

Is Christian Morality Reasonable? On the Difference Between Secular and Christian Humanism¹

Martin Rhonheimer

(Published in “*Annales Theologici*” 15,2, 2001, pp.529-549)

Reasonableness and “unreasonableness” of Christian morality

In his famous work “The Reasonableness of Christianity”, published in 1695², the British philosopher John Locke holds that in revealed Christian morality “as delivered in the Scriptures” there is nothing that cannot be grasped by human reason alone,—unassisted by faith. He however adds that faith in revealed morality is still, and will always be, *psychologically* necessary for the large majority of people since they neither have the leisure nor the ability to apply themselves to the demanding task of philosophical inquiry.

Such a view sharply contrasts with both secular humanism and what I want to call Christian humanism. Secular humanism conceives itself as a kind of liberation from the constraints of Christian faith and clerical paternalism. In all its current forms, it would never allow one to assert that Christian faith is “psychologically necessary for the large majority of people” because of their lack of leisure and intellectual skill. Instead secular humanism, be it atheistic or not, contends that many of the typical demands of Christian morality, as e.g. taught by the Catholic Church, are utterly unreasonable, not demonstrable by rational means, and generally to be rejected as inhuman.

In turn, Christian humanism, as I understand it, implies that Christian morality

¹Talk given at Boston College (Chestnut Hill, Mass.), the 10th April 2000, on invitation of the Faculty of Theology and sponsored by the Jesuit Institute. A first version of this paper was read during the Conference *Understanding the Faith* at Netherhall House, London, 16th April 1997. For helpful comments, suggestions and encouragement I am indebted to Stephen Reynolds and Arturo Blanco.

²The full title reads *The Reasonableness of Christianity, as deliver'd in the Scriptures* (London: Awnsham and John Churchill, 1695).

is both profoundly reasonable *and* provokingly unreasonable. Such an affirmation might cause surprise, among other reasons because, though conceding that *some* contents of revealed morality are *beyond* or *above* reason, at least a Catholic will not easily admit any of the requirements of Christian morality to be properly *unreasonable*.

But this is what, paradoxically, seems to be the case. What I am going to argue is that for a Christian life there are specific moral requirements which could simultaneously be called both reasonable *and* unreasonable, without however being properly *beyond* or *above* reason.

Or, to put it in another way: the basic moral requirements of Christian life are in principle fully intelligible and therefore accessible to reasonable argument and defense, but they simultaneously need in many cases the support of Christian faith to preserve fully their reasonableness.

Without such support, so I will argue, these basic moral requirements appear to be unreasonable because they are obviously difficult to fulfill. They appear to overburden human beings, to be too demanding and unrealistic, and thus even oppressing. So their inherent reasonableness easily converts into the unreasonableness of an unattainable ideal, which is therefore unacceptable to most people. In my view, people in fact can fully accept these moral demands as practically achievable goals, but only on the ground of faith which engenders hope and becomes practical through charity. It is in that context precisely that these moral demands fully recover their reasonableness.³

I am not, of course, referring here to some strictly supernatural demands of Christian life, such as the frequentation of the sacraments, faithfulness and obedience to the Church's Magisterium, or even the willingness to suffer martyrdom. *Such* moral requirements are obviously only intelligible on the basis of faith in Christ, the Church, and the sacraments.

Of course even these strictly supernatural features of Christian morality do not go undisputed nowadays, but the point is that they are contested mostly because

³I would probably not go so far as to contend that, without the "announcement of Christ, Christian morality would be an uncomprehensible puzzle"; see I. CARRASCO DE PAULA, "El estudio y la enseñanza de la moral fundamental, hoy. Reflexiones en torno al quehacer teológico," *Scripta Theologica* 32: 3 (2000): 911-924; 919. The "unreasonableness" of Christian morality I will be talking about, rather than complete "unintelligibility" (like a "puzzle"), is the unreasonableness of the *unattainable ideal* which, however, in itself and as a kind of *good* is intelligible for everyone, and, in this sense, "reasonable". Thus, there is a profound continuity between revealed Christian morality and unassisted practical reason or "natural law". This will be explained in more detail below.

of a deep crisis at a rather different and deeper level which is precisely the one I'd wish to refer to: the level of the basic demands of natural law, as understood and taught by the Church. For instance—things like the indissolubility of marriage, the practice of responsible parenthood exclusively by means of periodic continence, the confining of sexual acts exclusively to marriage, the unconditional prohibition of the direct killing of innocent human beings (mainly abortion). And we must also include the moral requirements of justice and righteousness in e.g. business activity, politics or scientific research and medical care, which will often demand heroic behavior on the part of a Christian.

