

JOHN MAHONEY

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THE MAKING OF  
MORAL THEOLOGY

A Study of the Roman Catholic Tradition

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# THE MAKING OF MORAL THEOLOGY

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## INTRODUCTION

This study was born of a happy conjunction, for the author, of a sabbatical year from Heythrop College, University of London, after serving for a period as Principal, and an invitation to deliver the Martin D'Arcy Memorial Lectures in Campion Hall, University of Oxford, in the Spring of 1982; and the author is grateful to the Governors of Heythrop College and to the then Master of Campion Hall, Father Paul Edwards of the Society of Jesus, for the possibility and the honour of contributing to the memory of a former distinguished Jesuit Master of the Hall.

The theme for the annual D'Arcy Lectures is chosen by the member of the Society of Jesus invited into the lectureship, and the writer welcomed the opportunity to devote them to exploring the history of his subject of moral theology, which has exercised a continuous, formative, and even at times dominant, influence on the development of the Roman Catholic Church's thinking and behaviour through the centuries, and which has been undergoing little short of an upheaval in the aftermath of the Second Vatican Council and the conciliar criticism of the discipline. An initial attractive project to focus attention upon 'makers of moral theology', such as Augustine and Aquinas, was soon abandoned as incurring the dangers of inflating the importance of some lesser, if still significant, personalities, such as Abelard and Pope Pius XII, and, more importantly, of not according sufficient attention to the other major influences—the intellectual movements and currents of thought and practice in the Church, the universities and the papacy, Church Councils, and other events, which have all contributed to and conspired to form what the author finally decided to term 'The Making of Moral Theology'.

Rather than proceed, however, in the manner of a history, on a broad chronological front from New Testament times to the present in describing events in moral theology in an even-handed way without attention to what hindsight had identified as the highways, as distinct from byways, in moral theology, it seemed more fruitful to approach the subject in a more thematic manner

and to select for historical description followed by reflection and comment what emerged upon consideration as the eight most significant aspects in the history of moral theology. These formed the topics of the original lecture series and now constitute the eight chapters of the current work. Such a final structure, and the order in which the topics have been arranged and presented, result, it is hoped, in a cumulative treatment of the subject which at the same time conveys its historical progression, development and fortunes.

The interest evoked by the D'Arcy Lectures on the Making of Moral Theology as so presented, and the absence of any sustained study of the subject hitherto, led the author to conclude that publishing the lectures in their original inevitably brief form might prove more tantalizing or cursory than informative to a wider public, and he has given such time as has been available since resuming teaching moral and pastoral theology at Heythrop College to expanding their contents considerably in the hope that their published form will be of interest to a general readership as well as to students of moral, theological, ecclesiastical, ecumenical, and historical matters. To this end also the abundant citation in the notes of primary theological and historical authorities is intended to provide something of a source-book, as well as to substantiate positions and conclusions, sometimes perhaps controversial, adopted by the author.

The technical term *theologia moralis*, referring to a distinctive science systematically separate from other branches of theology, has been in general use only since the end of the sixteenth century and the Thomist renaissance which followed the Council of Trent, but, of course, formal consideration of Christian moral behaviour is as old as the New Testament records of the moral teachings of Jesus and of Paul as they applied to the early Christian community. Nevertheless, the subject of moral theology as the study of Christian moral behaviour received its definitive orientation for centuries to come from the sixth-century popular development of the monastic practice of regular private confession of personal sins. This traditional preoccupation with sin makes it inevitable that our opening chapter should trace and reflect upon the influence upon Catholic life, and upon moral theology and its developing literature, of auricular Confession as it has developed through the Middle Ages and the Reformation to the present day. No less influential in its own way upon the growth of moral reflection in

the Western Church has been the legacy bequeathed to it by its greatest early bishop-theologian, Augustine of Hippo, which provides the subject of our second chapter and which, particularly in its consideration of man's moral capabilities and of sexual morality, has perpetuated for centuries a mood of pessimism which moral theology is only beginning to shake off in this latter half of the twentieth century.

