challenges and dilemmas in perspective. I also felt something that can best be expressed by means of metaphor. If this story we have just heard were to be filmed, it could be done in black and white and with a monaural sound track. All the actors would be white males, and they would speak English with regional American variations or European accents. What I am getting at is that our historical narrative has focused on professional, clerical moral theology, something which Boyle acknowledges. Indeed, the narrative is structured around an understanding of moral theology now judged by Boyle and others to be inadequate. This view saw moral theology as a discipline taught by seminary professors to future confessors, with the hierarchy contributing occasionally on an *ad hoc* basis. Since most Catholics have understood things this way, Boyle's reading of the history of the discipline in the U.S. in light of this definition is helpful as a description of the basic lines of a profession that has exercised great influence over the lives of American Catholics. However, if one employs a more contemporary understanding of moral theology, such as Margaret Farley did in *Theological Studies* in 1975 ("the effort of the Christian community to understand and articulate how its faith should be lived"¹), then a full account of the American experience in moral theology should be filmed in color, with a stereophonic or quadraphonic sound track that does justice to the efforts and contributions of lay women and men, of religious sisters and brothers, and of ordinary parish priests.

Researching such a "people's history" would require going to sources beyond official textbooks and hierarchical documents, for the efforts of ordinary Catholics to understand and articulate how the faith should be lived are simply not part of the clerical record. Much of value can be learned about the American experience in moral theology from additional sources such as the lay-edited journal *Commonweal*; the sisters' publication *Probe*; the fiction of J. F. Powers, James

¹Margaret A. Farley, "New Patterns of Relationship: Beginnings of a Moral Revolution," *Theological Studies* 36 (1975) 629.

Farrell, and Mary Gordon; and, the writings of Catholic pacifists, social justice activists, and feminists. Much can be learned as well from books such as Robert Blair Kaiser's *The Politics of Sex and Religion*,² which recounts the story of the immensely important effort at collegial moral discernment on the question of contraception undertaken with limited success by a commission of laity and hierarchy in the 1960s.

Clearly I do not propose to attempt a full-color account here, nor do I think Boyle would question the value of filling in the picture around the black and white clerical version of the American experience in moral theology. After all, his writings describe the whole Church as a "community of moral discernment" wherein authoritative teachers certainly have a role, but believers in general are not limited to a "purely receptive" function, since they also are gifted by the Holy Spirit.³ Though limited in focus and spare in detail, especially where recent and contemporary experience is concerned, Boyle's history is by no means complacent, nor is it merely descriptive. He praises the discipline for serving an immigrant church, he notes the contribution of men of vision like Bouquillon, Kerby, and Ryan, and he appreciates the skilled casuistry evident in much of the literature. But he criticizes American moral theology for its moralism, anti-intellectualism, and individualism; for continuing untroubled when it should have responded to items such as *Rerum novarum*; and indeed, for remaining, for most of its history, "a relatively fixed object against a changing cultural background." His paper is essentially an argument that significant change is required in American moral theology, with an appropriate continuity being preserved. If his historical narrative describes and judiciously assesses the *real* that is the past, his normative conclusion charts the *ideal* for which we must strive. Here I agree strongly with Boyle, and can only second the criteria for adequacy he discusses.

The question his argument leaves us with, of course, is one of transportation: How do we get from here to there? From my own experience of American Catholic moral theology, I am persuaded that the needs of the discipline are more practical, political, and indeed *moral* than they are theoretical. And yet certain theoretical moves that have occurred in the discipline of Christian ethics in the last decade or two are quite relevant to our situation, particularly the emphasis on vision and virtue that Stanley Hauerwas and others have stressed, drawing on the writings of British moral philosopher Iris Murdoch. Here is one instance where a "bracing encounter" with moral philosophy, to use Boyle's phrase, can do us good.

On the significance of vision I shall be very brief. Hauerwas sums it up when he observes, "[W]e can only act in the world we see, a seeing partially determined by the kind of beings we have become. . . ."⁴ We can never make our vision fully adequate to reality, but we can and ought to improve it by gaining perspective on our situation. Most important is attention to the way things are seen by those with-

²Kansas City: Leaven Press, 1985.

³John Boyle, "The Natural Law and the Magisterium," in Charles E. Curran and Richard A. McCormick, eds., *Readings in Moral Theology No. 3: The Magisterium and Morality* (New York: Paulist, 1982) 430-60.

⁴Stanley Hauerwas, *Vision and Virtue: Essays in Christian Ethical Reflection* (Notre Dame: Fides/Claretian, 1974) 69.

out power and privilege. Here I think great and prophetic artists can be enormously helpful to theologians.

To illustrate this point, I shall conclude with brief remarks on vision and virtue based on a text from 1961 that contains much wisdom relevant to the situation sketched by Boyle. The text is *The Good Conscience* by the Mexican novelist Carlos Fuentes.⁵ My choice of this writer derives partly from a sense that the old immigrants, now established in American society, need to learn about and from the cultures of new American Catholic immigrants. My selection of a Mexican testifies synecdochically to the values to be gained from telling the story in living color and full quadraphonic sound. But Fuentes is not just a token; there is wisdom in his analysis, which vividly portrays the way traditional moral theology is implicated in some of the most besetting problems facing Catholicism today, particularly injustice to women and the blindness of the middle and upper classes to social justice questions and obligations. We see in this novel what rigid patriarchal authority does to one family system, and we can infer what it has done and is doing to the Church. "The first rule in this family," Fuentes' narrator informs us, "was that life's real and important dramas should be concealed."⁶

The silencing that has gone on in Catholic moral theology—whether it involves the secrecy surrounding the work of the commission that studied contraception or the disciplining of moralists like John McNeill, Anthony Kosnik, Ann Patrick Ware, Daniel Maguire, Philip Keane, Margaret Farley and other Sisters of Mercy, Charles Curran, and John Boyle—this repression is ruining the atmosphere in which Catholics must live and breathe, making for a stifling climate—Boyle, following Michael Gannon, calls it one of *grande peur*—in which one's perception of truth cannot be spoken nor one's honest questions pursued. Such an atmosphere stunts the growth in Christian life of church members.

Also instructive for our concerns is the way Fuentes' account of the maturation of the protagonist Jaime Ceballos critiques Catholic overemphasis on a certain understanding of the virtue of chastity—indeed, the near absolutizing of this virtue—to the neglect of charity and justice. I cannot develop this argument here, but will simply conclude by combining some learnings from Fuentes and Boyle to say that if it was fitting in certain times to emphasize certain virtues, it can be tragic to be frozen in this emphasis and to neglect other necessary virtues.⁷ New situations require new emphases. Boyle's paper, with its recognition that a climate of fear has impeded the growth of moral theology and its final exhortation to take appropriate risks, clearly makes demands on our virtue. Most specifically, it asks theologians to exercise the *courage* our situation requires.

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⁵New York: The Noonday Press, 1961.

⁶*Ibid.*, 26.

⁷For a discussion of this problem see John D. Barbour, *Tragedy as a Critique of Virtue* (Chico CA: Scholars Press, 1984).