

# THE MORAL JOURNEY

By VINCENT MACNAMARA

THE NATURE OF THE RELATIONSHIP between spirituality and moral life is elusive and I take it that it is my job to offer some introductory exploration of the area. The problem is an old one. It is no accident that the liberation movements sought to retrieve the great prophetic tradition that faith is performative, that mere cult is not enough, and that engagement for justice is the logic of faith.

My perspective is that of the moral theologian. My concern is to consider what moral theology has to say to spirituality or how moral life might be seen within the spiritual journey. We live our moral lives within a religion. That makes for complication. A religious ethic presents us with two great symbol systems, two languages, the language of ethics (right, wrong, good, bad, virtue, obligation) and the language of religious myth (God, salvation, grace, justification, sin, redemption). If spirituality calls for awareness about the springs and purposes of our actions it must be important for us to have a sense of these different strands of our experience and their interdependencies. How we hold the elements together has implications that go deep into our psyche. We are here on what has been called the theological frontier of ethics. It has significant questions for spirituality. They are questions not only about our perception of morality, of human nature (anthropology) and human development but, more radically, questions about God. The Bishop of Woolwich opined in the sixties that one cannot change one's notion of God without changing one's notion of morality – so inextricably are they linked. It is a fair point.

I take Christian spirituality straightforwardly as being about the living of Christian life – 'one's entire life as understood, felt, imagined, and decided upon in relationship to God, in Christ Jesus, empowered by the Spirit'<sup>1</sup> – recognizing that within the tradition there are different paths, demands and responses. If that is a fair statement of what spirituality is about, moral life is obviously part of it; the general title of this *Supplement*, I presume, does not set them in opposition. But what part? In the past some have reduced spirituality to morality or have thought that the point about being a Christian was having a distinctive morality. But Christianity is more than a moral system. On the other hand, in relatively recent times, liberation movements have found it

read more at [www.theway.org.uk](http://www.theway.org.uk)

necessary to argue for moral commitment, inveighing against a spirituality that might be a mere ideology.

It is salutary, from time to time, to take soundings of the kind of morality with which we operate. (We may well find that we have several different versions.) I propose that it is essential to have some sense of what I can only rather helplessly call the autonomy of morality – even within Christianity. By that I mean that we are to understand morality as a demand of the human spirit, as one of its most critical and characteristic demands. We experience ourselves as moral beings. We know that life makes a claim on us. There is a thrust of goodness in us that seeks expression. That is an elementary datum of the human tradition. It is important to believe in it and make friends with it. To acknowledge it is primordially what it means to be spiritual. To deny it is to deny one's humanness.

Growing spiritually, then, will mean, among other things, growing in sensitivity to this moral strand of our experience. It will mean acknowledging its origin, becoming attuned to its implications, educating our desires in line with it. I am saying something in the first instance, then, about the interiority of the demand. Becoming moral is a long, delicate and difficult journey inward. It fans out into the great demands of action – the tough, gutsy virtues of respect, justice, equality, fairness. But it begins here in that spiritual space where we take responsibility for ourselves, for others and for the world we share. To listen to this God-given thrust within us, to *want* to be moral, is a fundamental conversion. It is not to be taken for granted.

I have called that the autonomy of morality. It is in several respects an inadequate expression. But it seeks to make the point that morality does not arise merely because one is religious. It is constitutive of the human person, experienced by and shared with those who do not subscribe to any religion – and to be respected as such. Not to be alive to the moral call is to have an undeveloped heart. It is the primary failure. It is to be humanly lacking. So, a view of morality that sees it primarily as a code imposed by a Creator-God under threat of punishment or with enticement of reward does not pay homage to the interior nature of the demand. It leads to an alienation. It inhibits the spiritual moment.