It was the Neoplatonist Augustine, also, in his impassioned despair of man's resources and his appeal to divine grace, who pointed the way towards what would become the theology of the supernatural; while it was the Church's greatest theologian, the thirteenth-century friar, Thomas Aquinas, who daringly incorporated into Christian thinking a rediscovered Aristotelianism, thus laying the foundations of a Christian metaphysics of nature and of natural law which would endure to the present. The competing claims for nature and supernature (Chapter Three) were to erupt in the politico-religious controversy we know as Jansenism, which rocked the Church and made a battlefield of moral theology in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and found the beginnings of a resolution only in recent times under the influence of existentialist thought.

The question of authority—and of the function of Christian teaching authority in the field of moral behaviour—which was so central to the Jansenist controversy forms the subject of our fourth chapter, which traces the history of *magisterium* in the Church, both as the exercise of teaching authority on the part of the University *magistri* (or Masters in Theology) and their successors, and as the teaching authority in 'matters of faith and morals' on the part of the Church's hierarchy and the papacy. In the former case, the history of Probabilism as a means of coping with moral dilemmas is considered, along with the hostility which it evoked from the Jansenists (including Pascal) and the condemnations of its wilder excesses of permissiveness which it provoked from the universities and the papacy. In the case of the hierarchical, and especially the papal, *magisterium*, our study of the now hallowed phrase 'faith and morals', as it first appears in a major Church document in the Council of Trent, leads to the conclusion that the term 'morals' (*mores*) referred on that occasion not to matters of ordinary Christian morality but to the traditional religious and devotional practices which were under sustained theological and

historical attack from Martin Luther and his supporters in their bid to reform the Church. The decline in the authority of post-Tridentine moral theologians on account of Probabilism and Jansenism, the Jansenist and Gallican attacks on Roman authority, and the further encroachment on it by the French Revolution and its secularization of many universities, all contributed to an increased centralization in a diminishing Church and to a concentration upon the teaching authority of the papacy which found its culmination in the declaration of papal infallibility by the Vatican Council of 1870. And from our study of the Council's proceedings and its aftermath we advance the conclusion that the definition of papal infallibility in morals was hurried and ambiguous. That papal prerogative has never manifestly been exercised, but the subsequent expansion of 'infallibility by association' in a number of increasingly detailed papal pronouncements on moral matters has almost totally eclipsed all other moral thought and initiative in the Church and gives rise to the reflections on authority in moral matters which close the fourth chapter.

The question of individual moral responsibility, to which Probabilism had attempted to do justice with inadequate resources, is made the more acute as a central teaching authority develops and expands. Accordingly, our fifth chapter, on 'subjectivity', proceeds to the topics of conscience and of the traditional distinction between 'objective' morality and 'subjective' morality. From Abelard to Aquinas to the fourteenth-century nominalist school of thought, the varying fortunes of the individual's role and intention and his relationship to the will of God are considered, along with the growing significance attached to 'invincible ignorance' as an excusing factor from the imputing of moral responsibility and ultimately, in the Christian dispensation, from eternal damnation. The Church's changing attitude to unbelievers, however, and the steady dilution of its strong principle of 'no salvation outside the Church', provide important evidence of a growing awareness of the inadequacy of benighted ignorance to explain away moral behaviour which is not in accord with the Church's teaching. This more positive recognition of unique and variable features of objective reality in individual cases enables us to analyse and assess the intimidating strictures of Pope Pius XII on 'situation ethics'. And it finds confirmation in the *volte-face* of the Roman Catholic Church on ecumenism and in its positive evaluation of other, formerly



'heretical', Churches in only the past thirty or so years—a culmination of its moral as well as its dogmatic teaching which prompts concluding reflections on the interplay between objectivity and subjectivity in the moral life.

