

Recent Moral Theology

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It is hard to imagine why Karl Hörmann's *Introduction to Moral Theology* has been translated into English.¹ The author states that the book was written for lay people. In fact, it is the kind of book which is most at home in the pocket of the seminarist at examination time. The publishers claim that it is 'a guide to principles and practice in modern life'. In fact, many of the infrequent practical examples are hot from Aristotle or the thirteenth century. Every page is leprous with jargon. We read of 'the positive method', of 'substantial union', of 'ontological goodness', of 'the sense-appetite'; words such as 'convenience', 'determine', 'incomprehensible' and 'elevated' are used in senses quite alien to their English usage. Frequently the examples take us back to that quaint and vivid world where men set fire to their neighbours' houses and kill their friends while hunting, where captains throw overboard their merchandise to lighten the ship, and where maidens miss mass to avoid being put to the blush by their banns. 'Modern life' is catered for mainly by brief asides on psychoanalytic theories and by a final chapter on cruelty to animals. Nuclear warfare is treated at the same length as water-divining; the ethics of advertising and race-relations not at all.

The philosophical theories implicit in the book are open to serious objection. The mind appears to be conceived as a field of quasi-mechanical causes whose operation is perceptible only by introspection: the primary concern of morality seems to be with 'acts of the will' which are private mental processes of varying strength and intensity. It is often impossible to tell whether the author is laying down moral principles or making statements of fact. 'Man learns from his conscience', we are told 'that he is absolutely bound to perform certain actions and to avoid others'. Is this a statement, we wonder, about what *does* happen, or about what *ought* to happen? Here and elsewhere, the author gives us no help to decide.

The arguments which are given in support of moral principles are rarely convincing and often fallacious. Typical of the standard of reasoning is the following passage. 'The end of God the Creator must

¹AN INTRODUCTION TO MORAL THEOLOGY, by Karl Hörmann, translated by Edward Quinn; Burns and Oates, 30s.

be something good, for the end is always something good. The end is in fact that which the agent seeks when he applies the means. He would not seek the end if it did not seem worth seeking: that is to say, if it did not present itself to him as good. Thus the concept of end coincides with that of the good and even God in his work of creation can have the good alone as his end'. The book is full of just such bad arguments in bad English.

Many of the particular moral principles and assertions of fact put forward by the author seem to be either erroneous or misleading. For example, we are told that the Church has never approved rebellion against legitimate authority (p. 231), that servants are bound to obey their masters in 'matters of morality' unconnected with their job (p. 228) and that the infertile period consists of 'the days when menstruation occurs' (p. 217). Again, we are told that a citizen can presume, until the contrary is proved, that a war waged by his own government is a just war (p. 255). Since in every war at least one of the warring parties is making war unjustly, it is difficult to see on what grounds this presumption is based.

Most of the defects of *An Introduction to Moral Theology* are not peculiar to it. Some of them are unfortunately so common in similar handbooks that it has become a commonplace to say that moral theology stands in need of renewal. Fr Bernard Häring's book *Das Gesetz Christi* has been acclaimed by many writers on the Continent as inaugurating a new and welcome approach to the subject. The Mercier Press has now published the first volume of a translation of Fr Häring's work which enables the English reader to evaluate the claims made for it.²

There can be no doubt about Fr Häring's desire to be up to date. He talks as freely of the superego as of the irascible appetite, quotes Graham Greene as readily as Busenbaum, and speaks Existentialist as fluently as he speaks Scholastic. More seriously, he makes an effort to attach his teaching to scripture no less than to canon law, and insists that moral theology must teach a man how to live and not just how to make his confession. He is interested in moralists outside the Catholic tradition, and makes frequent reference to the ideas of Kant, Kierkegaard, and Freud.