The problem here is that what in principle looks intrinsically reasonable and human, such as the ideal of inseparable fidelity in marriage or the unconditional respect for human life, ends up appearing to unassisted human reason, at least in many cases, as unattainable in practice and therefore unreasonable and even inhuman. So—and this is my main point—Christian morality, to a large extent, throws light on the possibility of living a moral life which fully meets the intrinsic demands of human nature. This means that we can speak of a true *specific Christian humanism* which differs from the purely secular humanism of the non-believer. Thus, what initially appears unreasonable, regains reasonableness through faith, hope and charity. That is how faith in fact rescues reason and reason recovers all its power to make faith both human and effective. Rightly understood, reason therefore needs revelation for being capable of effectively working as moral reason and to maintain the “reasonableness of morality”.⁴ Let me now spell that out in some more detail. By doing this, I also hope to contribute to the well known debate — though the subject has now become less topical — about the “specificity” or “distinctiveness” of Christian morality⁵.

⁴Cf. J. RATZINGER, “Christliche Orientierung in der pluralistischen Demokratie? Über die Unverzichtbarkeit des Christentums in der modernen Gesellschaft,” H. BÜRKLE, N. LOBKOWICZ, ed., *Das Europäische Erbe und seine christliche Zukunft* (Veröffentlichungen der Hanns-Martin-Schleyer-Stiftung 16) (Köln: Bachem, 1985), 20-35; especially 31 f.. Reprinted in Ratzinger, *Kirche, Ökumene und Politik. Neue Versuche zur Ekklesiologie* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1987), 183-197.

⁵I refer to my earlier treatments of the subject: “Über die Existenz einer spezifisch christlichen Moral des Humanums,” *Internationale katholische Zeitschrift ‘Communio’*, 23:4 (1994): 360-372; *Natural Law and Practical Reason: A Thomist View of Moral Autonomy* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000) 547-553; originally published in German as *Natur als Grundlage der Moral. Die personale Struktur des Naturgesetzes bei Thomas von Aquin: Eine Auseinandersetzung mit autonomer und teleologischer Ethik* (Innsbruck-Wien: Tyrolia-Verlag, 1987). A Spanish Edition has been published as *Ley natural y razón práctica. Una visión tomista*

The teaching of the encyclical *Veritatis splendor*

Catholic moral teaching holds that the basic requirements of morality are fundamentally accessible to human reason. Accordingly, *Veritatis splendor* teaches that even though “[o]nly God can answer the question about the good, because he is the Good” he nevertheless “has already given an answer to this question: he did so *by creating man and ordering him* with wisdom and love to his final end, through the law which is inscribed in his heart (cf. *Rom* 2:15), the ‘natural law’” (*VS* 12). Quoting Thomas Aquinas⁶, the encyclical then affirms that the natural law “is nothing other than the light of understanding infused in us by God, whereby we understand what must be done and what must be avoided. God gave this light and this law to man at creation” (*ibid.*).

This is not to say that Christian morality contains nothing more than what natural law demands, even though, in a sense that is also true. The above teaching of *Veritatis splendor* however is related to the basic questions of “How do we, as humans, discern what is basically good and bad, right and wrong, and, accordingly, what does a life able to be ordered to God through supernatural charity consist in?”

Veritatis splendor replies that the basic capability of a human act “of being ordered to the good and to the ultimate end, which is God (...) is grasped *by reason* in the very being of man, considered in his integral truth, and therefore in his natural inclinations, his motivations and his finalities, which always have a spiritual dimension as well. It is precisely these which are the contents of the natural law....” (*VS* 79,2).

de la autoñoia moral (Ediciones Universidad de Navarra EUNSA, 2000) as well as a translation into Italian: *Legge naturale e ragion pratica. Una visione tomista dell' autonomia morale* (Roma: Armando, 2001). See further: “Moral cristiana y desarrollo humano,”: *La Misión del Laico en la Iglesia y en el Mundo*. VIII Simposio Internacional de Teología de la Universidad de Navarra, ed. by A. SARMIENTO, T. RINCÓN, J.M. YANGUAS, A. QUIRÓS (Pamplona: Ediciones Universidad de Navarra EUNSA, 1987) 919-938 (this is an earlier, much shorter version of the above mentioned article in “Communio”). For some other related aspects see also my articles “Autonomia morale, libertà e verità secondo l'enciclica ‘Veritatis Splendor’,” *Veritatis splendor. Genesi, elaborazione, significato*, ed. by G. RUSSO. Seconda edizione aggiornata e ampliata (Roma: Edizioni Dehoniane, 1995) 193-215; “Morale cristiana e ragionevolezza morale: di che cosa è il compimento la legge del Vangelo?,” *Gesù Cristo, legge vivente e personale della Santa Chiesa*, ed. by G. BORGONOVO (Casale Monferrato: Piemme, 1996) 147-168.