A significant factor in the maturing of moral theology through the centuries has been the durability of certain terms and concepts, such as 'nature', '*magisterium*', 'unbeliever', and 'conscience'. And much of the renewal which has recently been taking place in theology, including moral theology, can be viewed as a slow cracking of traditional conceptual moulds and categories. No category, however, has proved so fundamental or so immune to questioning in the making of moral theology as the concepts and terminology of law in which moral obligations have invariably been expressed. And our sixth chapter examines the origins and deployment of the language of law as a striking instance of the power of concepts and ideas in moral theology. What it further discloses is the historical predilection of moral theologians for the Platonist and voluntarist approach to law which underlay and further vitiated the whole fundamentally legal controversy over Probabilism despite the strong espousal by St Thomas of an Aristotelian and rational understanding of the function of law. This went some way to mitigating the weaknesses of such analogical language when applied to God's moral expectations of man, but it was itself severely strained by Aquinas's eventually identifying the central element of the 'New Law' of the Gospel as the presence of God's Spirit in the hearts of individual believers. Basically, however, a predominantly legal approach to morality is seen to proceed from, and to reinforce, an impoverished conception of the Christian God, particularly when its analogical character is systematically ignored, and our final chapter pursues more generally the modern implications for moral theology of this line of reflection.

No historical study of the making of moral theology could ignore, however, the major papal intervention of the present century on a moral issue, and our penultimate chapter concentrates upon the encyclical *Humanae Vitae* of Pope Paul VI. The purpose of the chapter is not to study yet again the vexed question of contraception, but to identify and reflect upon what we have termed 'the impact of *Humanae Vitae*' upon the Church and upon twentieth-century moral theology in the reactions it occasioned as

the first major testing of the Church and of moral theology after the Second Vatican Council. Those reactions were to raise for urgent and continuing consideration profound questions about the *locus* of moral teaching authority in the Church and in the 'college of bishops' as well as in the Bishop of Rome at their head. They also probed the functions of reasoning and argumentation in moral theology and their relationship to moral insight; the *sensus fidei* and the exercise of prophecy in the Christian community; the role of conscience and the gift, and gifts, of the Spirit to the whole People of God; and the function and future of moral theology; as well as the Church's perception of its own identity as a reflecting community.

The reverberations of *Humanae Vitae* remain a feature of contemporary moral theology in the Roman Catholic Church, but much else falls to be considered in our final chapter, which takes the form, not of a conclusion to our historical study, but of a perspective on the present scene and of a proposal for the future. No decades in the history of moral theology have been so productive of literature on the subject as the past two, not even the decades of high casuistry. Nor have any decades witnessed to such an extent, in the five centuries since the formal identification of moral theology as a theological science, the lack of an agreed systematization and the exploration, speculation, experimentation, and altercation to be found today in the literature of moral theology, not only relating to the many new and urgent questions facing society and individuals, but equally in the examination of the very foundations and methodology of the subject.

Rather than attempt the questionable, and indeed impossible, task of attempting to describe in short compass all that has been taking place in the discipline, we have devoted our final chapter, 'A pattern in Renewal?', to an examination of the terse call by the Second Vatican Council for particular improvement in the subject of moral theology, and of the difficulties attendant upon that improvement as greater than the Council itself appreciated, before offering an identification of two major features which appear to be emerging as moral theologians tackle the problem of long overdue renewal in their subject. These features we have described as a pervasive drive towards integration and totality at every level of moral analysis, culminating in a divine principle of totality which forms the ultimate context for all moral evaluation; and at the same

time a consistent bid to acknowledge diversity and respect it throughout the whole field of moral reflection and behaviour, as an instance in moral theology of the pluralism which is struggling for expression in theology as a whole. To explain and complete these features we suggest a third as called for, which we have described as the recovery of mystery, the serious acknowledgement that moral theology, perhaps unlike Christian ethics, is a branch of theology, or the consideration of the being and activity of God, with the consequences which that entails. As a conclusion, we offer, in the light of these three characteristics of totality, diversity, and mystery, a consideration of the Church as *koinonia*, or fellowship. As such it is called to be a sacrament, a symbolic agency in society, of that *koinonia* which has been impressed upon mankind as a whole as the image of its creator who thus calls all men in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit to an ultimate sharing in the divine nature of the Trinity of persons in the living God. From this theological perspective it emerges that the task for moral theology is that of being a communal activity exercised by the entire *koinonia* of Christ's disciples, enabling his Church to image forth *koinonia* in action as well as in content. Its programme is to aid man as a whole to discover in himself a destiny and a moral vocation to the shared *koinonia* with God which is the Creator's mysterious plan of love for mankind, and of which the Church is both the provisional expression in history and an agent in society. Sharing in this architectonic design of human and divine fellowship, and applying it and disclosing it in the diversity of human situations, appear to offer a future programme for moral theology, as enabling God's sons and daughters who are driven by the Spirit of Christ (Rom. 8: 14) to contribute 'in all wisdom and insight' to the human destiny which the Epistle to the Ephesians describes (1: 9-10) as 'the mystery of his will, according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him'.