In several ways the book improves upon the dull manuals of a tired tradition. An introduction gives a helpful chronological survey of the

²THE LAW OF CHRIST, by Bernard Häring, C.S.S.R. Volume I: General Moral Theology. Translated by Edwin C. Kaiser, C.P.P.S.; Mercier Press, 35s.

development of moral theology. The author often presents moral concepts for discussion in an historical perspective, showing how they have altered under the influence of reflection and the impact of revelation. Thus he discusses in an illuminating fashion the concepts of *commandment* (pp. 42 ff.) and of *conversion* (387 ff.); he has much to say about the altered notion of *law* in the New Testament (252 ff.); in the biblical idea of *sin* he isolates the three separate elements of *loss*, *disobedience*, and *injustice* (342-348). He knows how to use the history of liturgy and law to clarify theology: witness his discussions of the connection between absolution and the eucharist (418), of the influence of penitential legislation on the form of moral treatises (17), of the causal link between legal theories and the neurosis of scruples (163). Contemporary history, too, provides him with material: he can trace the fortunes of the theory of natural right from Luther to Hitler (241-2) and compare the doctrine of the mystical body with the concept of collective guilt canvassed at the Nuremberg trials (85).

A sense of history in moral theology, such as Fr Häring displays and commends, is not an optional attainment for the erudite. It is essential for an adult understanding of Christian moral teaching. For example: the distinction between mortal and venial sin is, for the modern Catholic, more important than any other distinction which he applies in his behaviour. He may well be astonished to learn that this distinction, as we now make it, was not drawn until late in the history of the Church. But unless he has learnt this, he will not find it easy to discuss morality intelligibly with other Christians. Again, Fr Häring's discussion on Kantian ethics has more than a scholarly interest. Quasi-Kantian ideas—that duty is the highest motive, for example, or that what is more difficult is more virtuous—have been soaked up by many Catholics who have never heard of the *Grundlegung*.

On many particular topics Fr Häring has stimulating observations and suggestions to make. Thus, he draws a neat comparison between the permission of divorce in the Old Testament and the legalization of prostitution in a Christian State (248). In sacramental marriage, he explains, a miniature church or *ecclesiola* is created as a community member in the universal church (96). The long controversy over the use of probable opinions in morals was, he suggests hardily, simply 'an epochal mass neurosis' (163). Similar striking remarks are sprinkled throughout the book.

Nevertheless, *The Law of Christ* is hardly the herald of a renaissance in moral theology. Its defects far outweigh its virtues. Least important,

but most exasperating, is the style. Fr Häring thinks in superlatives and has a passion for the vertiginous. The book is full of yawning chasms and immense abysses; we read constantly of 'the immensity of past and future', of 'tremendous dimensions' and of 'the profoundest depths' (of evil, or of the soul, or of conscience, or just of ignorance). On the other hand, he often invites us to a cosy intimacy with high abstractions: we become familiar with 'the heart of reality', 'the wealth of being' and with 'the singularity of being in individuality'. The result is oddly melodramatic. Consider the following passage:

Because of the profound harmony of intellect and will in the depth of the soul (in the substance), the intellectual power must be shaken to those very depths when the will struggles against it because of deep and sinister motives. Therefore the will in its turn must tremble in agony when it combats the clear knowledge of understanding and allows itself to be fascinated and deceived by a mere mirage of the good. The most agonizing cry wells up from the depth of the soul itself, for as root and source of unity of the powers, it is directly wounded by their dissension. Here is the profound reason for the first elemental agony, a spontaneous unreflecting pain. (143).

One puts the book down, awed and dizzy; then the mists clear, and one sees what he means. A man who does what he knows to be wrong usually feels sorry about it. Very true.

Fr Häring cannot mention sin without making clear that he is against it. Thus, he is prodigal of adjectives of disdain: 'The vile resolution to seduce a virtuous maiden imparts a kind of evil unity to all the particular words, proposals, deeds which finally culminate in the one infamous completed action' (369). He is a master of the dramatized platitude: 'One who constantly neglects good and turns to evil deeds will grow vile and sinister' (123). He is not above the trick—common in bad metaphysics—of using adverbs and expressions of degree to qualify predicates which will not admit of them. Thus he writes of the 'infinitely real', of 'the fulness of existence', of 'the depths of being', and, of course, of 'the wholly other'. Which is as if a man were to say that in heaven four will be not just twice two, but *infinitely* twice.