⁶*In Duo Praecepta Caritatis et in Decem Legis Praecepta, Prologus*, in *Opuscula Theologica*, II No. 1129 (Torino: Marietti, 1954).

That is why the encyclical also approves the attempt “to find ever more consistent rational arguments in order to justify the requirements and to provide a foundation for the norms of the

moral life.” The reason for this optimistic encouragement is given in the very next sentence: “This kind of investigation is legitimate and necessary, since the moral order, as established by the natural law, is in principle accessible to human reason” (*VS* 74). This is so precisely because natural law *is* a “prescription of human reason”: it is “human reason itself which commands as to do good and counsels us not to sin” (*VS* 44, quoting Leo XIII.). Natural law is nothing other than “the light of natural reason” which enables us “to distinguish right from evil” (*VS* 42).

On the other hand, however, *Veritatis splendor* clearly perceives the gap opening up between what reason, in principle, can justify as morally normative, and what may seem reasonable considering man’s real possibilities. The encyclical insists that “[o]nly in the mystery of Christ’s Redemption do we discover the ‘concrete’ possibilities of man.” That is why it “would be a serious error to conclude... that the Church’s teaching is essentially only an ‘ideal’ which must then be adapted, proportioned, graduated to the so-called concrete possibilities of man...”. The encyclical further asserts that the Church is talking of “man redeemed by Christ”: “God’s command is of course proportioned to man’s capabilities; but to the capabilities of the man to whom the Holy Spirit has been given” (*VS* 103).

That means that only God’s love “poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us” (*Rom.* 5:5) can assure fulfilling what the natural law demands. Moreover, it implies that this is the only way that the full reasonableness of natural law can be preserved and the temptation resisted of making one’s “own weakness the criterion of the truth about the good” (*VS* 104).

The two levels of moral knowledge and the ought/can-dichotomy

What I have said so far, of course, raises several questions. But I shall now limit myself to tackle a problem which is one of moral knowledge (or epistemology). From what has been previously said, you might conclude that the problem of practicability or “feasibility” is simply a problem of execution and that, in order to fulfill what the moral law demands, one just needs the help of grace, and that is all. But this is not the whole story.

First of all, and in a more fundamental way, we have here what amounts to a

problem of moral knowledge (as I said—an epistemological problem). Humans are essentially reasonable beings. They act as free subjects, deliberately, willingly and thus guided by reason and in a way we call “responsible”. This is also true on the supernatural level, since grace does not suppress nature, but brings it—elevated—to its ultimate perfection. So the perfection brought about by faith, hope and love necessarily must involve a perfecting of moral knowledge as well. Conversely, the absence of these supernatural powers in the human soul will also have a bearing on the reach and the quality of moral knowledge.

You may now ask whether this is not to destroy the rightful autonomy of the created natural order. Is this not tantamount to declaring that human reason and will are incapable of perceiving and realizing the good which properly corresponds to human nature? You might even ask whether this does not amount to saying that supernatural grace is a necessary or essential complement to human nature, thus calling into question its supernatural and gratuitous character (grace is not “demanded” by nature). Such doubts in fact lead us to the core of this whole question.

Reason-guided moral perception has two dimensions which are closely connected and are never completely separate from each other. The first dimension is the capability of grasping human goods as such, and of from there disclosing the corresponding “*ought*”. This is properly the work of natural law⁷. The second dimension however is a judgement—also based on experience both personal and social—about the practical possibilities of realizing this good and carrying out the corresponding “*ought*”. On this second level, the moral subject is confronted with experiences which conflict with the original insight into the human good and its proper intelligibility. So, on this second level, the good and the “*ought*” presented by natural law may now appear only as a more-or-less attainable ideal, rather than as a morally binding norm or, if formulated in a prohibitive way, as a moral absolute.

Consider e.g. the moral norm of indissolubility of marriage. Faithful marital love, meant to last for ever and not to be subject to the volatility of the human will and the changing circumstances of life, character etc., is as a basic human good clearly intelligible to everybody—specially to children. But at the same time, on the level of the judgement about practicability, it may seem impossible and too hard in *all* cases and circumstances. People know very well that a society where all marriages are stable and faithful would be a much better society, with much happier people

⁷For details I refer to my *Natural Law and Practical Reason* (see Footnote 5 above).

than in our present society. But they think that it is a fanciful idea and quite impossible to establish and uphold as a *moral norm*. There are of course really tragic cases where, from a purely human point of view, faithfulness to a spouse, abstaining from remarrying and from any kind of sexual relationship with another partner, simply doesn't seem to make sense anymore. In a situation like this an additional input of intelligibility, such as e.g. identification with Christ, is necessary in order to convert fidelity into a meaningful—and attainable—moral option.