Wanting to be moral is a first step. A second is discovering the true expression of it. It matters greatly how we go about interpreting the call, what picture we have of moral life, how we weigh values. Here too we must take responsibility. Our moral lives are about the choices we have to make in the chiaroscuro of our individual situations, which

cannot be adequately mapped for us in rules or codes. But we do live in a tradition and it offers us guidance, if only general guidance – attitudes, virtues, perspectives that colour choice. Morality is not independent of one's metaphysical or theological or anti-theological view of the world; that is why talk of autonomy is inadequate. We do not do our morality in a vacuum but deeply embedded in a world-view that affects how we read the landscape. It is not as if we were first created moral and subsequently became religious. There is a fine intermeshing of moral and religious sensibilities and one cannot understand the ethical view of a particular religion without engaging its web of beliefs, its cosmogony of how things are in the world and how they came to be that way.

Christians have such a web of beliefs, a mental universe that shapes their imagination and affects how they interpret their moral call. It tells of the fidelity of God, of the goodness and purposiveness of creation, of incarnation and redemption, of the preciousness of the individual, of final destiny, of the humanizing reign of God, of true success and failure, of dying and rising, of the obstinacy of sin, of hope in a final condition that will transform earthly efforts. Such faith gives a vision that bears on moral awareness. The Christian community then has its own character, shaped by its own stories, rituals and symbols. They issued for the earliest Christian communities in a variety of sayings, parables and admonitions about the Christian way – about trust in Abba, about confidence in the Risen One, about the one thing necessary, about living in joy, trust and hope, about losing and finding one's life, taking no thought for tomorrow, seeking not one's own rights but those of others, being forgiven and forgiving, rejoicing in mourning and persecution.

It is into that vision that we are born or baptized. It gives an overarching context and significance to the whole moral enterprise. Moral life becomes a Christian spirituality; it is the place where we respond to God. The vision offers us also powerful motivation to encourage and enable us – what some have called the indicative–imperative dynamic of biblical ethics. And it presents us with a Person who is an inspiration and model, for all time the incarnation of the complete ethico-spiritual response. Whether, with regard to content, the morality which issues from it can be called distinctive or specific does not concern me here.<sup>2</sup> Certainly the great granite qualities – justice, truth, respect, fairness – what for want of a better word we might call the human virtues, are foundational to it. If they are not given their grounding place there is no credibility to Christian spirituality; there is no point in straining a gnat and swallowing a camel.

My main point, however, is that the Christian is to be true to his or her total story, to engage it within the world-view of the Christian community and to allow it to bear on moral discernment. It confronts us most strikingly in our liturgy – in the retelling of the story that gives us our identity, in the communal memory of the One whose life is for us the fulcrum of all history. That summons us back from the fantasies and daydreams which we inhabit; it calls us to attention and conversion. I am being deliberately general here. Moral growth is a form of education of ourselves and our desires. The moral journey is individual, historical and unrepeated. We have different circumstances, possibilities and potentialities. The spiritual tradition bears witness to an astonishing richness of nuance in the Christian way – lives of passionate engagement in the world, of unselfish care, of solidarity with the marginalized, of simplicity, poverty, celibacy, contemplation, forgiveness – all suffused by Christian hope. We can only hope to grow in a responsibility shaped by the faith-story, to develop a character that will be for us a creative guide to the art of Christian living.

There is a core to this. Christian moral life is not a laundry-list of disparate demands. It is, as the New Testament tells us, centrally a perception of and a feeling for the sacredness of others and of ourselves. It calls for a sensitivity to what that requires in the intricate patterns of our lives. Happily, some developments in recent moral theology have conspired to re-educate our perceptions and liberate us from the stiff-necked code which dominated morality in neo-Scholastic times. One thinks of the humanizing force of personalist philosophy, the (as yet unfinished) movement to make love/respect the central hermeneutic norm of moral judgement, the distinctiveness of feminist moral awareness, the acknowledgement of the historical and unique character of the individual, the realization of our embeddedness in unjust structures and of our responsibility for the environment in which we live and in which others are yet to live. This has made for a relativizing of ethical priorities, for a morality that is not an unthinking obedience to rules but that is alive with respect for the person. It has freed people to be creative and imaginative. It has encouraged a response that recognizes that behaviour is wrong because it is unloving and that it is the depth and extent of such lack of love that is the measure of failure.

