

A RESPONSE TO WALTER PRINCIPE

It is a very great honor for me to be asked to respond to Father Principe's remarks and my greatest difficulty in doing so is that I wonder if he has really left anything to be said on this subject. However, when he sent me his paper, he did point out to me that he had done very little in the field of *moral* theology, and he kindly suggested that since that is my area, I might want to extend and supplement what he has to say and to develop my questions and criticisms out of that field. I am going to follow the lead that he has suggested, offering a few supplementary comments of my own from the field of moral theology, although certainly I would never try to match Father Principe's breadth of learning in this or any other area. Then I am going to raise one question that seems to me to arise both from Father Principe's remarks and from what I'm going to say briefly now.

It might seem surprising at first to turn to the field of the history of moral theology as one more illustration of the irreducible historicity of all theological reflection. After all, it would seem that in moral theology, if anywhere, we are faced with genuinely new questions generated by the unprecedented social circumstances and the new technologies of our age. And to some extent that intuition is accurate. After all, I have found it frustratingly difficult to find much in Aquinas, for example, that speaks directly to the issues surrounding genetic engineering, or nuclear deterrence. (Inconsiderate of him!) Nonetheless, I would claim that in the field of moral theology, too, we do find examples of the irreducible historicity of theological reflection of which Father Principe speaks. For it must be noted that the new circumstances and the new technological possibilities of our age, about which we moral theologians exercise ourselves, do not generate moral quandaries all by themselves. That is to say, we would not be facing the particular new questions that we do today if we had not already brought a particular set of convictions and concerns to what is new in our situation. To take one admittedly not-so-new example, abortion would not be the kind of issue that it is for us, it would not raise the *particular* moral questions and dilemmas that it does, if we did not bring to this issue a complex set of commitments both to individual autonomy and also to equality. Or to take another, perhaps fresher, example, genetic engineering would not raise the particular questions that it does for us if we did not come to it with both a commitment to a certain veneration for nature and, once again, a respect for individual freedom. Examples such as these have convinced me that in my field as in all others we can never draw the line between past wisdom and present dilemmas too neatly. Rather, we find ourselves constantly in the midst of a living tradition of belief, value, and thought that is defined as much by its recurring problematics as by the substantive positions that we find its expositors taking. Certainly, new questions arise within this tradition, particularly in its moral dimension. Nonetheless, even these new questions are fully significant and intelli-

gible for us only when we can see them as new instantiations, as it were, of the problematics which have structured our shared tradition from the beginning. And our attempts to resolve these questions will require us, at least at some points, to engage past attempts to resolve other expressions of the same recurring problematics.

Now all this is very well, but it does raise one critical question that Father Principe touches upon but does not develop and that I would like to sharpen now. And that is the question or the problem that is expressed, depending upon the circles in which you move, as the problem of historicism, the problem of the hermeneutical circle, the problem of relativism, or, in my field, the problem of sectarianism. Indeed, I have noticed a certain lack of the meeting of the minds between systematic theologians and moral theologians precisely on this question. In my experience, systematic theologians seem to me to be very comfortable with a general idea of the historicity of the theological tradition and the need to view the theological tradition in terms of its own particular, and in some ways very idiosyncratic developments. Moral theologians, on the other hand, while they recognize that to some extent this must be taken into account, nonetheless remain committed to the autonomy of morality from all particular traditions and ways of life, and therefore to the genuine possibility of establishing a universally valid moral law. And this, by the way, is true of moral theologians at all ends of the spectrum of the debates that are so much a part of moral theology today. When one comes across an ethicist who does want to take the particularity of the Christian moral tradition seriously, perhaps make it the foundation of his or her work, the cries of sectarianism go up to high heaven, and sometimes, fairly so. Nonetheless, this situation reflects the fact that there is a certain, shall we say, talking at cross purposes between systematic and moral theologians precisely in this area. Now this is a question that I feel with all the greater difficulty because I am convinced, like most of my colleagues in moral theology, that one cannot simply remain at the level of a particular moral tradition. That, it seems to me, is an inadequate way to deal with the very serious problems of moral pluralism and historicism. But while saying very clearly that I want to get out of the hermeneutical circle, I do want to raise the caution that to do so is by no means easy.

Let me point out first of all that the ability to raise questions within a tradition does not get us to the central problem. After all, everyone admits that we can raise questions within the particular moral and intellectual traditions that we inhabit; the issue is whether we can escape from the fundamental presuppositions and problematics that set those questions for us, or indeed, whether we should even *try* to escape from those fundamental presuppositions and problematics. Similarly, an examination of different historical positions, or even an examination of radically different religious and moral traditions can only serve to set the problem of historicism for us and to sharpen it. It cannot of and by itself provide us with a solution since the question is precisely whether we can choose among different historical and cultural options on the basis of anything other than sheer philosophical fiat.

These are the kinds of questions that any attempt to take seriously the history of theological and moral reflection must address at some point. And I can assure you that while I feel the force of the questions, while I feel it is critical to resolve

them, I certainly would not attempt to give you any resolution of them here and now—I just want to sharpen the questions. I would say, however, that I have found resources for dealing with these problems that I might commend to you. Philosophically, I think the most recent work of Alasdair MacIntyre is extremely helpful in grappling with these issues.¹ Theologically, I think the work of Francis Fiorenza deserves special attention in this area.² Beyond that I have found it helpful to go back to the work of John Henry Newman, who in this, as in so many other areas, was anticipating the problems that trouble us more than a century before his time.³

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¹Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality* (South Bend IN: The University of Notre Dame Press, 1888).

²Francis Schussler Fiorenza, *Foundational Theology: Jesus and the Church* (New York: Crossroad Press, 1985).

³John Henry Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, 16th ed. (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1920).