In other words, to resume this point, the second dimension of moral insight—the judgement about the possibilities of realization or the “feasibility”—will necessarily influence the plausibility of the corresponding “ought”, i.e. it will influence the first level of moral insight. *For in itself, no moral “ought” can be grasped that reaches beyond the moral “can”. And the “can” itself—i.e. what someone will admit or accept as being within his reach or power—is deeply affected by any appearance of unreasonableness in the process of trying to achieve it.* Accordingly, persons who wish to act coherently on the grounds of a proper understanding of their moral obligations, can find themselves faced with a chasm—an apparently unbridgeable gap—opening up between what they know to be the human good “as such” and what they judge to be achievable in practice and therefore reasonable.

Theoretically, of course, it is possible to cope with this predicament simply by declaring oneself incapable of doing all the good one feels obliged to do. Yet, such an attitude is not likely to lead to a rationally coherent and thus satisfying life-plan⁸. A much more plausible way of filling the gap between the “ought” and the “can” would be, therefore, *to simply adjust the “ought” to the “can”*, that is, to rationalize the experience of “not being able to achieve the human good”, formu-

⁸I think this can turn out to be a rationally coherent way of life only for those who are willing to simultaneously accept sources of moral knowledge other than their own rational insight—e.g. some revealed moral norms received by faith. I refer here, among other cases, to the position taken by those who wish to follow the Church's teaching in everything. When they come to something they find difficult e.g. not to adopt contraception or to refrain from abortion in a “hard case”, they try their best to obey the Magisterium. They do this because they are willing to accept, through *faith* rather than their *own reason*, the moral norms given to them by the Church. But notice that, in order to be a rationally consistent position, this presupposes to consider obedience to the Magisterium as something *reasonable* because one is convinced—again on the grounds of faith—that the authentic Magisterium of the Church, guided by the Holy Spirit, is really the voice of truth. Notice moreover that in order to live in such a way *consistently* and *faithfully*, these persons additionally should at least *try* to meet, through personal interior struggle, the moral demands they accept by faith. Otherwise they would fail to be rationally coherent.

lating in consequence a moderated and “revised down” or “diluted” version of this good and of the corresponding moral norm.

Yet, that does not at all suppress the intrinsic reasonableness of the original insight into the human good. What it does is to downgrade it to an ideal that, when converted into a moral norm, will in its turn be perceived to be inhuman, and therefore to be unreasonable. But—except the case of culturally imposed prejudice, which is not what we are at present examining—also in the second case it will still be possible to *understand* the requirement of the “full” human good. But most probably one will not accept it as normative or as morally reasonable.

The paradox of the human predicament and the temptation of becoming a consequentialist

As I have said, there are experiences in human life which tend to overturn and modify our genuine insight into the human good. They do that by inducing persons to rationalize the gap between the good and practicability. Let me now ask: which are these experiences?

You might expect me now to refer to original sin. In the present context, however, this would not be of much avail. The dogma of original sin only explains *why* man and the world, created by God, are found in such deplorable a condition. It thus throws light on the *origin* and the *punitive character* of the present predicament and hardship of mankind which we could never have known without the help of revelation. The dogma however does not help us to understand the predicament as such. On the grounds of quite obvious anthropological, psychological, historical, sociological and other data known to everybody, it is no mystery at all. The *conditio humana* is a plain fact. Faith simply tells us where it comes from, that “from the beginning it was not so”, and that of course does bear on our interpretation of man, of his moral possibilities and the sense of history⁹.

In the first place, therefore, we have to deal with something the dogma of original sin throws no light on at all, that is, the predicament as such. It is constituted by experiences of suffering injustice, disease, division between men, unfaithfulness, war and violence, being powerless in the face of evil and of

⁹I refer to the, from a thomistic viewpoint, still outstanding treatment of this subject by M. J. SCHEEBEN, *Die Mysterien des Christentums* (Gesammelte Schriften Band II), ed. by J. HÖFER, (Freiburg: Herder, 1951), 200-259, especially 234 ff.

material and spiritual misery, and also our own weakness. It also contains the experience of the senselessness of so many situations created by the actions of men (mine and those of my neighbors), as well as by circumstances that are beyond our control. If we interpret this *mysterium iniquitatis* against the background of a history of the fall of mankind and of the redemption already at work at the core of history, we will draw conclusions about the moral “ought” quite different from those drawn by a non-believer.

In the course of the past centuries we have been given many specifically non-Christian answers to the riddles of human existence and the condition of the world. There are ideologies which promise inner-worldly salvation, and others which typically work by reductionism, asserting “that man is nothing other than”, e.g., “libido”, or “matter”, or “a result of the conditions of production”, or an “outcome of selective advantage in the struggle for survival of the fittest”, and so on. There are different kinds of humanism—the most coherent of which certainly are the openly atheistic ones,—and there are different ways of answering the question: “What can we legitimately expect, what are we entitled to hope for?”