It is a task – and not just an intellectual task – to discover and acknowledge in our hearts the truth for our individual lives. Moral truth is difficult to allow in because it commits us and we may not be able to bear the reality. We are entangled in many biases that distort judgement

– the biases of nation, tribe, group, gender, profession, personal taste. We are more easily beguiled by the sirens of our surface desires than by the gentle call within us to truth and goodness. We are invested emotionally in what feeds our ego and will deny the claims of whatever threatens it. And who could blame us? The tortuous and many-layered process of evolution with its various forms of life leaves us with inner tension: ‘We are not just rather like animals,’ Mary Midgley begins one of her books, ‘we *are* animals.’<sup>3</sup> The journey from dependence to independence, from embeddedness to separation, creates a dissonance that we never quite harmonize. We are ever faced with new terrain, different stages of physical, emotional and intellectual growth – or decline – each with its own energies and needs. The instincts that are the necessary dynamic of our activity easily betray us. We may come trailing clouds of glory but we come with a lot of other baggage besides.

We each have our own personal shape to this, our own history that has made us who we are. Much of it is not of our own making but is prepersonal, laid down before we had any say in the matter, but still confusing us and still to be reckoned with. It is not easy to be a human being. We come with wounds; they are the inheritance of our tribe. We cannot escape them. We need a gentleness with ourselves; we need to be able to forgive ourselves as much as to forgive others. We are in need of a healing redemption. That is how God has chosen to make us and it is unrealistic and potentially damaging not to take full account of it.

It is just here that the drama of our lives is played out. Moral life is not about obeying a far-off code given by God but about following the silver thread of truth and goodness as we struggle – and it is a necessary struggle – to survive and survive with esteem. It is an untidy business. Karlfried Graf Durckheim spoke of the three great distresses that seduce us into desperate defence of the creaky citadel of our ego – the fear of destruction, anguish before death and annihilation; despair before the meaninglessness of life; and the utter sadness of isolation.<sup>4</sup> One way or another, the human condition skews our relationship with others. ‘It is not possible for us’, Marcel said, ‘to escape completely here below from the preconceived idea which makes each one tend to establish him- or herself as the centre around which all the rest have no other function but to gravitate.’<sup>5</sup> As Iris Murdoch put it, the enemy in the moral life is the fat, relentless ego.<sup>6</sup>

That might be depressing were it not that it is very much the Catholic belief that there are shafts of light within us, that we are a spark of the

divine, that the light of God's countenance has shone upon us, that the Spirit has been given to us, that the love of God poured into our hearts seeks expression. We need to have faith in that; it is important for our psychic health and for our spirituality. As our natural law tradition insists, being moral is not importing something from without. However clouded our communal and individual provenance, goodness too is within us. Conscience, in Mary Midgley's apt phrase, is not a colonial governor imposing alien norms but our nature itself becoming aware of its own underlying pattern.<sup>7</sup> It is our deepest self seeking to organize us in a way that makes for our peace and flourishing. The Christian thinks of it as allowing the life and love of God to appear in us and to be abroad in the world.

To befriend our shadow and yet be open to our deepest flourishing is the task. One does not need to be a Christian to know that the paradoxes of the Sermon on the Mount have their truth. A psychologist can write that the personality as a whole demands that the ego as a part make sacrifices, that the demands of our moral sense are the limitations and imperatives placed by the wholeness of the Self upon the ego.<sup>8</sup> Some modern philosophy, in the same vein, has sought to expose the shallow cult of self-fulfilment which masquerades under the good name of 'authenticity'. Authentic living, some would lure us into believing, means doing one's own thing. But Charles Taylor makes the point that to shut out demands emanating from beyond the self is not the way of flourishing; it is only if I exist in a world in which history, or the demands of nature, or the needs of my fellow human beings, or the duties of citizenship, or the call of God or something else of this order *matters* crucially, that I can define an identity for myself that is not trivial.<sup>9</sup> We need, Murdoch says, to return from the self-centred concept of sincerity to the other-centred concept of truth.<sup>10</sup> If we were wise enough and could only educate our desires we might find that living the truth is doing what we most want to do. The Sermon on the Mount gives that a powerful validation and the One whose mind it expresses gives us hope that it can be the way of blessedness.

