

MORAL THEOLOGY

- Topic: The Development of Moral Doctrine
Conveners: Brian F. Linnane, College of the Holy Cross
Maura A. Ryan, University of Notre Dame
Presenter: Jean Porter, University of Notre Dame
Respondents: Michael P. Moreland, Boston College
Cristina L. H. Traina, Northwestern University

Jean Porter's paper, "Natural Law, Moral Discernment, and the Authority of the Church," provided a springboard for an interesting and fruitful discussion on the nature and scope of the authority of the magisterium with respect to precepts of the natural law. As Porter observed, this old question receives new urgency in the continuing debate over the status of the ban on the use of contraceptives. Disagreements over the proposed infallibility of magisterial teaching on contraception have turned on differing (and, in Porter's view, oversimplified) accounts of the nature of moral reasoning and the relationship between natural and revealed morality. Drawing from canonists and theologians writing between the mid-twelfth and late-thirteenth centuries, Porter offers an interpretation of the natural law that attempts to avoid the false dichotomies (e.g., between natural reason and revelation) that have marked modern versions. In the scholastics of this period, she argues, we find a concept of natural law that was developed "out of a scripturally informed and selective appropriation of earlier Christian and classical traditions of natural law reflection, which was then in turn applied to specific scriptural texts as a basis for interpretation." Here moral reasoning involves a rich interplay of sources within a tradition of interpretation that draws on Scripture as well as rational argument and that employs a selective, theological construal of human nature.

A scholastic concept of natural law has at least two implications for debates over the nature and scope of magisterial authority and the force of the ban on contraception. First, in this view, natural law is not understood primarily as a body of specific moral rules but as a capacity for moral judgment. The movement from first principles to norms will necessarily involve complex processes of communal interpretation and practical deliberation within evolving theological and ecclesial traditions. While it makes sense to speak of "authoritative" or "definitive" or "irreversible" moral teaching (norms that become, through the process of community discernment, perceived as integrally connected to the Christian life), it does not make sense to speak of moral norms in terms of infallibility (as objects of supernatural faith). Second, it follows that the important question concerning contraception is whether its condemnation reflects commitments that are "central to the integrity of Christian faith and moral practice."

Both respondents expressed appreciation for the integration of reason and revelation in Porter's account of natural law. Michael Moreland underscored the

importance of this kind of retrieval for current efforts to read Aquinas as theologian and exegete. At the same time, he noted the danger of undermining completely the distinction between reason and revelation. To understand reason in "theological and ultimately scriptural terms," as Porter suggests, is useful in transforming a previously skewed relationship between reason and revelation, but it does not solve the problem of defining either their scope or their relation.

Cristina Traina agreed that a theological and scripturally mediated reading of natural law is appealing, but cautioned that "scriptural approbation of natural law does not solve the problem of what revelation means," a problem for contemporary theology as a whole, not simply for moral theology. Traina shared Porter's insistence that it is possible to define moral teachings as definitive even if not "infallible." The challenge, however, is to develop provisions for "prophetic criticism," i.e., safeguards between "on the one hand the argument that goes 'the greater the weight of tradition, the surer the teaching' and on the other the possibility that interpreters would find radically different 'inner meanings' on each pass through a set of traditional practices and beliefs."

Open discussion raised a number of further questions: What exactly does it mean for moral reasoning to be "theologically informed"? At what point does "theologically informed" risk taking on a defensive and exclusionary character? How have theologians and canonists understood the relationship between natural and eternal law? What possibilities exist for interpreting the language of "faith and morals"?

In general business: Brian Linnane announced that a membership list is being compiled to facilitate a call for papers for the session in 2000. Daniel Cowdin of Salve Regina University was appointed as coconvener.

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