Furthermore, there is an even deeper self-contradiction that threatens human reason. In many cases, which sometimes seem almost unavoidable, doing good and abstaining from evil may be followed by very disadvantageous consequences. And conversely, the consequences of a misdeed often seem to be better than the consequences of refraining from such an action. And yet, for man’s practical reason this is, so to speak, a “scandal”. For it essentially belongs to the good—so we all are naturally inclined to think—that, at least in the long run, it should eventually lead to something good. But from a purely human point of view this is very often not the case. St. Paul did write to the Romans: “in everything God works for good with those who love him” (*Rom. 8:28*), but that, of course, is only helpful to the believer.

Now, on a purely human level the question arises whether there is any point whatsoever in moral requirements which only seem to cause problems and disasters, without offering a prospect of happiness. Isn’t it better and more human to have, instead, a kind of morality that allows us to seek, in any given situation, to optimize the outcome of our actions in terms of expected well-being and happiness? Let us not forget that the prospect of well-being and happiness is an essential feature of the good. They cannot reasonably be conceived as permanently separated. Otherwise one would be trying to reconcile the reasonableness of the good with a frustrated desire for happiness. And that, taking into account human nature, is impossible.

Moreover, considering humans as free and responsible beings, we would expect the exercise of responsibility and happiness to be somehow linked. But sometimes it seems that to be happy you just need to be lucky. It seems to depend more on chance than on one's efforts to be responsible in carrying out one's moral duties. So, good luck and bad luck seem to play a more decisive part than those achievements and decisions attributable to human persons and their free choices. Additionally, in quite a few cases, instead of leading to well-being, refraining from *doing* injustice will make you *suffer* injustice. Being moral does not seem to pay very well, and it certainly seems to pay much better when your moral standard is a consequentialist one.

The tempting attractiveness of consequentialism reveals precisely, and is a sign of, the predicament of the human condition and of moral reason functioning under its influence. Consequentialism is a sort of "technique" calling for continuous rationalization in order to overcome the gap between "ought" and "can" by adjusting the "ought" to "the best you can do". It teaches you that to know what is the right thing to do you just have to look at the possible outcome from this or that course of action, and then to choose the one which is likely to bring about the most desirable effects.

This shows again how reasonableness can be affected by simply modifying it according to concrete expectations regarding consequences and their evaluation, without however altering reason's original capacity of grasping the human good. I wish to emphasize that this alteration is brought about not on the first and fundamental level of moral understanding, characterized by the original grasp of human goods as practical aims, but on the second level where the judgements about practical realizability are made. Thus the reasonableness of the first level is not affected, but simply put aside or at least downgraded and thus relativized.

Christian humanism as salvation morality

Consequentialism of course *is* a rational theory and it does express, although in a distorted way, a form of reasonableness. Consequentialism therefore can be rationally argued against and shown to be morally defective. Yet, it is not my present aim to do that.¹⁰ With the previous remarks I only wanted to indicate how

¹⁰For a thorough critic of consequentialism I refer to my *Die Perspektive der Moral. Philosophische Grundlagen der Tugendethik* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2001). Earlier versions

the plausibility of consequentialist moral thinking properly springs from and is connected with the situation of man insofar as his moral reason is lacking the support it would have from the faith, and from the prospects and expectations which the faith generates.

To sum up what I have been saying so far: As long as the insight into the good, and thus into what is morally normative, is shaped or conditioned by the experience of one's own capabilities, as well as by one's "reasonable expectations" and related hopes, *then the faithful's and the non-believer's understanding of the human good and its normative implications will necessarily differ.*

This seems to be a serious problem which almost impedes rational communication between believers and non-believers. But that is not the case. In reality, what I have just said contains an opportunity. Notice that the basic requirements of Christian morality, which in fact are requirements of natural law, are not derived from revelation or faith. They genuinely spring from human reason. So there *is* a common platform for dialogue between the believer and the nonbeliever. And this platform is the platform of rational argument. At the same time, however, Christians and non-believers differ in their ability to accept fully what the human good demands.

Christian revelation essentially contains a message about our real capabilities and expectations. It provides a specific answer to the mysteries of the world and of mankind, as well as to the innermost desires of the human heart. The coordinates of that answer are the revelation of original sin, fall, inherited guilt (not personal, but of humankind as such), redemption through God's becoming man in Christ, and the mediation of redemption through the Church.

