

VIRTUE ETHICS AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE FOR SPIRITUALITY

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THROUGHOUT MOST OF ITS HISTORY the practice of Christian spiritual disciplines has been closely linked to the cultivation of the virtues, including both the cardinal virtues of classical antiquity, namely, prudence, justice, courage and temperance, and the distinctively Christian virtues of faith, hope and charity. More recently, the turn to spirituality in contemporary theology has been paralleled by a turn to the virtues in theological ethics. What might these two approaches offer to each other?

Recent work on the virtues and their relation to the Christian life suggests more than one way in which virtue ethics and a theology of spirituality might enrich each other. In the first part of this essay I will review some of the main developments in virtue ethics in this century, beginning with the renewal of Catholic moral theology which began in the early decades of this century, and continuing with the more recent revival of interest in the virtues. In the second part, I will suggest four ways in which these two approaches to theological inquiry might be mutually enriching.

Recent work on the virtues

Of course, there is no one agreed-upon definition of spirituality, and correlatively, there is no consensus on the meaning and significance of virtue ethics. Nonetheless, even a rough indication of the parameters of each topic will be enough to show that they overlap to a significant degree. Matthew Ashley suggests, as a 'heuristic definition', that 'a spirituality is comprised by two complementary aspects':

First, a spirituality is a classic constellation of practices which forms a mystagogy into a life of Christian discipleship . . . By defining a spirituality as a constellation of practices I am focusing on the fact that a spirituality is something that one does . . .

The second and complementary aspect is the particular way of speaking and thinking – in song, poetry, sermon, and even in theological and doctrinal assertions – about God, about the ultimate meaning

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of human life, that both nurtures and is nurtured by the set of practices that make up the spirituality.¹

To anyone who is familiar with the literature generated by the recent revival of interest in the virtues, this has a familiar ring. In his seminal book *After virtue*, Alasdair MacIntyre argues that the concept of virtue originally emerged out of reflection on social practices, and that it finds its natural home within specific moral traditions and the constitutive narratives which sustain them.² Some Christian ethicists, including pre-eminently Stanley Hauerwas, have followed him in insisting on the link between the virtues and the core narratives and sustaining ideals of specific communities. Others have attempted to retrieve a distinctively Aristotelian/Thomistic approach, with its emphasis on the interrelationships among the agent's beliefs, his or her passions or emotions, and the actions which express these inner states. What these different accounts of virtue have in common, however, is an emphasis on the practical consequences of Christian belief and a dissatisfaction with any attempt to reduce the Christian life to affirmations of dogma or sheer obedience to moral rules.

Indeed, it might almost be said that the distinction between spirituality and virtue ethics is a distinction without a difference. Given that both theological approaches emphasize the practical and affective dimensions of Christian life, in contrast to doctrinal orthodoxy, why not consider these as two complementary ways of approaching the same subject matter? As Mark O'Keefe says, 'Although we commonly distinguish between a Christian moral life and a Christian spiritual life, in the daily existence of Christian men and women these "lives" are, of course, one'.³

However, in attempting to work through the issues raised by the relationship between virtue ethics and spirituality, I have become convinced that these issues are obscured rather than clarified by equating the moral and the spiritual life. For this reason, I will continue to speak of spiritualities, referring to distinctive 'constellations of practices', beliefs and affective states, rather than expanding the object of a theology of spirituality to include the Christian life *per se*.⁴

Nonetheless, O'Keefe's remark contains an important insight. The religious life of the Christian, including the particular spiritual practices which sustain that life, cannot be separated from the individual's moral life, including (I would add) the cultivation of those virtues which are integral to the Christian life in all its forms. Nor is this a new insight. When St Paul wanted to summarize the meaning of the Christian life, and to caution his listeners against deviating from that

life, he commonly did so by describing the virtues and vices which should be typical of, or foreign to, that life (for example, see Gal 5:16–26, Phil 4:4–9). Even more significantly, in the famous ‘hymn to love’ in 1 Corinthians, he appealed to the distinctively Christian qualities of faith, hope and love as a framework for interpreting the particular practices and roles which were emerging among the Christian communities (1 Cor 13:1–13).