No doubt some of the embarrassing quality of *The Law of Christ* must be blamed not on Fr Häring but on his translator. The latter, certainly, has no great ear for English. 'Since the tenth century', he can write, 'the practice of scourging oneself has come into vogue.' And he has a rich Wardour Street vocabulary containing 'darksome', 'bootless',

'behooves', 'perchance', 'ever and anon', 'weal and woe', 'durst', 'thievery' and 'bodilization'. But the translator cannot be held responsible for the similes, such as the painful fable of the Alpinist on page 404, or the comparison of virtue to 'a blithesome bird' (496). Author and translator combine to make us wince; it is difficult to settle the proportion of infelicity between them.

One who has not read Fr Häring's book may think that it is unfair to pay so much attention to style. Not so: there are many places in the book—including whole sections (e.g., 73-80, 142-146)—where rational discussion is replaced by rhetoric and argument gives way to dithyramb. Sometimes, as in the following examples, meaning seems to vanish completely.

To be a person means to have the capacity of removing one's self from all else, to preserve the peculiar and unique 'being-oneself' in true inwardness, in order to know the 'intimate sphere' (Scheler) in its profoundest depths.

Precisely human existence, as being coming to itself in freedom bears the primordial stamp of anxiety, insofar as there is the ever-present, uncanny danger of sinking back into a state without freedom, into the loss, which is the 'one', the impersonal life stream, the anonymous forces of the milieu (56).

Incantational utterances of this kind are, we know, popular in some philosophical quarters on the Continent. Can they have had anything to do with the success of Fr Häring's book?

The topics treated in this first volume of *The Law of Christ* are roughly the same as those covered by St Thomas in the *Prima Secundae*. This part of the *Summa Theologiae* is a philosophical masterpiece of the first order: a writer who genuinely translated its ideas from their difficult medieval idiom into a modern vernacular would deserve well of the literate world. The more so, since the topics in question have been shamefully neglected by secular philosophy since the Renaissance: in this country, for example, they were scarcely taken seriously until Professor Austin at Oxford began to talk about excuses a few years ago.

Fr Häring refers to St Thomas more than a hundred times and quotes him always with respect. But he can hardly be said to have performed the service of rendering the thought of the *Summa* intelligible to the modern reader. In the first place, there is an almost total lack of instances to illustrate the numerous Thomistic concepts introduced. Between pages 105 and 110, thirty technical terms are introduced with their medieval equivalents: in the same pages, to clarify their meaning,

there are no more than four concrete examples. In the second place, the technical terms themselves are often not translated but transliterated. As if to underline this, Latin phrases are often placed, with apparently explanatory intent, after their alleged English equivalents. Thus we read of 'habits (*habitus*)', 'docility (*docilitas*)', and are told to 'act contrary (*agere contra*).' This will not do. To take a single obvious example, *per accidens* does not mean 'by accident'. A doctor, *per accidens*, may be a woman; but no-one is a woman *by accident*.

Despite the battery of Thomistic archaisms with which it is presented, the doctrine of *The Law of Christ* turns out on examination to differ from that of St Thomas on point after point of major importance. Thus Fr Häring teaches that the passions of the soul are powers (65), that a free human act is the cause of itself (101), that the Son of God is God's knowing (142) and that the existence of God is self-evident to spiritual intuition (146). On the other hand, he sometimes follows Aquinas where it might have been wiser to forsake him. Thus, on page 545, he quotes with apparent approval St Thomas's theory that the eating of eggs exercises 'a baneful influence on the sexual life'.

The difference between the teaching of St Thomas and that of Fr Häring is clearly marked on the central topic of sin. St Thomas taught that it is possible to commit sin without *doing* anything sinful, either outwardly or inwardly; the mere *failure to do* what one ought to do, if voluntary, is sinful (1a IIae 77. 5). He taught also that it is possible to sin without knowing that one is sinning, in the case where one does something which one *ought* to know is sinful. (1a IIae 19. 6). Fr Häring seems to disagree on both issues. 'Sins of omission', he writes, 'are actions, for they are really culpable only in so far as one by a free act neglects the good which he knows he must do' (372). On both counts, so it seems to me, St Thomas is right and Fr Häring wrong.

Fr Häring thinks not only that every sin is an action, but also that every sin is committed at some particular moment. Thus, he tells us that the sin of missing Mass on Sunday is committed when one resolves to miss it, or when one gets drunk on Saturday night (372). But he does not, and indeed can not, tell us at what moment, for example, the sin of failing to visit one's dying father is committed. It may perhaps seem obvious that if I have committed a sin, then there must have been some moment at which I committed it. But in fact it does not follow; just as it does not follow from the fact that I have grown fat that there was some moment at which I grew fat. The metaphor of 'falling into sin' must not be allowed to mislead us; not every sin is an event like a tumble.