Regarding the human good, salvation means liberation from the obvious incapability of meeting fully and truly all the requirements of being human—such as, e.g., indissoluble fidelity in marriage or the heroic refraining from—legally—killing an innocent and defenseless human being in order to resolve a grave personal problem, or abstaining from unjust business practices when doing so gives rise to serious personal difficulties and professional disadvan-

of this book have been published in Italian as *La prospettiva della morale. Fondamenti dell'etica filosofica* (Roma: Armando, 1994) and in Spanish as *La perspectiva de la moral. Fundamentos de la ética filosófica* (Madrid: Rialp, 2000). See also Rhonheimer, *Intentional Actions and the Meaning of Object: A Reply to Richard McCormick*, "The Thomist," 59,2 (1995), 279-311; reprinted in *Veritatis splendor and the Renewal of Moral Theology*, ed. by J. A. DI NOIA and R. CESSARIO (Princeton-Huntington-Chicago: Scepter-Our Sunday Visitor-Midwest Theological Forum, 1999) 241-268.

tages.

The real point about the integration of practical reason into the context of Christian faith is not just that grace comes in to help us fulfill what is required from a moral point of view. The question is not simply one of execution. The influence of faith goes much deeper. *It reaches to the root of moral understanding* by affecting its second level, that is, the level of judgement about realization and human possibilities, and thereby fully restores the intelligibility of the human good.

This influence however and the corresponding “rescue of reason” takes place on a higher level. It is the level of the Christian’s being called to holiness and the logic of the participation in the Cross of Christ and his Resurrection. This is absolutely crucial for a correct understanding of Christian morality. The moral requirements—what the human good and its integral fulfillment demand—are thus brought into focus from the viewpoint proper to the history of salvation. Christian morality is essentially salvation-morality¹¹. And it is precisely in this way that the inherent contradictions and inconsistencies of a purely secular humanism can be overcome. It leads to a specifically *Christian humanism* that we can also call a *Humanism of the Cross*. It is a *human morality* that is *specifically Christian*¹². And it *is* a true humanism because it is a realistic way to restore to the human good its characteristic of being a promise of fulfillment and happiness. This of course is good news. And the Christian message *is* good news, it is *Evangelium*.

Christian humanism and the specificity of Christian virtue ethics

From what has been said so far we can draw the conclusion that any purely secular or non-believing humanism will necessarily miss the truly “human”. It will necessarily undervalue—from its point of view, “reasonably” undervalue—the real moral powers of man and fall short of his possibilities to fully strive at

¹¹This is also the reason why Christian faith can never be reduced to a kind of ethics, because a genuine *Christian* ethical discourse is always more than an ethical discourse: it implies truths, grounded in faith, about God, man, the world, and about the sense of history. - That Christian morality—“morality that springs from the encounter with Jesus Christ—is essentially a “morality of salvation”, has recently been emphasized also by CARRASCO DE PAULA, “El estudio y la enseñanza de la moral,” 922 f.

¹²So it overcomes the fallacious distinction between “salvation ethos” and “world ethos”; see for that my *Natural Law and Practical Reason*, 547 ff. The dissociation between a worldly “ethical order” and an “order of salvation” was rejected by *Veritatis splendor*, No. 37.

realizing what human reason grasps as its proper good: justice, faithfulness, benevolence, truthfulness, fortitude, temperance, chastity etc.—that is, the whole range of the virtues.

We should never forget that the undervaluation of the human person’s moral possibilities typically leads to justifying moral standards which increase rather than diminish the predicament of mankind. It also leads to practical “solutions” and courses of action which normally makes a victim of someone other than the acting person himself. By thus complicating matters further and entangling social relations—consider e.g. the social effects of broken families and divorced couples—this will in turn fatally increase the plausibility of any attempt at further underestimating man’s possibilities and the plausibility, therefore, of a correlated secular humanism based on ideologies of “free choice” and unrestrained individualistic autonomy.

A Christian humanism, on the other hand, will be based on personal sacrifice, service, self-giving and love—in the logic of following Christ and getting progressively identified with him. If such a humanism is really Christian—unfortunately Christians do not always behave in a Christian way—it leads to solutions that, while demanding more from the acting person, are not carried out at the expense of third parties. They therefore tend to diminish the predicament of mankind and will definitely enrich both social relations and the acting person not only humanly but also supernaturally. Finally, by creating new and encouraging contexts of human experience, rooted in those values which typically spring from the practice of the virtues, this will also confirm and increase the intelligibility of the human good and therefore create and strengthen interpersonal bonds which, to a large extent, depend on a shared understanding of the good. So, we can argue and show that even considering its outcome, Christian morality turns out to be more reasonable than pure secular humanism.¹³

¹³This again shows the profound continuity of unassisted practical reason, as unfolded in Natural law, with revealed Christian morality. This continuity, as it seems to me, roots in practical reason as such, that is, in the fact that practical reason, as far as the human good is concerned, is intrinsically able to grasp this good, though not in its *full* intelligibility, which precisely stems from revealed Christian morality. In my view, to ground this continuity we therefore need not, as CARRASCO DE PAULA in his article “El estudio y la enseñanza de la moral,” 921, does, appeal to the theology of creation, even if the theological truth that the world and man have been originally created *in Christ*—which according to Carrasco explains the continuity between natural moral reason and revealed morality—may give some further *ontological* grounding to this continuity. However, such a reference to creation theology seems not to be needed from the standpoint of *practical reason* which is the viewpoint of ethics, be it philosophical or theological.