This Pauline appeal to the Christian virtues as a way of expressing what is central to the Christian life has reappeared again and again since Paul wrote. Nonetheless, as is well known, this approach was not characteristic of moral theology in the modern period. After the Council of Trent, theologians generally distinguished between the duties which are incumbent on all Christians, and the practices which lead to a deeper sense of God’s presence or a more perfect submission to God’s will, which were thought to be appropriate only for those striving for extraordinary sanctity. The former were relegated to moral theology, which became excessively legalistic in its approach, whereas the latter were seen as the province of ascetical or spiritual theology.

This division began to be challenged in the early twentieth century, well before the Second Vatican Council issued its call for the renewal of moral theology.⁵ The best known and most influential of these early reformers was Bernhard Häring, whose *The law of Christ* (significantly subtitled, ‘Moral theology for priests *and laity*’; emphasis mine) offered a revolutionary reconception of moral theology under the form of a traditional moral manual.⁶ Häring insisted that the moral life must be seen as the practical expression of God’s grace, poured out in all the justified. Doctrinally this was not new, of course; but what was revolutionary about Häring’s approach was that he never let the reader forget it.

For Häring, the moral life could never be reduced to the observance of precepts, but led through its own inner dynamisms to a cultivation of the sense of God’s presence. Thus, for him the moral duties incumbent on all Christians are inseparable from the practice of some form of spirituality, which had been thought to be appropriate only for a few. In order to express the interconnectedness of moral action and spiritual disposition, Häring draws on the traditional view that the virtues, and more particularly the theological virtues, are the principles through which grace becomes active:

Not only must the Christian be really and objectively ennobled by grace, his faculties or powers must be elevated through grace so that his actions can be supernatural in form and worth. In fact Christian

morality is nothing less than the life flowing from supernatural grace. It is the life flowing from the dynamism of the divine Sonship and invested with its dignity.

... Sanctifying grace and the theological virtues are not simply parallel or companionate, standing alongside one another. They form an intimate and vital unity. Without these three divine virtues, sanctifying grace, which means life, would be incapable of its own vital activity.⁷

Häring offered an especially clear and forceful account of the interconnections among Christian virtues, the spiritual life of the Christian, and God's grace as the reality underlying both. But he was scarcely the only one in this period to emphasize these connections. Writing at about the same time, the Jesuit moral theologian Gérard Gilleman similarly attempted to revive Aquinas' account of charity as the root of the moral and spiritual life of the Christian.⁸ This same approach was also taken by theologians and spiritual writers who were not primarily moral theologians. Yves Congar drew on Aquinas' teaching on the virtues to develop his account of lay holiness, and Eugene Boylan likewise drew on Aquinas' teaching on the theological virtues in *This tremendous lover*, a devotional book much used by lay men and women at this time.⁹ Finally, Karl Rahner's work on the unity of love of God and love of neighbour served to reinforce the links between spirituality and the virtuous life, with God's grace as the reality underlying them both, and to place these interconnections into a theological framework which has been accepted by most Catholic theologians.¹⁰

Subsequently, interest in the virtues among Catholic moral theologians subsided as debates over the formulation and application of moral rules took centre stage. More recently, however, there has been a revival of interest in the virtues among Christian ethicists, Catholic and Protestant alike. The most important single figure in this revival has been the Protestant ethicist Stanley Hauerwas, who has been arguing since the 1970s that conceptions of virtue and character, rather than law, provide the most appropriate framework for reflection on Christian ethics.¹¹ In his view, the Church is characterized by ideals and practices quite different from those of the wider society, and Christian ethics should reflect these differences by focusing on the virtues which enable one to live a distinctively Christian way of life.

Although his early work was developed around an examination of Aristotle and Aquinas, Hauerwas' work since then has not continued in this direction.¹² Another strand of the most recent revival of virtue

ethics has focused more specifically on the recovery of Aquinas' moral thought. Those who work in this area are usually, although by no means always, Catholic scholars, and they tend to draw extensively on the literature generated by the revival of interest in Aristotle's virtue ethics among philosophers.

Within this latter strand of thought, two directions of inquiry have emerged. The first, which reflects the influence both of Hauerwas and of certain contemporary philosophers, emphasizes the differences between 'virtue ethics' and 'rule-based' or 'quandary ethics'. Those who follow this line argue that the moral life, at least within a Christian context, should be understood in terms of virtuous dispositions and prudential judgements, and not as a matter of strict observance of objective rules.¹³ Another strand places more weight on the interconnections between philosophical psychology and ethics in Aquinas' thought.¹⁴ For scholars who go in this direction, the virtues are important because they provide a place for emotions, perceptions and judgements in the moral life, without necessarily implying that objective norms are unnecessary or unimportant.