It is not easy. To be disposed to receive wisdom, to have the kind of affections that make a welcoming home for it, is a conversion. There is a self-transcendence, a spirituality, involved in being open to seeing the truth and an unfreedom in not wanting to emerge from our prejudices. There is a further self-transcendence in being open to doing it and an unfreedom in resting in our familiar patterns. Many different traditions bear witness to the difficulty and encourage us with attitudes and spiritual practices which they variously call attention, self-presence,

meditation, non-attachment, *apatheia*, the silence of the heart. To create a meditative space or style is already an act of conversion. It is a statement of willingness to find some distance from the daily proving, promoting, sustaining, defending of ourselves that we pursue, insect-like, with passionate folly. It is a willingness to allow the mud to settle, to look at ourselves in the mirror of silence, to allow our truth to emerge, to engage the spiritual moment. That, of course, has disturbing implications, which is why we find it hardest when we need it most.

So opaque are we to ourselves that we may need a hermeneutic of suspicion even about our best efforts. We might heed warnings about projection. Our best efforts for justice and peace, for example, may be an attempt to place the enemy conveniently out there, to feel our own righteousness, to deny the evil within us. One who is aware of this 'is now unable to say that *they* do this or that *they* are wrong, and *they* must be fought against . . . such a man knows that whatever is wrong in the world is in himself'.<sup>11</sup> We need the wisdom of humility. We cannot stop working for justice and peace. That cannot wait. But it is the spiritual way and significant for the reign of God that we be just and peaceful persons, that our hearts be converted. Even striving for perfection may be a covert form of ego-striving that is not far along the spiritual road. There are those who will tell you that the higher the object we seek to grasp the more are we in danger of being enmeshed in self-righteous desires. We are not free then. We are not in spiritual space. The moral journey, I said, is a long journey inward and not many travellers make the upper reaches. But we cannot cease from exploration.

There may be much to learn from traditions that stress waiting rather than striving. They recognize that goodness and love are graces. We can only try to be open to receive such gifts, to dispose ourselves by attention and detachment, to look to the dissolving of the knots of anxiety, hurt and insecurity that prevent the free flow of our spirit. One has the sense that those who are blessed with such graces do not strive morally; morality seems to flow from them and they flow with it. We know them when we see them and they are for us intimations of mystery. They have a centre beyond the personal seeking and striving that infect even our most worthy plans and projects. They appear as channels of divine energy; 'the *fruits* of the Spirit are love, joy, peace, patience . . .' (Gal 5:22).

We will need to supplement prayer with other strategies, to canvass the wider grace. Psychotherapy, it has been said, is a very basic form of moral education.<sup>12</sup> It too confronts us and allows our fantasies to

emerge for what they are. It is particularly relevant because moral decision is not only a rational but an affective process, and our emotions – and even the configuration of our bodies – are a far more valid clue to where we stand and what we hold dear and what we will not let go than any well-articulated thoughts. Emotions can accompany and enrich our moral understanding. Think of the importance of the experience of anger to the work of justice. But they also overwhelm and disorganize our cognitive evaluations. They affect our freedom to see. The psychotherapeutic process, on the other hand, invites attention. Whatever else may be said about the danger of psychologizing spirituality, the kind of work that encourages awareness, that allows us to see how emotional attachments block moral insight and that suggests some way forward, is an ally of our ethico-spiritual life and an enabler of it.

The Christian holds all such spiritual movement in a total context. The moral enterprise becomes more than morality; it is situated within and is the expression of religious response – and so, once again, the inadequacy of the notion of autonomy. The self-transcendence involved in knowing the truth and pursuing the good is part of the dynamic towards what is our final meaning, and it beckons us there. For the Christian, the spiritual quest arrives at a sharing in the faith of Jesus Christ which is that the source, ultimate meaning and final destiny of all existence is the one whom he called 'Abba'. One who has found that has found life.