You might now perceive, arising from the depths of your soul, the accusation of “fundamentalism” or something similar. Yet, this charge, here, would be entirely unjustified. A fundamentalist is somebody who tries to integrally establish norms of Christian morality as a standard for coercive public order, for political institutions and law. This however is not what Christian morality demands. On the contrary, being dependent on revelation and faith—remember that acceptance of the faith presupposes a free personal act—the reasonableness inherent in Christian morality cannot be the standard of coercive legislation valid for a multitude in a pluralistic society. Even in a society which is more or less homogeneously composed of Christians, standards of morality concerning free and responsible behavior and legally established and thus enforceable standards of behavior need not be identical. In my view, Christians should be opting for a political culture in which, within certain bounds, freedom and autonomy are conceived as essential moral goods to be protected by public institutions. The submission of the individual person to truth is not a task to be carried out politically or by legal means. But this rather complex topic is not one that I should be dealing with now.¹⁴

At any rate, in my view what Christians should aim at is not essentially to shape society through law and the imposition of coercive measures by political institutions, but to reform society from the inside through their behavior. This, of course, eventually will lead to change and improve many things on the level e.g. of legislation as well. Nevertheless, we should not narrow down the task of Christians to politics and organized action. The decisive part is the one carried out by “ordinary people” who are conscious that they are called to aim in their ordinary life at fully realizing the Christian vocation to sanctity, without fearing to be very often a “sign that is spoken against”. With this, I come to my last point.

¹⁴See for this M. RHONHEIMER, “Perché una filosofia politica? Elementi storici per una risposta,” *Acta philosophica*, 1:2 (1992), 233-263; “Lo Stato costituzionale democratico e il bene comune,” *Ripensare lo spazio politico: quale aristocrazia?* ed. by E. MORANDI and R. PANATTONI, *Con-tratto – Rivista di filosofia tomista e contemporanea* VI (1997) (Padova: Il Poligrafo, 1998), 57-122. Some general reflections about the distinction between the legal-political plane and the moral plane can be found in Rhonheimer, “Fundamental Rights, Moral Law, and the Legal Defense of Life in a Constitutional Democracy. A Constitutionalist Approach to the Encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*,” *American Journal of Jurisprudence*, 43 (1998), 135-183 (a first version, in Italian, of this article has been published in *Annales Theologici* 9 (1995), 271-334.

The profound reasonableness of Christian humanism and its ecclesiological dimension

As we have seen, the basic moral requirements—the human good—contains an intrinsic reasonableness which, in principle, is independent from faith, and in that sense autonomous. Yet, only under the conditions of Christian faith is it possible to comply consistently with a morality which is in full agreement with the “human” and the “truth about man”, because, so I have argued, only when integrated within the context of faith can these requirements be defended and justified—precisely as *reasonable!* This is what restores full normative validity to what I have called the original moral knowledge, which is nothing other than the natural law.

The point I wanted to make here is that, by bringing together the human good, on one side, and the requirement of reasonableness, on the other, faith renders fully intelligible moral demands genuinely grounded in *reason*. Thus, I think faith to be a necessary condition of a person’s being able both to reconcile the requirements of the human good with his striving for happiness, and therefore also to meet these moral requirements *consistently*.

As Christians we should never be afraid of reason. Reason is on our side, even though, to be given back all its strength, it must be permeated and enriched by the seemingly unreasonable foolishness of the Cross. And the Cross, apart from being a source of meaning and intelligibility, turns out to be the root of supernatural joy and spiritual regeneration.

John Henry Newman, at the end of his *Apologia pro vita sua*, pays homage to the truth-attaining capability of human reason. He points out how in fallen man reason is biased towards irreligiosity, and how this in fact, in his own words, leads it to “suicidal excesses” and to the “immense energy of the aggressive intellect”¹⁵. Revelation therefore, which talks through the Church’s Magisterium, precisely “supplies for a need”. Far from enfeebling human thought, it aims “to resist and control its extravagance”¹⁶. So, Newman saw in the exercise of the infallible Magisterium something able to fully restore and permanently protect reason’s truth-attaining capability. Correspondingly, we should be imbued with the conviction that the Church’s moral teaching is fundamentally reinforcing the power

¹⁵J. H. NEWMAN, *Apologia pro Vita Sua* (London: J. M. Dent; New York: E. P. Dutton, 1912 etc.[Everyman’s Library]), 221.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 226.

of reason and moral understanding.