Finally, within the field of spirituality, a growing number of authors are beginning to explore the ways in which the moral and spiritual dimensions of the Christian life are intertwined.¹⁵ So far, these authors have not focused on the virtues *per se*, but there is every reason to expect that we will see more attention to this topic by theologians working in the area of spirituality.

Virtue ethics and spirituality: assessments and suggestions

In the second part of this paper, I would like to suggest four ways in which recent work on the virtues can contribute to, and in its turn draw on, the recent turn to spirituality among theologians. My suggestions will come in the form of four theses.

The tradition of the virtues is important because it serves to identify what is common to the Christian life, in contrast to the distinctive characteristics of particular spiritualities. It is significant that those theologians before the Second Vatican Council who emphasized the virtues included many of the same theologians who argued most forcefully for the dignity and holiness of the laity. In order to do so, they appealed, explicitly or not, to Aquinas' interpretation of the traditional schemas of the cardinal and theological virtues. This interpretation proved to be fruitful, in turn, because for Aquinas the virtues which are characteristic of Christianity as such are more fundamental and essential than the practices and qualities, or, as we

might say, the spiritualities, which characterize particular states of life within the Church.

Aquinas makes this point through his interpretation of the traditional schema of the theological and cardinal virtues. For him, the cardinal virtues as such are essential to moral rectitude for anyone, whether Christian or not (*Summa theologiae* I–II, 61.1). However, the distinctively Christian life is only possible through the theological virtues of faith, hope and, above all, charity, which are necessary to salvation and which are bestowed directly by God rather than being acquired by human effort (I–II, 62.1). Charity, in turn, brings with it transformed versions of the cardinal virtues (technically speaking, they are ‘infused’ together with charity), through which the individual brings the fundamental orientation of charity to bear on the day to day affairs which provide the matter for the cardinal virtues (I–II, 63.3).

As I understand it, the implication of Aquinas’ theory of virtue for spirituality is as follows. Any authentic Christian life will incorporate the theological and cardinal virtues. Since the practice of the virtues requires the cultivation of certain perceptions and sensibilities, as well as the performance of certain kinds of actions, the practice of charity and the other Christian virtues will involve the cultivation of an awareness of God’s love, and reflection on what it means to act in response to that love. Here is the basic link between the virtues and spirituality; for the Christian, the cultivation of the virtues will normally take the form of the practice of a spirituality.

At the same time, the forms which the Christian virtues take will vary in accordance with the circumstances and the vocation of the individual. Both the soldier and the mother of a family are often called on to show a charitable courage, but the particular actions which express that courage will most likely be quite different, even though in each case recognizably acts of courage. Thus, while the practice of the Christian virtues beyond a very rudimentary level requires the individual to practise a spirituality, there is no one spirituality associated with them; each Christian will normally adopt or invent a set of spiritual practices which are appropriate to his or her own situation, and for that matter, his or her own temperament.

For Häring and his contemporaries, the thought of Aquinas was mediated through the manuals of moral theology, which were traditionally modelled on the moral theology of Aquinas’ *Summa theologiae*. Thus, they could present themselves as reclaiming a neglected aspect of what was already a generally accepted tradition – which indeed they were. Contemporary theologians cannot appeal to this sort

of shared context but, on the other hand, neither do they have to argue against a presumption that some ways of life are practically inconsistent with true sanctity. For us, even more than for our immediate predecessors, the traditional schema of the theological and cardinal virtues offers a framework for exploring what is common to the Christian life, and for interpreting and relating together the more particular manifestations of that life.

Attention to the virtues calls attention to the importance of perceptions and emotions, both for spirituality and for the moral life. In my opinion, the sharp dichotomy that some would draw between virtues and moral rules is wrong-headed.¹⁶ Nonetheless, it is not necessary to deny the importance of rules and actions in order to acknowledge that other dimensions of morality are important as well: the emotions, the way in which one construes a situation, enduring tendencies to react in certain ways and, in short, all the intangible psychological factors which go to make up one's character.

I have already suggested that this aspect of virtue theory represents a point of contact with work on spirituality, because the latter also emphasizes the importance of cultivating certain ways of feeling, perceiving and viewing the world. Here I simply wish to call attention to the significance for the study of spirituality of recent work on the moral importance of one's emotions and perceptions, which has been one happy result of the recent revival in virtue ethics.¹⁷

So far, I have focused on aspects of virtue ethics which have already been well developed by our contemporaries. My next two suggestions draw on aspects of virtue ethics which have not been developed to the same degree by contemporary authors.