The Christian is to live moral life in the explicit light of this faith. For faith, everything, and not least moral life, is linked to God. God is known as the answer to the question that we (spirit in the world) are. God is our ultimacy. God is the source of our lives with their inner thrusts towards truth and love. It is in God's image that we are made and to God's likeness that we are to be conformed. The inner urgency to respond to the other is a reflection of God's covenant with each and of God's humanizing and liberating purposes for the world. Our goodness is divine energy in the world. God is the truth we seek when we seek to respond morally, the good we want.

But we need to tread warily, because here – how we construe the relationship between moral life and God – is one of the great fault-lines of Christian spirituality. It is the theological frontier we mentioned already and it is territory in which the Christian psyche has suffered scarring. So much depends on how we relate the great themes. The law-merit-judgement-reward model of Christian morality has had a withering effect on spirituality. It has given us a God more ready to

condemn our crimes than one ready to bind up our wounds. There is a kindlier view of our human and religious history that sees sin as sickness rather than as crime, as weakness rather than as wilfulness, and that sees God as healer rather than as judge.

The basic kerygma is that God has first loved us and that being in love with God, as Lonergan puts it, is the ultimate self-transcendence.<sup>13</sup> The experience of such love, St John tells us, is healing and transformative; it is to open us to the love of others. And John's further message is that it is only by loving others that we do respond to God's love. It is hard to take that quite seriously, to see it not just as a pretty piece of decoration with which to adorn a homily but as a profound philosophical truth about what it means to be spirit in the world. It means that we love God only through our moral becoming. That brings us back to a concern for genuine morality. It is not that we have been commanded to love the neighbour and do so out of love of God. It is not that the love of God is the motive for love of neighbour. There is an even more radical unity between the two. The explicit, genuine, love of neighbour *is* the primary act of the love of God.<sup>14</sup>

In all this we must respect the dynamics of personal choice. What I have been saying right through this article is that moral response is not just about doing things. It is a spiritual activity. It requires that we genuinely appropriate the moral as a primary dimension of human experience, that we become open enough to find the moral truth and free enough to do it humanly from within. It is not only a matter of what we do but how and why and with what freedom – a matter of its spiritual character. The more free we are the more humanly valuable our response to the other and the more significant that response as love of God. So the religious and moral strands of our lives achieve a spiritual synthesis.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Joann Wolski Conn, 'Spirituality' in Komonchak, Collins and Lane (eds), *The new dictionary of theology* (Dublin, 1987), p 972.

<sup>2</sup> Cf Vincent MacNamara, *Faith and ethics* (Dublin, 1985), *passim*.

<sup>3</sup> Mary Midgley, *Beast and man: the roots of human nature* (London, 1980), Introduction.

<sup>4</sup> Cf Alphonse Goettmann, *Dialogue on the path of initiation: an introduction to the life and thought of Karlfried Graf Durckheim* (New York, 1991), p 67.

<sup>5</sup> Gabriel Marcel, *Homo viator* (New York, 1962), p 19.

<sup>6</sup> Cf Iris Murdoch, *The sovereignty of good* (London, 1970), p 52.

<sup>7</sup> Cf Mary Midgley, *op. cit.*, p 274.

<sup>8</sup> Cf James Hillman, *Insearch: psychology and religion* (Dallas, 1987), p 86.

<sup>9</sup> Cf Charles Taylor, *The ethics of authenticity* (Cambridge Mass, 1991), p 40.

<sup>10</sup> Cf Iris Murdoch, 'Against dryness: a polemical sketch', *Encounter* 16 (1961), p 20.

<sup>11</sup> Carl Gustav Jung, *Selected writings*, selected and introduced by Anthony Storr (London, 1983), p 243.

<sup>12</sup> Cf Beverly Wildung Harrison, 'The power of anger in the work of love' in Ann Loades (ed), *Feminist theology: a reader* (London 1990), p 205.

<sup>13</sup> Cf Bernard Lonergan, *A third collection: papers of Bernard Lonergan*, edited by Frederick Crowe (London, 1969), pp 129ff.

<sup>14</sup> Cf Karl Rahner, *Theological investigations* vol 6, trans. Karl H. and Boniface Kruger (London, 1969), p 247.