

## SEMINAR ON MORAL THEOLOGY

### SCRIPTURE AND NATURAL LAW: INCOMMENSURATE LANGUAGES?

The Moral Theology Seminar sponsored one plenary session and three concurrent working groups. Lisa Sowle Cahill, outgoing chair of the Moral Theology Steering Committee, moderated the plenary session. In the opening session William Spohn of the Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley discussed the problem of motivation and content in Christian ethics. Following Josef Fuchs and Bruno Schuller, most mainstream Catholic moralists distinguish the two in such a way that distinctively Christian considerations (including biblical warrants, stories, symbols) provide motivation for moral action but do not enter into the moral content of acts, which is defined by common human moral standards and values.

Vincent MacNamara in his recent *Scripture and Ethics: Recent Roman Catholicism* (Georgetown) criticizes the "autonomy school" for using the term "motive" too loosely in this distinction. Motives are those aspects under which an agent sees something as desirable. They should not be confused with justifying reasons which refer to considerations that entitle one to say that to act in a specific way is to act morally. It is inadequate to state that Christianity provides only motives for a life of virginity or non-violence when it provides the grounds for judging them to be morally worthwhile. Biblical materials, therefore, are more than merely exhortative; in some instances they provide justifying reasons for moral choices. Since these reasons offer necessary grounding for the moral act, they should be regarded as part of the "content" of the act. Although acts of voluntary Christian poverty, for example, may be analogous to practices warranted by other religious traditions, analogy of content should not be taken as identity of content. Religious reasons and intentions, therefore, are more central to morality than the autonomy school allows.

What is at issue here is the definition of morality. If one restricts morality to the performance of duties and moral discourse to their reasoned justification, then distinctively Christian moral resources, largely derived from biblical materials, are easily ruled out. However, if one broadens the concept of morality to include dispositions and intentions, character, vision, and virtue, then biblical language is not only commensurate with the language of morality for Christians but, in many instances, is constitutive of it. Seeking for distinctive moral norms or values which would be utterly unintelligible to non-Christians should not be the main issue; portraying a distinctive way of life in its rich blend of dispositions, aspirations and vision is more to the point.

American pragmatism presents a more adequate account of moral experience than either transcendental Thomism or neo-Kantian approaches because it inte-

grates description and evaluation. In their ethics of practical discernment, William James and Charles Sanders Peirce developed the notion of "the fitting" which evaluates actions in an aesthetic manner. By discerning the action which is appropriate to the situation and to one's framework of meaning, this tradition provides a critical rationale for the "interplay of world-view and moral judgment" called for by MacNamara. Peirce's concept of the "normative sciences" which subordinates logic to ethics and ethics to aesthetics reverses the pattern of analytical ethics which measures ethics by the supposedly neutral arbiter of logic and ignores the aesthetic dimension entirely.

Richard A. McCormick initiated a lively discussion on the distinction of motive and content in ethics. He pointed out that those whom MacNamara dubbed the autonomy school are becoming less sanguine about the term "autonomy." Furthermore, they hold that actions whose moral content is derived from common human morality constitute a relatively minor portion of Christian moral experience. It was noted in reply that the earlier writings of both Fuchs and Schuller state that the New Testament presumes that most of Christian moral experience rests on common human morality with religious considerations employed as motivation rather than justification.

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#### A. THE SEARCH FOR A SOCIAL VOCABULARY

The first working group was moderated by Francis X. Meehan (Mount Carmel Parish, Doylestown, PA.). Dr. William Sullivan, political philosopher from La-Salle University and co-author of *Habits of the Heart*, opened the session by sharing how he felt the book impacted on the theme of the convention, specifically on moral theology's search for a moral social vocabulary. He saw "Habits" as crying out for a moral practice which holds the human good as less instrumental, more intrinsic. Western liberalism has too much focused on the autonomy of the individual and too little on socially structured cooperation for the commonweal. He sees "Habits" as sharing Alisdair MacIntyre's vision (indeed, Aristotle's vision as well) of what constitutes right moral practice, namely, a dimension of civic benefit.

Taking the issue of human work, Sullivan wondered if the very nature of our economy did not prevent people from really grasping any intrinsic value to their occupation. It seems even when people clearly contribute to society, they often speak of their work's value only in terms of spontaneous emotional fulfillment. This expressive individualism flows over into the rest of life's activities as well. "Habits" contended that life cannot be truly fulfilling when its good are pursued in such a subjective and instrumental manner; or, at least, that the poverty of articulation itself takes a human and societal toll. So much of the biblical and civic tradition which had given a common floor to social argument in this country has been eroded. And even when healthy social values are pursued, the poverty of language makes their attainment elusive and uncertain.