Accounts of Christian virtue provide a way to justify new and unfamiliar forms of spirituality, while at the same time setting parameters for what is acceptable within the spiritual life. This aspect of virtue ethics is especially apparent in the writings of Aquinas and his contemporaries who were involved in the mendicant movement, which was so different from monasticism and at the same time so scandalously successful. In the thirteenth century, this movement was frequently attacked as a dangerous innovation, even as a diabolical perversion of religious life.¹⁸

Today, it would appear to many of us that the mendicant movement has been richly vindicated, and so it is perhaps too easy for us to dismiss contemporary attacks on it. Yet these attacks raised a question which must be raised at some point about every distinctive form of spirituality. What are the criteria by which to distinguish legitimate and

healthy forms of the spiritual life from those which distort the message of the gospel or are in some other way destructive or unhealthy?

For Aquinas, the theology of virtue offers a straightforward way to respond to the charge that mendicants are practising a dangerous and unjustifiable innovation in their way of life. In the *Contra impugnantes*, he begins by relating the vowed religious life to the primary sense of religion, that is, the way of life proper to all Christians. He then goes on to explain that the way of life of the vowed religious is distinguished by the fact that he or she is publicly committed to performing some particular work of charity; thus, he argues, any of the works of mercy can be the object of organized religious life, even if that form of life has not previously existed within the Church (*Contra impugnantes* I, Cap 1.7,8).¹⁹

At the same time, Aquinas also appeals to the framework of the virtues to provide criteria by which to distinguish legitimate and healthy from distorted and unhealthy forms of spirituality. Since the life of Christian virtue is essentially the life of charity, that is to say, a life of love for God and neighbour, then any form of spirituality which involves hostility or contempt towards other persons, or to God and the good creation which God has given us, is ruled out as a valid Christian spirituality. Applying this principle, Aquinas rejects the spirituality of the Albigensians, who denied the licitness of marriage (*Summa contra gentiles* III.II, 126). Moreover, charity includes not only love of God and neighbour, but love of oneself and even of one's body. Thus, while Aquinas supports the ancient Christian practice of fasting, he adds that if it is carried to the point of actual harm, it ceases to be life-giving and becomes vicious (*ST* II-II, 137.1 *ad* 2).

Distinctive spiritual practices offer exemplary ideals which deepen our understanding of the life of Christian virtue. So far, it might seem that the relationship between virtue ethics and spirituality is one-sided. Virtue ethics offers a way of relating specific spiritualities to those practices and qualities which are integral to the Christian life as such, and correlatively, it provides both justifications and criteria for those spiritualities. But what can a reflection on particular spiritualities bring to virtue ethics?

Distinctive spiritualities are important to the practice and theory of Christian virtue, because they serve to provide examples of what it means to practise the Christian virtues in distinctive or exemplary ways. As such, they expand our intellectual and imaginative sense of what it means to live the Christian life. For this reason, they provide models which may suggest new ways of following Christ in one's own life, even if they are not imitated exactly.

For example: the spirituality which expressed itself in martyrdom in the earliest days of the Church, and which was fostered through the cult of the martyrs, offered a new paradigm for courage in the image of the man or woman who accepted death for the sake of Christ. As Christians moved from being a persecuted minority to enjoying a position of privilege after the conversion of Constantine, the example of the martyrs inspired a new form of Christian life, and with it, a new conception of courage, namely, the practice of asceticism, with its attendant ideal of courageously struggling with one's own sinful desires. In our own day, the example of the martyrs has once again inspired a new image of courage, in the form of conscientious objectors who willingly accept imprisonment or death, rather than fight in an unjust cause.

Each generation must discover anew what it means to be a follower of Christ. From one perspective, this means discovering a new way of living out the Christian virtues; from another, it calls for a renewal of the spiritual life. Virtue ethics and theological reflections on spirituality can both contribute to this process of discovery in our own day.²⁰

NOTES

¹ J. Matthew Ashley, 'The turn to spirituality: the relationship between theology and spirituality', *Christian Spirituality Bulletin* (Fall 1995), pp 13–18, esp pp 13–14.

² Alasdair MacIntyre, *After virtue*, second edition (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), pp 180–225.

³ Mark O'Keefe OSB, *Becoming good, becoming holy: on the relationship of Christian ethics and spirituality* (Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1995), p 9.