A feature of this study which may surprise readers who are not familiar with Roman Catholicism is the extent to which moral theology, while claiming to be a science and therefore to enjoy at least some measure of autonomy, has been heavily dependent upon the approval, sanction, and direction of ecclesiastical, and notably papal, authority. One reason for this, of course, is to be found in the Roman Catholic belief, as stemming from the community of disciples founded by Christ, in a diversity of functions in that

community, and notably belief in the office of *episkope*, or oversight, as established for the maintaining of fidelity to 'the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus' (Rev. 14: 12). To that extent a healthy distribution of function within 'the household of faith' (Gal. 6: 10) can serve to reinforce the respect of the moral theologian towards his material as the patrimony of the Christian community, and his responsibility to, as well as for, his fellow-believer, 'the brother for whom Christ died' (1 Cor. 8: 11). It can also serve to foster the strongly corporate and cohesive family sense which is a valuable feature of Roman Catholicism, even when it derives from social or cultural factors almost as much as from shared religious considerations. At the same time, in the exercise of such 'oversight' within the Roman Catholic community, such non-religious factors can have, and undoubtedly have had, the effect of at times introducing imbalances, with consequent reactions, between various sectors within the Church. And this finds expression in recent years in the considerable attention given to the relationship between the moral theologian and the *Magisterium*, on which this study comments from time to time and to which the author hopes it will as a whole also have made some contribution.

Surprise may also be experienced that in this historical study of the making of moral theology no consideration is given either to the existence and developments of the subject outside the confines of the Roman Catholic Church, or to the attitudes and observations of other Christian writers concerning the subject as developed within Roman Catholicism. Apart from the need to define some boundaries to an already lengthy treatment of the subject, what such considerations serve to highlight is that, until very recently indeed in the making of moral theology, the attitudes and the enterprises of others were of little, if any, concern to Roman Catholic moralists, far less to the leaders in their community, unless to condemn them. It is a most welcome feature of the past fifteen or so years that dialogue has sprung up and begun to flourish, partly at the instigation of the Second Vatican Council, between the various moral traditions of Christianity in a way which has contributed constructively to that cracking of moulds and renewal of the subject which characterize much contemporary Roman Catholic writing. And it is in this context of Christian fellowship that all references in the following work to 'the Church' as implying the Roman Catholic Church are to be read as expressive solely of stylistic brevity, and in

no sense to be understood as making exclusive claims either for Roman Catholicism or for its particular science of moral theology. Paradoxically perhaps, the hope of the author is that, in providing a historical critique from within the tradition and concentrating upon the resources of that tradition, he will have made some contribution towards that self-understanding and mutual understanding which are indispensable to ecumenism.

Finally, these chapters do not claim to present a moral history of the Church, or an account of how Christians have actually thought and behaved in their everyday moral lives, for, of course, theory and practice are rarely completely harmonious in any sphere of life, not least in the moral life. And this not just because of what the Christian tradition calls the human propensity to sin, or that 'concupiscence' which the Council of Trent, perhaps wryly, described itself as 'both acknowledging and experiencing' (*DS* 1515); nor just because at times the historical vagaries of moral views within the community of the Church lead one to hope for a not inconsiderable disparity between theory and ordinary Christian practice. More fundamentally, such disparity as has existed may also on occasion be seen as intrinsic to the whole enterprise of moral theology as it attempts to comprehend and articulate in human and refracted terms the mystery of God's continuous call to individuals to share increasingly in his life through his chosen medium of human personal freedom.