That is why, according to the encyclical *Veritatis splendor*, we have “to find ever more consistent rational arguments in order to justify the requirements and to provide a foundation for the norms of the moral life” (*VS 74*). We are entitled to be confident in the intelligibility of the human good and the capacity of man in general to understand what this good requires.

Yet that, of course, is only one part of the story. It still remains necessary to let this understanding be permeated and enriched by the prospects generated by faith. So, we have to urge Christians to assimilate what moral reason demands and apply it in living their faith. This implies two things. First, to foster, in themselves and in others, *personal conversion*. That means acceptance of their own insufficiency the need of grace, and the corresponding hope based on God’s goodness and mercy. Second, from this conversion must spring the habitual disposition of Christian charity and fraternity, in the first place the disposition to forgive one’s neighbor, over and over again, for any harm he might have done to us. Such a stable, and humble, attitude of personal conversion and of willingness to forgive others “seventy-seven times”, is the basis on which a moral life has to be built up so as to prevent the distortion of reason by the hardening of one’s heart.

Accordingly, also the Church’s mission can be described as twofold. It is precisely to be defined as the commitment, first, to illuminate human conscience regarding the truth of human existence *as fully human*, and, second, to assist him mainly with her sacramental power, which is the redeeming presence of Christ in this world, to struggle to meet this requirement, and thus to become simultaneously light for others and leaven in the middle of society.

As to the first task, the Church is the first to be responsible for the formation of consciences. She does that while being fully aware of the fact that, although reasonable, her message will not be recognized by everyone as something reasonable, and will therefore be rejected by many. This not only because of what we have called before the “unreasonableness” of overburdening people, but also on account of people’s being entangled in the cobwebs they have spun with their own actions and which frequently weigh down their conscience with guilt and failure. This may lead to self-justification, resignation or even desperation.

The more aggressively the Church’s moral teaching is called unintelligible, the more we can suspect that the real problem is not its lack of intelligibility but rather the critics’s unwillingness to undergo personal conversion. That is why I wish to emphasize the second and very proper task of the Church in which she most resembles her divine founder: the invitation to conversion, accompanied by the

offer and effective dispensation of divine forgiveness and “re-creation”, mainly through the sacrament of penance. Only within the Church—in virtue of the Holy Spirit sent by the Father and the Son—are human lips able to offer divine forgiveness and mercy.

In doing so, the Church and her ministers precisely continue Christ’s mission of rendering present among men the merciful love of the Divine Father. But that in turn has no sense without clearly—*importune, opportune*—teaching the integral truth about what is the good for man. It is not from the pulpit, but in the confessional that the Church’s ministers have to absolve.

But we are never to forget that only in the light of faith the integral fulfillment of the human good as a moral norm regains its full reasonableness, and with that also its appeal as a meaningful prospect of happiness and fulfillment. This leads us to an attitude of understanding and tolerance, not with sin, but with the persons who feel unable to fully meet the requirements set forth in the Church’s moral teaching. Without relativizing or unduly adjusting the “ought” to the “can” or graduating the moral norm, all pastoral work nevertheless has to try to conduct each single person to gradually fulfilling all the good which their human nature, redeemed by Christ, aims at¹⁷.

Christians therefore should always be acting, not with an inferiority complex, but— as Blessed Josemaría Escrivá used to say—with sort of a “complex of superiority”, based on the power of our faith to save human reason’s truth-attaining capability. When the truth is announced to them, many people may seem not to understand, or be unwilling to accept. But that does not mean that the Church and those faithful to its teachings have failed in their task of announcing the truth. Neither does it mean that those we have spoken to are not, in principle, able to grasp the truth of the teaching. Admittedly, improvements in ways of explaining will always be possible, and most probably needed. But if and when people do accept, *it will be due to the changing dispositions of their heart*. This change will make them capable of fully opening themselves to the intrinsic intelligibility of what natural law demands. That has never been achieved, in the first place, by arguments, but rather through prayer, through each Christian’s personal struggle for holiness, and through the example of self-sacrificing and joyful service to our fellow men and sisters.

¹⁷See JOHN PAUL II, *Apostolic Exhortation “Familiaris Consortio”* (1981), No. 34, 4, for the well known distinction between the “law of gradualness” and “the gradualness of the law”.

Martin Rhonheimer
Pontifical University of the Holy Cross
Faculty of Philosophy
Private Address:
Rue P.-A.-de-Faucigny 7
CH-1700 Fribourg