⁴ I am grateful to Matthew Ashley for pressing me on this point and helping me to clarify my thinking on it.

⁵ This call for renewal is found within the *Decree on priestly formation*, issued on 28 October 1965, published in *The documents of Vatican II*, Walter M. Abbott SJ, general editor (New York: Guild Press, 1966), pp 437–457.

⁶ Bernhard Häring CSSR, *Das Gesets Christi* (Frieburg im Breisgau, Germany: Erichewel Verlag, 1959); subsequently published in English as *The law of Christ: moral theology for priests and laity*, two volumes, trans Edwin G. Kaiser CPPS (Westminster, Maryland: Newman Press, 1961–1965). Subsequent citations are taken from the 1965 edition.

⁷ *The law of Christ* vol 2, p 3.

⁸ Gérard Gilleman SJ, *Le primat de la charité en théologie morale: essai méthodologique* (Louvain: E. Nauwelaerts, 1952); the second edition was subsequently translated into English as *The primacy of charity in moral theology*, trans William F. Ryan SJ and Andre Vachon SJ (Westminster, Maryland: Newman Press, 1959).

⁹ Yves M. J. Congar OP, *Lay people in the Church: a study for a theology of the laity*, trans Donald Attwater (Westminster, Maryland: Newman Press, 1957), pp 380–427; M. Eugene Boylan O Cist R, *This tremendous lover* (Westminster, Maryland: Newman Press, 1966), pp 59–73.

¹⁰ This theme runs throughout Rahner's writings; for a clear and very influential statement of his views, see his 'Reflections of the unity of the love of neighbor and the love of God', published as pp 231–252 in *Theological investigations* volume 6 (New York: Crossroad Press, 1969).

¹¹ Hauerwas' writings are very extensive. In my view, his most complete statement and defence of his understanding of virtue and its relation to the Christian life remain two books which come near the midpoint of his work so far, namely, *A community of character: toward a constructive Christian social ethic* (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), and *The peaceable kingdom: a primer in Christian ethics* (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983).

¹² See in particular *Character and the Christian life: a study in theological ethics* (San Antonio, Texas: Trinity University Press, 1975).

¹³ The most influential of these is Daniel Mark Nelson, *The priority of prudence: virtue and natural law in Thomas Aquinas and the implications for modern ethics* (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992). James Keenan SJ takes a similar line, although with some qualifications; see his *Goodness and rightness in Thomas Aquinas's Summa Theologiae* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 1992), and 'Virtue ethics: making a case as it comes of age', *Thought* 67 (1992), pp 115–127.

¹⁴ These include Diana Fritz Cates, *Choosing to feel: virtue, friendship, and compassion for friends* (Notre Dame IN: Notre Dame Press, 1996); Romanus Cessario OP, *The moral virtues and theological ethics* (Notre Dame IN: Notre Dame Press, 1991); Stephen J. Pope, *The evolution of altruism and the ordering of love* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 1994); Jean Porter, *The recovery of virtue: the relevance of Aquinas for Christian ethics* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990); and Lee H. Yearley, *Mencius and Aquinas: theories of virtue and conceptions of courage* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1990).

¹⁵ In addition to O'Keefe, cited above (note 1), see the essays collected in Dennis J. Billy CSSR and Donna Lynn Orsuto (eds), *Spirituality and morality: integrating prayer and action* (Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1996), for recent examples.

¹⁶ I have argued this in more detail in *Moral action and Christian ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp 125–166.

¹⁷ See the references in note 13 above for examples of this work; Cates' book is especially valuable in this respect. Philosophical virtue ethics likewise offers much insight into the moral importance of the emotions; for a good example, see Martha C. Nussbaum, *The therapy of desire: theory and practice of Hellenistic ethics* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994).

¹⁸ On the controversy over the mendicants, see C. W. Lawrence, *The friars: the impact of the early mendicant movement on western society* (London: Longman, 1994), pp 152–165, and Jean-Pierre Torrell OP, *Initiation à Saint Thomas d'Aquin: sa personne et son oeuvre* (Paris: Cerf, 1993), pp 109–139.

¹⁹ I owe this point to Torrell, *Initiation à Saint Thomas d'Aquin*, p 121.

²⁰ I wish to thank Matthew Ashley, Joseph Blenkinsopp and Larry Cunningham for their perceptive and helpful comments on an earlier draft of this article.