In the course of producing this work the author has had cause to be grateful for the interest and encouragement of many friends and colleagues. In particular he wishes to acknowledge his indebtedness to various fellow-Jesuits for comments and suggestions, including Professor Emeritus F. C. Copleston, Dr William Daniel, Fr Vincent Turner, Dr Clarence Gallagher, Dr Norman Tanner and Dr Gerard J. Hughes. In the end, this study of *The Making of Moral Theology* remains a personal essay for whose faults the author is responsible, but which, for whatever virtue it may contain, he dedicates to his mother as an expression of love and gratitude.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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The bibliography is limited for the most part to recent works and secondary sources which are referred to in the course of this study, and is aimed at providing convenient reference for the reader rather than at furnishing an encyclopaedic bibliography on moral theology. Individual titles and details of patristic, medieval, and scholastic works and of conciliar and papal documents are not listed, except for some recent papal encyclicals and editions of works in English translations when the author has not preferred to offer his own. Otherwise the bibliographical entries under *Sigla* may be consulted as identifying the standard and most accessible collections of many primary sources to which reference is made.

### SIGLA

- AAS     *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, vols. 1 (1909) – 76 (1984) (Vatican Press). Superseding the earlier *Acta Sanctae Sedis* (1865–1908), AAS is the monthly official publication of the Papacy, containing the authentic promulgation of Church laws, the official texts of papal and conciliar documents, the proceedings of ‘Sacred Congregations’, or Vatican Departments, and the announcements of ecclesiastical decisions and appointments.)
- COD     *Conciliorum Œcumenicorum Decreta*, ed. J. Alberigo, *et al.* (Bologna, 1973<sup>3</sup>). (A one-volume collection, in the original, of all the decrees of all Ecumenical Councils, first published on the eve of the Second Vatican Council. The third edition includes all the documents of Vatican II. An accompanying English translation of this edition is currently in preparation under the editorship of Dr Norman Tanner.)
- CTS     Catholic Truth Society, London. (Publishes in English translation various conciliar, papal and other Vatican documents.)
- DS     Denzinger, H. J., and Schönmetzer, A., *Enchiridion Symbolorum et Definitionum* (Barcelona, 1963<sup>32</sup>). (First published by Denzinger in 1854, and revised and updated in subsequent editions (including one by Karl Rahner), ‘Denzinger’ is a one-volume collection, with brief notes in Latin, of chronological excerpts in the original languages of the dogmatic definitions and doctrinal statements of Councils and Popes. Where possible, passages in this study are for convenience referred to by a number

- in *DS*. Otherwise reference is made to either *COD* or *AAS*. An English equivalent, with Concordance to *DS*, is *The Christian Faith in the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church*, edd. J. Neuner, and J. Dupuis, (London, 1983 (rev.) ).
- DTC* *Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique* (Paris, 1899–1953).
- NCE* *New Catholic Encyclopaedia* (New York, 1967–79).
- PG* *Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Graeca*, ed. J. P. Migne. (The Abbé Migne (d. 1875) founded his own publishing house and enlisted the energies of other French priests in his project to produce a universal library of Christian writings in the original languages and with introductions, notes and, where necessary, translations in Latin. The 161 volumes of the Greek series cover the years AD 120–1438, to which are occasionally added corrections and supplementary material. In numerous cases, ‘Migne’ has been superseded by critical editions, but in general his *PG* and *PL* are referred to whenever possible.)
- PL* *Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Latina*, ed. J. P. Migne. (See above, *PG*. The Latin writers covered in 221 volumes date from the period AD 200–1206.)
- STh* Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*. (Written explicitly for beginners, the *Summa* of St Thomas is the Christian masterpiece of the Middle Ages. A new translation in 60 volumes has been published by the English Dominicans (Blackfriars–London, 1964–81). The standard way of referring to *STh* is by volume (e.g., 1a 2ae), question, and article, followed at times by reply to an objection (e.g., *STh*, 1ae 2ae, q. 106, a. 3 ad 4).)
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