On the topic of sins committed in ignorance, Fr Häring is not consistent. Sometimes he writes as if one cannot sin unless one actually *thinks of* the sinfulness of what one is doing: thus he says: 'If there is no conscious advertence to law or value on the part of the mind there can be no question of violation of law' (110). At the other extreme he implies that a man cannot be without guilt in believing that it is legitimate to sell contraceptives (151). In his discussion of the authority of an erroneous conscience (154-156) he fails to distinguish clearly between the question 'Does an erroneous conscience bind?' (to which St Thomas gave the answer 'Yes') and the question 'Does an erroneous conscience excuse?' (to which St Thomas gave a qualified answer 'No'). Outlining the conditions for sin, he says that for mortal sin 'the degree of knowledge and advertence . . . must be such that one can see clearly that the act is gravely sinful, or at least that there is a serious obligation to inquire about the gravity' (353). This is inconsistent with his earlier and wiser statement that a physician who has neglected his studies cannot be excused through ignorance if he blunders in his practice (110). For the indolent physician may *simply not realize* that the dose which he is mistakenly prescribing for his patient will be lethal. He is guilty, for all that—as Fr Häring would surely agree.

Fr Häring is often difficult to understand. Technical terms such as 'epiky', 'equiprobabilism', 'internal forum' and 'irascible appetite' are used freely long before any explanation of them is offered. Moral principles are enunciated which in the absence of any interpretation seem either meaningless or obviously false. Thus, we are told that each individual must look upon himself as the bearer of unique and inviolable rights (289); that we have a duty to act in accordance with historic exigencies (246); that the Christian is bound to develop all his natural powers (233). Each of these dicta sounds imposing until one reflects on what it might mean. Consider the third. Each of us has many powers whose realizations are incompatible; for instance, the power to remain celibate and the power to get married. To tell someone to realize *all* his powers is to command the impossible.

In conclusion, I shall quote a passage which illustrates both Fr Häring's qualities and his shortcomings. Treating of the responsibility of élites for the crimes committed by the societies of which they form part, he has this to say:

The Church herself, in the sacred forum of the sacrament of penance, does not pass sentence (even though it be to pardon) on these matters. Only God can call us to account for this failure and in

the day of judgment open our eyes to the havoc wrought in the community by our neglect of grace. Even where there is question of a fault which can be judged by men its subsequent effect in the community falls under human judgment only in so far as the culprit had the capacity to foresee and the obligation to take into account the social consequences of his action (e.g. seduction, scandal). One may with good reason defend himself before men by maintaining that he did not anticipate these consequences and yet pray fearfully to God: *ab alienis parce servo tuo.* (85).

Here, on a theme in our time sadly topical, we have a problem well discerned, and an arresting thesis put forward in answer. But the implications of the thesis are fantastic: does Fr Häring mean that if a man were to confess the sin which he committed by his passive acceptance of Nazism, *he could not be absolved*? He offers no argument for such a conclusion; and in developing it he assumes blandly that 'foresaw' means the same as 'could have foreseen'. This is the writing of a man of imagination and vision: but not of a man who stops to ask himself what his words imply.

Reviews

THE ADVENT HOPE, A Study of the Context of Mark 13, by Graham Neville; Darton, Longman and Todd, 14s.

It is good to welcome a Protestant book which, in spite of serious faults, makes a further positive contribution to discussion about the second coming of our Lord. The author is here concerned not so much with the nature of that event as with the proper attitude of Christians who find that they have a long intervening period to live through before the event arrives. The norm used for this attitude is the concern of the Old Testament prophets for history—how they saw in its every movement the working of the divine will through the free actions of men. With inspired insight into contemporary affairs against the background of their knowledge of Israel's religious traditions, the prophets perceived something of the ways of God and his will for the world. Drawing on this perception, their proclamations about the imminent conclusive action of God in history held a further and still deeper resonance. They were descriptive too of history's ultimate goal, which in view of God's self-consistency, or